

The Heretic's Daughter: A Novel Study Guide

The Heretic's Daughter: A Novel by Kathleen Kent

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Plot Summary

This book is an intriguing account of witch trials, American colonial political impotence, and ecclesiastical ignorance as well as general crowd hysteria. This is also a coming-of-age story about Sarah Carrier who is 10 years old at the time of the Salem, Massachusetts witch hunts and trials. Relying to some extent on family oral history since one of her ancestors was executed at the trials as well as her own research into the period, the author creates an intriguing story that explores the nature of fear, love, kindness, and forgiveness. Neither the author nor publisher gives any reckoning of how much of this story is historical fiction and how much is actual fact. By default, the book must be classed as historical fiction and for young adults but its uniqueness and narrative ingenuity could be greatly enhanced for the reader if these proportionalities were made explicit. Instead, the reader is given a smoothly contoured story with a richly textured historical setting that from a strictly structural point of view is no different from the novels available in grocery stores today that sweep the reader away into a world of pure fantasy.

Whatever the degree of genuine truth, the reader's appetite for facts-on-the-ground is to some extent satisfied by the author's meticulous descriptive powers and seemingly-authentic rendering of 17th Century American English. Her scenes and characters seem very real and the sense of foreboding that must have surrounded this dark period in American history is communicated quite effectively. A smallpox epidemic, marauding Indians and delirious witch hunts combine to make life in the Massachusetts colony anything but peaceful. Those who survive in this hostile environment are physically and morally strong as well as intelligent and adaptable. Although these threats to survival are locked in a specific time within the story, they are in one form or another forces that have shaped American life for centuries—religious fanaticism, disease, and fear of starvation.

The derivation of the title, *The Heretic's Daughter*, could be either of the parents of Sarah Carrier and her siblings. Their father is a physically large and powerful Welshman who has come to Massachusetts for religious and economic freedom; in his case, the freedom not to affiliate with any church and the freedom to work everyone in his family including himself to the bone to keep their farm solvent. Sarah's mother Margaret is a very strong-willed and ethically rigorous woman who denies being a witch in order to stand up to the fear mongers and hopefully expose them as cowards. She is tried, convicted, and executed before her children are released from prison through legislative fiat. Her heretical and non-conformist character makes a deep impression on her daughter, Sarah and in turn, affects the family's maturation and ethics over time.



Massachusetts, December 1690

Massachusetts, December 1690 Summary

The story opens with the Carrier family on the road, traveling from their farm in Billerica, Mass. nine miles to Andover in an attempt to outrun smallpox. However, they are unaware that actually carry the disease because it has already infected Andrew, the middle son. Not unlike the Okies of the Depression-era Dust Bowl, the Carrier have all their worldly possessions crammed into a wagon that creaks and groans as they slowly made their flight from certain death. They head to the home of Grandmother Carrier, the mother of Martha. Upon their arrival, Grandmother tries to convince Thomas to attend church so she and the family will not be the brunt of Reverend Barnard's wrath. She asks him to do it for the sake of his wife and children. He replies that he will do it for his children and for her, but not for Martha who has her own opinions. Grandmother works on Martha until she also agrees, muttering under her breath, "I'd rather eat stones."

Andrew, Sarah's younger brother, becomes febrile and is put to bed in a cot near the fireplace. Martha opens his shirt and sees the telltale pustules of smallpox on his chest. Richard rides to Andover to fetch a doctor, who comes four hours later. Holding a handkerchief over his face, the doctor takes one look then runs out the front door and jumps on his horse, yelling back that he will post a bill of isolation to warn residents away from the house. Martha tells Sarah that her father will take her and Hannah to stay with her Aunt Mary in Billerica, where she will enjoy the company of her cousin Margaret. Martha tells her daughter that her father and brothers are needed to work the farm, although it's likely that Andrew won't be able to help. Before they leave, Grandmother gives Sarah a poppet (puppet) to play with, and Tom hands his sister two white shirt buttons. She worries that her brother will freeze in his unbuttoned shirt.

