

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 331: American Witches

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One day in February 1651, a man called Jonathan Taylor, a colonist in the new town of Springfield, Connecticut, came home after a hard day's work in the fields to find his wife and daughter already asleep in their one bed by the fireplace.

Taking care not to wake them, Taylor crept into bed beside them, but then, with a horrible jolt, he sensed that something was chillingly wrong.

He sat up, frozen with terror. Three snakes were slithering across the room towards him.

The first glided up the side of the bed, and before Taylor could do anything, it sank its fangs into his forehead.

And then the snake spoke a single word, death.

And the really terrifying thing, Tom, was the snake's voice, because it was a voice Taylor recognized.

It was the voice of his neighbor Hugh Parsons.

So, Tom, here we are in the dark and paranoid world of Springfield in New England, the world of witch hunting and witch crazes.

And we'll get back into this, the details of this incredible tale.

Witchcraft in New England, witch hunting, the search for heretics for evildoers, for bad neighbors, all this stuff.

It feels like a very rich and resonant subject right now, doesn't it?

It absolutely does. And of course, we're at the beginnings of America in the 17th century in New England.

And the question of to what extent our future developments in American history being seeded here is a fascinating one.

But as you suggested with your gripping account of this expression of witchcraft,

I mean, considering that New England is, you know, I mean, it is pretty much a series of virgin colonies pretty much.

And meanwhile, back in Europe, witch crazes are sweeping Germany and East Anglia and all kinds of places.

It is intriguing, I think, that certainly in the imagination of the English speaking world, New England has a particular resonance.

So everyone has heard of Salem, but also I was kind of thinking, you know, HP Lovecraft, the great horror writer with this idea that in seemingly innocent New England towns, terrible demonic terrors, weight and look.

And if you go to those, you know, the graveyards at Marblehead or places like that, there is something distinctively chilling about them.

Do you not think?

Is it the contrast?

Yes, the contrast, isn't it?

Between the idealism and the dream of the shining city on a hill, the imagined godly community.

And then the monsters lurking within the monsters are not.

I mean, obviously, they were embattled in New England.

They thought themselves embattled by the Dutch or by the French or by the by the Native

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Americans, by the Indians, as they would have called them.

But the monsters are within.

That's the fascinating thing.

The monster is your neighbor, right?

But isn't it also the fact that this is the beginning and these are towns that are literally perched on the edge of a vast, vast swathes of land that for the English settlers, they know nothing about it.

Yeah.

And that is, you know, anyone who's been lost in a wood knows that that is a state in which you are more prone to imagine.

That's right.

Which crafts and ghosts and demons.

Dominic, do we have someone who can talk about this with much greater expertise and weekend?

Much greater expertise, Tom.

Yes, absolutely.

We have Malcolm Gaskell.

Professor Malcolm Gaskell is the emeritus professor at the University of East Anglia in Britain.

And his book, *The Ruin of All Witches*.

So that story that I start with is the way Malcolm starts his book.

Malcolm, welcome to the rest of history.

Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Thanks for having me.

Glad to be here.

So Malcolm, for the benefit of, this does not familiar with this period.

We are in the 17th century.

We're in the sort of 1640s, 1650s and New England.

So why is there a New England at all?

Well, in the first half of the 17th century, there is huge migrations to colonial America.

And there's been settlements in Virginia early in the 17th century.

The Mayflower goes over in 1620, but it's not really until the 1630s that you get tens of thousands of people going from England over there.

And there's a whole stack of reasons why they go, religious reasons and political reasons and economic reasons.

People in New England, the clues in the name, they want to kind of make a New England for themselves.

They want to improve conditions for themselves, but they also want to set an example to the old country where they feel it's lost its way in all sorts of things like charity and piety and so on.

So Malcolm, the famous expression of that desire to set an example is John Winthrop, who in 1630, as he's sailing out to America,

preaches a sermon in which he refers to his ambition to make New England like a city on a hill, a kind of shining example.

And going with John Winthrop is a man called William Pynchon, who is much less well known.

Could you just tell us a bit about him and why specifically he goes?

Because he's in your book and he's a very representative figure in many ways.

Yeah, it's an incredible early American life really. He starts out in very obscure existence in a very

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small place called Springfield outside Chelmsford.

And he's a sort of country church warden and, you know, minor gentry, but really kind of nobody. But he goes out to start a new life for himself and has this, what turns out to be an extraordinary adventure.

And this is because he, like so many people, feels that, so he's going out in the reign of Charles I, as lots of people are.

And it's because they think that Charles I is a sort of crypto-papist who is introducing Catholicism by the back door and flummery in churches and, you know, altars and whatever.

That sort of stereotype. So I know, I think Tom and I are great ladybird aficionados.

So that's sort of stereotype. You know, there was a ladybird book. So these were children's books for that, our overseas listeners.

Yeah.

Of the sort of these sort of very starchy Puritans, the Pilgrim Fathers and Plymouth Rock and all that sort of stuff.

So that sort of holds up, does it? So if you've gone out, they're all godly and they're all chatting about the Bible and there's this kind of austerity to them.

Is that right?

Some people are more godly than others. Some people just go out for economic reasons.

I mean, people like John Winthrop and William Pynchon, you know, they've got their, they've got an eye on the main prize. They're entrepreneurs.

Everybody's obsessed with land from the start, but you can be interested in that and also be godly.

In fact, they feel that that's part of God's plan for them, that they will go out and prosper.

They know they're not, you know, they are sort of conflicting ideals in some ways or they turn out to be, but they don't think that they are.

They think that those things are actually compatible and actually sort of mutually reinforcing, I guess.

So that kind of Puritan stereotype does exist, but it's not everybody and it's not everyone through and through.

So the religious aspect of it, for the Puritans, there is this idea, you know, that founding the city on the hill, it's this idea that it will be a community of saints.

So how do you qualify as a saint? How do you know that you're a saint? What do you do with people who aren't saints?

Well, the godly people that go over there, they're already convinced because they've already set their faces against, as Dominic said, this kind of, you know, this kind of crypto-poper, as they see in the church and government of Charles I.

But when they go over to these communities, they have to kind of re-prove themselves because that there, a church isn't just, you know, isn't just like a parish church in England for all comers, good and bad.

There, they've set themselves up as a separate congregation where in order to be part of that covenant as they see it, you have to actually demonstrate that the Holy Spirit has entered you and you are a member of God's elect.

And that's a real problem for a lot of people. It causes huge disappointment and even, you know, suicidal thoughts of total wretchedness and lack of self-worth because they feel that maybe actually they weren't elect after all.

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It's something that you have to persuade yourself in your own heart.

And if you're not elect, then you are doomed to petition.

Yeah. And so the thing about Calvinism is it's, I mean, there are different strains and different interpretations of Calvinism, but essentially it's the idea that there is that from birth, before birth, there are the drowned and the saved.

And so really it's about demonstrating to yourself and your community that you're on the side of the angels and you're not this sort of, not wicked necessarily, but this sort of, you know, the light hasn't been switched on inside you.

You're a kind of a dark and essentially spiritually worthless person.

So this is pretty tough to come to terms with in their, you know, in their cultural mentality.

So the stakes are very high, aren't they? Because you're not just building a new life economically.

You're not just building a house and trying to sort of, you know, get food and chisel out, carve out this new life in what appears to be a wilderness.

They talk of it as a wilderness. Obviously there are, as you said, Native Americans, you're surrounded by enemies.

But I was going to say, is it that that causes, that drives the witch craze? But of course they're taking the witch craze with them to some extent, aren't they?

Because as Tom said, there are witch crazes in Europe in this period.

So for the benefit of people who don't know anything about it like me, why are people getting all hot onto the collar about witches in the 17th century in Europe before they even get to America?

Well, the witch craze is, I mean, there are lots of factors. I mean, there's no time to talk about it in any sort of detail.

But to have a witch craze, you need lots of factors to come together at the same time.

It's economic and it's religious and it's political and it's cultural and it's legal.

And you get all those things together, you can have a witch hunt.

This is a very polarized mentality where they feel that there is this battle for the soul of Europe from the 16th century into the 17th century.

A kind of long reformation where Catholicism has been pushed out of many states and Protestantism has taken over.

But that's not a happy, healthy transition.

That creates religious wars, creates intense religious conflict about really what the shape of Europe should be and, in fact, the whole of the Western world.

And it's part of that tension and that disagreement, a kind of collective anxiety about what the world should be and what God's intentions are that divides people from the side of God to the side of the devil.

It's just a very sort of polarized, bipolar way of looking at oneself and the whole of the world out there.

And those people that fall foul of it are potentially wicked.

So the witch stands in for the extreme form of the negative ideal of what individuals and the nation should be.

So the witch is your neighbor, right?

The witch is somebody almost always that is very close to you or living in close proximity, let's say, and is an outsider in your community or as a rival or both of those things.

Witchcraft exists in people's minds in different ways.

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So there's a kind of idealized form of the witch.

There's almost a sort of fantasy witch of the devil worshiper who gathers with other witches on the hillside at midnight.

Everyone kind of has that in their mind.

But when it comes to making accusations, those sort of people are not apparent.

So the witch becomes manifested, as you say, in someone that's often very close to you.

Not so much an outsider, but someone actually ironically who is where the proximity is the problem rather than distance.

But it's somebody who falls foul of expectations of the way people are supposed to behave within the community.

And that doesn't mean to say that everybody who falls foul of that is accused.

But that's the precondition.

It's somebody who isn't quite playing the game, partly possibly because they are dependent, possibly because they are cantankerous.

But it's somebody who's not actually just swimming in the stream of conformity and normality within your often rather anxious, fraught, economically imperiled community.

Right, because Malcolm, that's the key, isn't it?

So in New England, obviously, you can see that anxieties about light and dark, God and the devil, the justified and the unjustified would be incredibly harsh simply by virtue of being in very isolated communities amid a kind of vast spreading wilderness.

But there is also this material element that you hinted at there, that people are going out there not just for religious reasons, but for economic reasons.

And it's tough and there are great fortunes to be made, but also there are bound to be losers in this sense of competition.

And that becomes an important part in kind of why people suspect others of witchcraft as well, isn't it?

People are employing malign means, supernatural means to do other people down.

Yeah, that's definitely it.

I mean, we should remember that actually these Puritans that go over in the 1630s with their demonic ideas,

it takes quite a long time for witchcraft accusations to start happening.

It isn't that as soon as they arrive, you know, in their stovepipe hats and buckle shoes, they start pointing the finger at witches all around them.

Getting out of the pitchfork.

Yeah, quite.

It takes a generation for that to happen because it takes a generation for the kind of economic pressures which are always behind witchcraft accusations to really get going.

And so that New England, there is all this virgin territory, but these communities do get full up quite quickly.

And then people have to go off and form their own kind of satellites from that.

So those pressures are created quite quickly.

So Malcolm, just a return to William Pynchon, who we were talking about.

He sailed out with John Winthrop.

He is a very devout Christian.

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He is fascinated by theology, all that kind of stuff.

But he is also basically a go-getting capitalist.

And am I right that he starts to invest in the fur trade, so beaver trapping and all that kind of stuff?

And he finds that already along the New England seaboard, the beaver is starting to vanish.

And so he decides to go inland.

And the settlement that he found, which he called Springfield after the place that he came from in England.

This is not a religious settlement.

This is a settlement founded with the aim of making money.

Is that right?

Yeah.

I mean, it is religious.

They are godly, but it's not founded with that primary intention in mind.

Whereas so many of those communities towards the East are transplanted godly congregations.

That's really, you know, that's in their DNA right from the start.

But Pynchon, yeah, he's an entrepreneur.

He's a kind of, you know, one can recognize him as a modern capitalist entrepreneur.

So he's working in the fur trade even when he's in England.

But he goes to doing the partly because he wants to be closer to the source.

And then he actually goes from Massachusetts to the Connecticut Valley because he wants to get as close as possible

to the increasingly dwindling trading beaver fur that's coming down from Native Americans.

So that's really what he's doing.

He's trying to cash in as much as he possibly can.

But, you know, that's not in his mind in conflict with his godly ideals.

He feels that's part of God's providential plan for him and others like him.

So he establishes this town Springfield, which he names after Springfield in Essex, where he'd come from.

And I get the impression from your book that there's a slight sort of, it's a combination of the capitalist as you and Tom were saying, but it's also a slight lord of the manor side to it.

So basically everybody's in debt to him or in hawk to him.

They have to pay him in kind.

How does he attract them there in the first place to see sort of, does the word go out among the congregations in Boston and places like that?

Oh, this guy, Pynchon, is starting a new community.

You know, why don't you come along?

He's got work for you.

Or is it people that he knows?

Or how does he get people to join him?

Well, we tend to forget that actually that these people are, you know, very remote and they do feel that they're a long way from home, which is England, 3,000 miles away.

But they're actually very well connected.

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Their communications are really not bad.
They're just slower than we would, you know, it happened today.
So the Pynchon, when he needs something, he sends letters out.
He's got contacts all over the place, fingers in pies here, there and everywhere.
And so that he will write letters or he will travel back.
And if he needs, you know, if Springfield needs barrels,
he will go and hire a Cooper somewhere.
And if it needs a minister, as he does, then he goes and hires a minister, George Mox.
And so what he's doing is recreating this rather sophisticated, integrated community
that he knows from England.
And in fact, everybody knows from England.
England is an advanced country.
And so they really want to build all these things out.
And they, you know, one of the things that you find when you emigrate to New England
is all the things that you miss.
You know, there are all the things that people write back and say,
Oh, I forgot to bring this soap nails, because you can't just go out and buy it.
Whereas, of course, in England has shops, you know, you can actually go and buy stuff.
But so that this is what Pynchon does.
And he is, as you say, a kind of Lord of the Manor.
There's always this, you know, one of the historical ironies of this is that, you know,
it seems very progressive and very radical, very forward looking,
but it's also a very nostalgic enterprise.
And so that actually out in America, Pynchon does get to be the modern capitalist entrepreneur,
but he also gets to be a very old fashioned Lord of the Manor, as you say,
who controls everything and everybody owes him deference and he passes patronage downwards.
And, you know, for him and others like him, that's great.
And so just as Pynchon is founding this partly because he's godly,
but mainly because he wants to make money.
Presumably, the settlers, it's the same kind of mixture of emotions and motives.
People want to be part of a godly community, but they also want to become rich.
They wanted to get land. They want to set up families.
Yeah, I mean, land is the key thing.
Land runs right through this story.
And of course, it runs right through the story of England from the late 16th
into the first half of the 17th century.
In England, there's not enough of it.
There's too many too much labor in America.
There's loads of it and not enough labor.
So actually they they rebalance things and then England becomes a new England becomes rather
like England.
So that they, you know, it's his land.
You know, there are speculators who want great vast areas of Virgin Territory
as of course they do in England when they drain the fence, for example,

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it's the same kind of speculation.

But it's also a very personal thing and really quite ordinary people want another field, you know, or they want a bigger field or they want a bit of meadow or they want access to a wood lot and so on. And so this is right from the top to the bottom of society and getting hold of land because land isn't just money.

Land is also power and authority.

And this is a story as old as the hills.

So let's bring in two of the main players in this story that you tell so brilliantly in your book, *The Room of All Witches*.

So one of them is a Welsh maid servant and her name is Mary Lewis.

And she has had, I think it's fair to say, a pretty awful life back home in Wales, hasn't she?

So tell us about her and why she's come over to Pynchon's town.

Mary Lewis back in Monmouthshire, she gets married.

Her husband turns out to be a wrongan.

He's a Catholic in what is, after all, a Protestant country.

That is a wrongan.

And that is, he is a real, but he's also horrible as well.

And he abuses her and he deserts her and he, you know, he, sorry, bullies her, then he deserts her.

And so, you know, this is kind of spiritual and emotional void in her life.

She just feels, as I think many potential migrants do, that there's nothing left for her there.

And she joins this rather kind of charismatic, you know, radical Protestant community in Wales.

So she's already kind of being set up for the kind of world that she might go to in New England.

Of course, others are going to.

And so the time comes that it's, you know, she can get on a boat and go and completely start over.

And so Malcolm, in this sect, and presumably going to America,

she is very, very conscious of this division between those who are saved and those who aren't.

Between those who have won the light and those who are threatened with perdition.

Yeah, she is.

I think that, like many, she probably doesn't expect that she's going to have to prove herself.

Because of course, those who, you know, in England and in Wales,

who believe themselves to be part of the elite, they're very sure of themselves in that regard.

And so, you know, that she's going to be tested in a totally new way.

I mean, everyone is tested materially and spiritually.

That's one of the things that makes this experience so tough.

So she doesn't, she sort of knows what she's, you know, she's in for,

but I don't think anybody is quite prepared for the challenges that there makes on them personally.

And how does she end up in Springfield specifically?

Is she planning to go there from the beginning or does she just get to do it and then look around?

No, she gets hired as a maid servant and through the kind of Bush Telegraph of who needs labour and so on,

that William Pinchin hires her to be a maid servant to his daughter,

who has got young children and is pregnant again and is just going to need help around the house.

And that's really how she ends up making that 100-mile journey from the eastern seaboard of Massachusetts

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over to the Connecticut Valley where Springfield is.

And then for someone like Mary, just to sort of paint the picture, when she gets to Springfield, does she sort of think, oh, this is, I mean, obviously we don't know what she thinks, but does she sort of think this is just like home, you know, this is a recreation of home? Or is it obviously a more anxious, difficult, darker kind of place, would you say?

I think it's a mixture. I mean, that, you know, everyone's trying to seek out the familiar, to recreate the familiar, because of course that's what we do, you know, that's what's comforting. That's the world that you know. But it's just, that is just hard work.

And because they're very conscious of the fact that there are wolves there, no wolves at home. There are Native Americans, no Native Americans at home that, you know, there is hostility with them.

There are shortages of things. There's epidemic disease.

And just this, you know, this wilderness beyond as they see it, they just don't really know what lies out there.

And I think everybody feels this existential threat.

So the England, of course, has its problems in the 1640s and 50s, but nobody ever believes that England will cease to exist.

They don't know where it's going, but it won't be wiped off the map.

But that's how they feel about New England.

They know that actually in the end, this experiment could fail and they'll all either have to go home or they'll die.

And for Mary specifically, there's the fact that she is, you know, she's married.

She's left her abusive husband in England.

She's now working as a maid servant surrounded by children.

And she's merely an appendage of the family, you know, of the mistress for whom she's working.

But presumably she wants a family as well. She wants her independence.

And this is terrible that if you're a spinster, you were mocked as a thornback.

She doesn't want to be a thornback. She's looking for a potential husband.

No, she, I mean, like almost everybody else, she wants to conform.

And in this world, conformity means getting married and having children of your own, having your own separate household.

This is true for men and women. All young people want to form their own household.

That's why it's so hard in England because you need land and you need work.

So they're often going to America not to seek their fortunes.

I think that's a very kind of modern way of looking at it, but they do want to form a separate family and their own little political as well as economic unit, because that's what in the early modern world, that's what the household is.

So yeah, she wants to basically erase her past.

She wants to forget her husband. She wants the marriage to be annulled and she wants to find a new husband and just, just, I think, just be normal.

Yeah.

In that world.

And then as luck would have it, her eye falls on the perfect person.

So he is a few persons. He's a guy that's been brought in to make bricks.

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Yeah.

They need bricks. They can't buy them.

And she thinks he's a very fine fellow. He's a sort of physically, to make making bricks is hard work.

He's a physically impressive book. He's perhaps a little bit quiet as we'll discover.

But so her gaze falls on him and what's his story?

We don't know so much about him, do we? He's a bit more...

No, we know much, much less about him.

Not even entirely sure where he comes from.

There are about 20 or so Q Parsons amazingly in England at this time.

So it's a bit hard to tell.

But he is, yeah, certainly he must be, I mean, he comes across as a kind of, you know, kind of tall, dark, mysterious man.

I think that maybe, again, it's a speculation, but Mary is possibly slightly intrigued by him because he is actually very quiet.

And this is a characteristic that runs right through everything we know about him.

He's a man of few words and also few emotions.

And of course, that will cause him problems in due course.

But yeah, you know, she likes him, he likes her.

And, you know, I think that it's not a match made in heaven.

I'm not quite sure where it's made, but they're going to get together.

So she gets her marriage an old, doesn't she?

Yeah.

She goes to Pinchin and she gets permission because her husband has deserted her.

A Catholic husband back in Wales has deserted her.

So she and Hugh get married.

And at first it all looks lovely and rosy.

They're starting this new life together, this new household in Springfield.

And maybe we should take a break now because I don't want to, you know, get too deep into spoilers for our listeners.

This story is going to take quite a dark turn, Tom, isn't it?

It is.

It doesn't end well.

So to find out what happens, come back after the break.

Hello, welcome back to the Rest is History.

We are in mid 17th century New England, specifically in the newly founded town of Springfield, where a young couple, Hugh and Mary Parsons, have set up house.

Mary has a succession of children.

And here to tell us about what happens to that marriage and to the community of Springfield more generally,

we have Malcolm Gaskell, author of the brilliant book, *The Ruin of All Witches*.

So Malcolm, how does the marriage turn out?

Well, it starts off okay, I think.

Mary is quite quickly becomes pregnant.

She has a baby in the summer of 1646.

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And they both work hard doing what people do in New England households. So Hugh is out working on the land and making bricks and building chimneys and also doing jobs for William Pinchham, which is what everybody does. And she's at home looking after the baby and cooking and cleaning and doing that. I think initially they get it right. But of course, like all marriages, you've got to really work at it. And in Springfield, you've got to work at it like 110%. And even then, you might not get it right. Yeah. So the threat of witchcraft to bring that into the story. I mean, that hangs over the community generally, like all communities in New England. People are aware that witchcraft exists. You know, they don't see it as superstition. They know there's a dark world out there that the boundaries between the spiritual and the material are, you know, got some of thin. And she is obsessed by witchcraft. Isn't she Mary? She becomes obsessed, but yeah, it's very odd. I mean, it's interesting that the people, everybody does know about witchcraft and misfortunes happen all the time and they feel the devil. But it's very unusual for people to actually accuse others of witchcraft and it's true actually in England too. But there, you know, Springfield's been going for 15 years or more and there's no recorded accusations of witchcraft. But that suddenly in around 1647, there are rumors of witchcraft which are coming from Boston and up the Connecticut Valley. It just seems to be taking hold. You know, it's just, it's in the air before actually anybody points the finger. And Mary strangely does become really rather preoccupied by the idea that there are not just witches in, but that maybe there are witches coming from other communities. As a woman arrives from the parish of Windsor downriver called a widow called Mercy Marshfield and Mary just gets into a head that she's, as she said, brought the devil with her. I mean, Malcolm, one of the things that really struck me reading your book, perhaps because my wife is a midwife was the degree to which the paranoia about witchcraft seems absolutely implicated with the process of childbirth and child rearing. In the book you describe Margaret Jones, a midwife from Charleston, hanged in Boston in June 1648. News arrives from Dorchester of a devil disguised as a professed servant of Jesus Christ, who's another wicked midwife. Do you think that that is a kind of reflection of the way in which children are a focus both of kind of godliness, their reward from God and of the kind of the index of the potential that your family will have for future success. And therefore, if children are being attacked or children are somehow being malignly affected,

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that's striking at the absolute heart both of the family and the community.
Yeah, and certainly in these communities that children are the future because they are, they're worried that they will actually die out.
They won't have a limited number of income as from migration as you would have in England. They have to keep, you know, reproducing and passing on property and building wealth and so on. So yeah, so there is that kind of pressure.
But we should remember that there's an incredible emotional attachment to children too. This is kind of myth that, you know, infant mortality is so high that you just have children. If they die, it's like, oh, well, we'll have another one and so on.
But, you know, people are extreme, people love their children and that they're incredibly distressed when they die
and they don't really get used to it.
Children are often at the centre of witchcraft accusations because of the anxiety that they cause their parents.
And I think that, you know, here we can, you know, there's a bit more of a universal story, even if it's hard for us to identify with the strictly demonic side of their accusations. That seems very remote to us.
But actually, if you think about the love that you feel for your children and, you know, how you'd feel if somebody threatened them, especially something threatening them, you couldn't naturally do anything about. I think then you get much closer to the idea of what witchcraft was in a community.
I'm also struck by the fact that you mentioned that the mood changes or the mood darkens around 1647.
So that must be a point at which they are getting news weeks or months late about the civil wars back home.
Do you think that that plays a part in the sort of the darker turn, that people are suddenly aware, you know, there's a conflict that perhaps they fear will spread maybe to North America.
I know they've left England because they want to start a new godly life, but a lot of them probably are quite conservative in some ways.
That classic thing of the world being turned upside down.
So do you think that plays a part in it too? There's a kind of political subtext to all this.
I do. I think that they do feel the world turned upside down across the Atlantic.
There's this kind of rather old fashioned exceptionalist idea in certain kind of American historical writing
that when you went to America you kind of forgot the old world because that's really why you'd gone.
And you started afresh and you became this new authentic American self.
But actually these people call themselves the English, they've got English relatives, they often sometimes go home to England and that's very much where their hearts still lie.
So that when England's torn apart by civil war and revolution, they feel it very, very intensely.
They feel it on a spiritual level and they feel it at a personal level too
because they've got friends and family and they don't really know always what's happened to them.

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So this is a very interconnected world.

They are physically remote, but actually in their hearts they do, they kind of encompass the whole of the Western world.

You know, they worry about the future of Protestantism generally.

That's what many Puritan divines do.

They want to build this Protestant Western world and they feel that it's threatened.

They feel that it's politically threatened and religiously threatened and that they're going to have to fight for it.

So they're in Springfield very much on the kind of the margins, the borders, the edges of New England.

And they are getting disturbing political news from England

and they're getting these rumors of malevolent midwives killing children.

And then you say that like the plague, witchcraft was usually first encountered as news from distant parts.

So there is that sense rather like with an epidemic drawing closer to you,

the sense that the threat of sorcery, the threat of witchcraft is approaching.

How does it start to manifest itself in Springfield?

Witchcraft kind of arrives in Springfield when Mary Parsons starts talking about it.

You know, we have this kind of stereotypical view of the way that witchcraft accusations start sometimes.

When it goes wrong, they don't like somebody, they get accused and then they get tried.

But in Springfield, it's rather different.

Mary Parsons starts suspecting somebody else, Mercy Marshfield, who then sues her for slander.

And Mary started saying to her neighbors, you know, she bewitched your child, she bewitched your cow.

And they're not having any of that.

And they think that it's just wrong to be going on about witches, accusing people indiscriminately and just muttering about it the whole time.

I think that this does show that the idea has at least been seeded in people's minds, even if when that first accusation is made, it completely blows up in the accuser's face.

So that there is a kind of residue left from this.

And as you say that the idea of Springfield has drifted up the valley, it's drifted across New England, but it's kind of here to stay, you know, it's not, they're not going to reverse that just by having a successful slander trial.

So Mary is fascinated by witchcraft.

She's accused her neighbor of unsuccessfully of being a witch.

And we get into this extraordinary situation where she begins to think that not only her husband, who she's kind of, you know, the marriage has gone sour.

They've suffered disappointments, a tragic loss of a child.

Samuel, I think it is, isn't it?

Their little boy has died.

Mary is convinced of two things.

One, that her husband is a witch.

And secondly, that she is also her witch herself.

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I mean, that's an extraordinary, to us, utterly inexplicable development.

So what's going on there, do you think?

I think Mary undoubtedly is suffering from some kind of mental illness.

She seems deluded.

You know, I don't talk about this in the book because I'm trying to sort of stay in their world, stay in their categories, but the things that she describes, the sort of symptoms that she displays would be consistent with postpartum psychosis, which is much rarer than postnatal depression.

And she does seem very strangely deluded.

I mean, her husband is horrible and it does seem that, you know, it wouldn't be strange to infer that maybe he had the devil in him to some extent, but she actually really does start to feel that he has given himself to the devil and he's a witch.

He starts to suspect that she is a witch because of the way that she behaves.

And also because of, I think, this spiritual wretchedness that we talked about earlier, this sense of that can overtake some people of a lack of self-worth, that she starts to believe that she is a witch too.

And this would explain some witchcraft accusations we get in the old world too, that people confess freely because they've actually persuaded themselves and others have projected that upon them that actually they might be a witch against their own will.

So Hugh, let's go back to him.

So you said he's, you know, it would be reasonable to infer that he had the devil in him.

And we talked before about him being quiet.

So that quiet is actually what damns him, isn't it?

Yeah, to a point. I mean, he's quiet sometimes.

But he's actually, I mean, he has to do these brick deals.

Everybody wants bricks because, well, one, because wooden chimneys set the house on fire. That's obviously a bad thing.

So they want brick chimneys, which are better, but they're also status symbols.

So you've got to imagine that there's these men who are hiring Hugh Parsons to build them chimneys.

They're very dependent on him.

And this is a world where everybody's dependent on everybody else, but it causes difficult relationships.

Pinchin makes their lives possible, but they kind of resent him too.

Hugh Parsons gives them bricks, but they resent that dependence.

So that there are arguments.

Every time Hugh Parsons goes and does a brick deal, he ends up with some kind of row where he threatens them.

So that he is, you know, he's a difficult cantankerous, awkward character, and then he's quiet.

So it's a weird contrast between absolute fury and then this kind of brooding, taciturn mystery about him.

And that really is, that's his undoing.

The amazing thing about this book, I thought,

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considering that this is a very obscure place,
and these are not people who kind of make or shake history,
is how vividly you can bring them alive.
And you're doing it on two levels.
So you are giving a very, very subtle and complex portrait, say, of Hugh.
So you describe him, you know, this mixture of ambition and silence.
He's forever gauging the scale of other men's estates and debts
and dreading, falling behind,
that he feels a sullen envy that one physician described as a sort of
grief mixed with hate.
So these are characteristics that we can recognize in our terms.
But at the same time, as you said,
you want to bring these people alive in terms of the context
that would make sense to them.
So when you describe Mary,
she's in the alehouse with other people.
And suddenly you say, she consented in her heart to Satan
and was transported.
And you describe her as though it's actually happening,
her soul was the way to a witch's meeting.
There's revelry and gleeful shapeshifting from human to animal forms.
But the witch is angry with Mary for reeling so much,
made her walk barefoot over the stony ground to gather sticks for the fire.
So this is a really kind of fascinating tension
within the way that you're writing the story,
that these are people who are both vividly real.
They feel like, you know, they could be characters from a novel
and simultaneously you are situating them in a world
that is very, very different to the way that we would see the world.
Yeah, I mean, the writing of it, I was kind of, you know,
walking a line.
I mean, I'm trying to communicate to a modern readership, obviously.
But there's a difficulty.
I mean, I don't believe in witchcraft
and I don't believe that many of these things were actually happening,
but it's very important that I believe that they believed it.
And the danger is sometimes that, you know,
you spend all this time trying to build up this, you know,
this very authentic 17th century world
and then you kind of break the spell.
You know, it's like breaking the fourth wall
and telling the audience, you know,
everything's a nod to the reader that actually maybe was encephalitis
or the children were having, were suffering from diphtheria

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and they called it melancholy,
but actually she was suffering from clinical depression.
Every time you do that, I think it jars.
So I'm trying to kind of stay within their, you know,
the reality of their experience,
which might sometimes seem a bit kind of coy, I suppose,
but actually they are undecided what's going on too.
They say what they think is having, you know,
as they discover when they get to court.
It's not a consensual world.
They're unsure about themselves and their own perception experience
and other people are sceptical about what other people describe.
I think, I mean, I think that the effect is brilliant.
It kind of knocks away the sense of superiority
that we would feel as 21st century people looking back
and it sucks you into a world in which the devil might be real
and witchcraft might be real.
And so when in due course both Mary and Hugh
come to be charged with witchcraft,
you feel the stakes not just as legal ones
but as kind of supernatural ones as well.
What is the process by which Mary and Hugh come to be charged
and indeed in due course convicted of witchcraft?
Well, this is kind of groundswell of opinion.
You know, lots of little things all come together.
So it's difficult for communities to make accusations
because actually the conviction rate in England and in Europe
and certainly in New England is actually very, very low,
much lower than we'd expect.
You know, Malcolm, that was the detail in your book
that amazed me the most.
Right.
It shows just how imprisoned I was
by the kind of horrible histories.
And actually, funny enough, today, the day we recorded this,
I was driving my son to his school bus.
I said, I'm going to do this amazing podcast
with this fantastic book, Witchcraft.
And I said, guess how many people were convicted?
And he was way out.
You know, he said, oh, nine out of 10 or whatever.
I said, no, one in four.
Three out of four were acquitted.
That astounded me.

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So the conviction rate just across Europe is about 50%.
But in England, it's lower than it's about 23, 24%.
Something similar in Scotland, it's a bit higher than that.
But essentially, we have this idea that as soon as somebody
was accused, they must be chased up to the nearest tree
and then hanged.
And this is because this is a modern story.
It's not a kind of late medieval story.
These are people whose perceptions of the world are changing.
They are gradually changing towards a more empirical way
of looking at not just science, but the law as well.
So they're very uncertain about evidence.
They want to weigh all this up.
So when Hugh and Mary are charged,
or when they're apprehended in Springfield,
everybody's kind of reassured everybody else
that actually we can do something about this.
And this is what witchfinders do in the old world.
They go around and say to people, you know,
I know you are unsure about going to law over this,
but trust me, we should do it.
People need that reassurance to an extent, you know,
far greater than, as you say, we would imagine
from a kind of horrible history's view of this,
where you think there's a sort of sense of inevitability
of determinism about these accusations.
So then they all feel very sure in Springfield,
and they get very, very sure of themselves,
all this testimony is heard,
and then the case is taken to Boston,
and they have to kind of prove themselves all over again
to a different set of people
who have a different set of priorities and ideas
about what evidence is, and therefore what witchcraft is.
Well, that's the amazing scene, isn't it?
Because they don't all go to Boston.
A lot of the witnesses submit written evidence.
I love the way that works in the book,
because you've been building up the tension
and the sense of paranoia,
and that sense of inevitability, I suppose.
You know that it's all going to end horribly for Mary and Hugh.
She's accusing him and herself of witchcraft.
And the book's called The Ruin of All Witches.

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I don't, you know, the spoiler is kind of there in the title.
Yeah. And the sort of evidence accumulates.
So-and-so's milk was saffron-colored.
Somebody fell off his horse.
A pudding came out in two pieces.
Weird stuff about puddings.
Yeah.
But then they get to Boston,
and it's exhibited in open court,
and it's almost as though someone has turned on
an overhead lamp or something,
and you look at it and you just-
and you can see the people in Boston kind of listening to it
and thinking, this is pretty thin rule.
Is that because the people in Boston are more skeptical?
No.
Or is it simply- what is it then?
No, it's not skepticism of witchcraft.
Again, we can so easily slip into these kind of, you know,
2D view of our ancestors,
but they believe absolutely implicitly in witchcraft.
It's very difficult to unbelieve in witchcraft.
I think inevitably they feel more skeptical about the evidence,
so that actually in Boston what they say is,
well, this seems like a very good case, you know,
but we're just not sure that you've got the right-
I'm not going to spoil things too much here,
but it just doesn't really stack up,
and of course that's the sort of thing they're saying in England too.
That's why you've got this surprisingly low conviction rate,
because, you know, the will to have witchcraft accusations is there,
the laws there, the machinery of the courts is all in place,
but when it actually comes to it,
you know, nobody in the end really wants to hang an innocent person,
because then you will bring down the vengeance of heaven,
the blood of the innocent will cry out for vengeance,
they wouldn't say miscarriage of justice,
they'd have said something a bit more flowery like that,
but it comes to the same thing,
they really want to have fair justice,
and with witchcraft it's so difficult to gather that proof,
and something of that skepticism about the quality of evidence
has actually been there right from the start of the witch hunt,
right back in the early 16th century.

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And so in fact, neither of them end up being hanged for witchcraft?
No, they both kind of escape it,
but that in many ways is the typical,
you know, that's the typical outcome of witchcraft trials.
And again, I suppose that the crucible has kind of skewed this a bit,
and Salem often stands in for our view of witch hunting,
and we focus on the tragedy,
and of course it is a tragedy,
of the people that we would consider to be innocent being hanged,
but that's not actually, you know,
Salem is an extraordinary thing, it's an aberration.
Witch trials don't happen at all,
because they never get as far as the court,
and then even when they do get to court,
we find that more often than not, those cases fail.
So we don't want to spoil the ending,
because obviously we want people to buy your book.
It was my Sunday Times history book of the year,
I think a couple of years ago,
and it is a brilliant book,
and I couldn't recommend it too highly.
Mary and Hugh, their stories end up in unexpected places,
different trajectories, and we're not going to give it away.
But witchcraft more generally,
well, let's talk about, actually, let's talk about Springfield,
before we talk about witchcraft.
So Springfield, their worst fears do come true, don't they?
They're attacked by the Indians,
and the city is, the town is sacked,
and lots of people are killed.
So actually they were right to be paranoid and anxious.
You know, you can be paranoid and right.
And also Dominic, their founder, Pynchon,
gets charged with basically with heresy, doesn't he?
I mean, he has, he ends up having his books burnt
and all that kind of stuff.
There's a weird kind of parallel story in this,
where the man who seems to be in charge of the witch hunt
is himself under investigation for heresy,
and really that's his, you know,
that you find that actually Pynchon,
although he's at the top of this society,
and Hugh and Mary here at the bottom,
that really their fates are intertwined,

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and they kind of go down together.
And it's just an illustration, actually,
of these American lives that they, you know,
it's a huge, huge risk, it's a huge gamble,
and there are winners and there are losers,
and the losers either die or they have to go home.
And that's true in Pynchon's case.
But Pynchon's son, John, does stay on,
and you know, as Dominic said,
that their worst fears do come true.
And even before then, they discover,
they have this purge of these evil people,
Hugh and Mary, and then actually they go back
to being horrible to each other in new and interesting
and exciting ways, ending each other's land and all that.
So that actually it doesn't really,
this is the thing about witch hunts,
that there's sometimes this rather righteous feeling
that actually if we just get rid of those people,
everything will be all right, but it isn't,
because actually the wickedness really resides
in their own hearts.
And then in the 1670s, there's devastating
New England-wide war with Native Americans
that really does actually nearly spell
the end of New England.
The Native forces get within 10 miles of Boston,
and they get to Boston, it would be game over.
So this existential threat that's been hanging over them
all the time really does reach its climax
in the 1670s.
Although Springfield recovers, doesn't it,
and becomes, I learnt from your book,
the birthplace of Dr. Seuss.
It is, yeah.
He has his own memorial sculpture park
with life-size sort of cat in the hat
and all around the place, which is kind of trippy
and odd.
But now it's very famous, famous for all sorts
of other things, birthplace of basketball
and the Merriam Webster Dictionary,
and Rolls Royce's were made there,
and Springfield Armoury made guns

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for generations and generations
right up to the Vietnam War.
So it comes a really thriving town,
and then in the 19th century city too,
Dickens goes there.
I mean, it's a big civic place,
and then which like so many other American cities
goes into 20th century decline.
But Malcolm, another link to cartoons
is that of course the hometown of the Simpsons
is called Springfield.
Springfield serves as a kind of, you know,
an image of American every town.
And the obvious question I suppose
that's been hanging over this whole episode
is the extent to which what is happening
in our Springfield in the 17th century,
to what extent are patterns being established
that you can trace throughout the entire course
of American history perhaps into the present?
What do you think?
Well, I think there are patterns.
The American though, I think, I mean, they do,
one of the things they do achieve in Springfield
is like so many other colonial communities,
they do recreate Old England.
They have rather similar patterns
of class stratification and manufacture
and agriculture and so on.
It's often actually really rather similar.
You know, the similarity in the end
is that people want to belong to something,
a society and a community,
but essentially they want to build their own households.
Sometimes they do that comfortably
and sometimes they do it in opposition
with their neighbors.
And that becomes actually, I think,
a very modern story about how we all live.
But I don't think it's necessarily
a uniquely American one.
So I know we've spent a lot of time talking
about Springfield and what went on in Springfield,
but just to broaden it out again at the end,

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why do people stop having witch crazes?
The seeds of the destruction of the witch hunt
are really there from the start,
which I think as we talked about earlier
is the similarity of having the kind of proof
and being confident in the proof that is available,
which is essentially a witness testimony,
which today we would just call hearsay.
And I think that by the early 18th century,
this development of this awareness of hearsay,
of inadmissible evidence in court,
really just does for witch hunting.
So it's got nothing necessarily to do
with the belief in witches.
It's really got to do with whether you can translate
the belief into action in the courts.
And then you find actually,
if there are no more witchcraft convictions,
then actually some of the heat goes out of it,
which is just don't seem as, you know,
immediate or present because they haven't been convicted.
Of course, the belief in witches
and the belief in the supernatural generally
goes on in rural communities in America
and in England, you know, beyond the First World War.
And even actually the belief
that there are Maleficent witches
who may be trying to bewitch your cattle or whatever.
You know, that persists too to an extraordinary extent.
It's just that sometimes people are lynched.
But then of course, then the lynchers
find themselves on the sharp end of the law
rather than the witch.
The witch just becomes a victim of abuse
and sometimes sadly murder.
Well, Malcolm, thank you. That was absolutely brilliant.
And I think, I mean, I can't recommend
the Rune of All Witches enough.
And I think the thing that's most moving about it
is the way that you give these figures
who had such terrible lives,
you give them back a kind of dignity.
You talked about Hugh being a kind of terrible man.
But there is, I mean, you know,

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in the spectacle of his grief for his children,
very, very touching, very, very powerful.
So thanks so much for writing it.
Thanks so much for coming on the show.
And thank you everyone out there for listening.
Bye-bye.
Thanks for having me. It's been great. Cheers.
Bye-bye.
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