Massachusetts, December 1690 Analysis

The reader gets a sense of the desperation bordering on panic that has become a feature of daily life in the Massachusetts commonwealth as the Carrier family makes its trek to Andover to escape the spreading epidemic - although they are actually spreading the disease that has already infected one of its members. It seems there is nowhere for colonists to turn for any peace of mind in a world saturated with fear that has produced an epidemic of witch hunts and trials, disease, warfare with Indians, and poverty. Concurrently there is a rising sense among the colonists of dissatisfaction with life under the British crown.

The technique of starting a story abruptly by confronting the reader with a bracing splash of the cold water of reality is known as "in medias res," or "in the middle of things." It is an ancient literary trope and one that serves this narrative well. The author propels the story forward full-throttle and fills in background information as the plot



moves ahead. The threat of disease is a sure attention-grabber and the author uses it skillfully to generate reader buy-in.

The Carriers are fleeing several miles from their home to stay with Grandmother Carrier, who lives alone in a large house in Andover. But they find they cannot escape the paranoia that poisoned their lives in Billerica. Confronted with corrupt clergymen, xenophobia and the need to fight for their survival, the Carrier become a stronger family as they try to support each other in this time of crises. Neither Thomas Carrier, the seven-foot-tall head of the family, nor his wife Martha have any real affinity for church or clergymen but they dutifully go to church to please Grandmother and to help forestall gossip and character assassination by local residents. They only succeed partially.

The adults decide to send Sarah, the narrator, with her father and the infant Hannah to stay with her Aunt and Uncle Toothaker in Andover. Andrew becomes quite ill with smallpox and stays at Grandmother's house with his mother in hopes he will recover with only some facial scarring as a result of the disease that is already taking its deadly toll. In a sense, a desperate situation for the family only becomes worse because of separations to control spread of the illness. But Sarah can look forward to spending time with her cousin Margaret, with whom she is close.



December 1690-March 1691

December 1690-March 1691 Summary

Thomas Carrier delivers Sarah and Hannah by hay wagon to Uncle Roger and Aunt Mary Toothaker in Andover, hands a letter from Grandmother to Mary, then turns his wagon back toward Billerica with an admonition to Sarah to be good and help her hosts. Right away, it is apparent that Uncle Roger—a physician—is a great story teller and would rather entertain people with his tales than do any of the gritty work of running a farm. One of these discourses, about the ferocious killing of Narragansett braves by colonists, rises the hair on Sarah's neck—especially when her uncle pulls up his shirt to reveal a broad scar across his chest from one of these Indian battles. Sarah also notes wistfully that her own family experiences only "dryness [and] harshness," while her cousin Margaret's is "lavish with praise and care." She observes that "where my parents were silent or sullen, hers were animated with talk and laughter." For this reason, she is reluctant to rejoin her family especially because she develops a close relationship with Margaret.

The two girls pass the winter hours repairing clothing and exchanging gossip, while Hannah plays with knitting materials on the floor. "Sharing secrets is the way in which women tie themselves together, for it reveals complicity and trust," Sarah, as narrator, says. Their winter idyll is shaken when a fleeing Quaker man hides in their barn and asks for food. The girls give him something to eat and he sleeps in the straw, but is gone by daybreak. Margaret explains to Sarah that she wants to help the man because Quakers are outcasts considered heretics. As they go to sleep that night, Margaret tells Sarah she helped the man because "they" told her to. When Sarah asks who "they" are, Margaret points to the chest of drawers and says, "The little people in the cupboard." Uncle Roger shows up drunk after being gone all day, and tells Sarah he's been practicing magic, trying to disappear. Margaret later explains to Sarah that her father has been with prostitutes.

The poetically-informed reader may well wonder at the authenticity of a paragraph in Chapter 2, p. 60 where it says, "The end of March is often the cruelest time in the year, as the air will of a sudden turn warm and moist and bring a promise of a great thaw." The line seems lifted, with only slight modifications, from T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*: "April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain." Eliot's poem predates this novel by some 70 years. While this may not be a case of virtual plagiarism, the line cries out for an editorial hand directing the novelist to rewrite.

The extended family is visited by The Reverend Nason of Billerica, who eats like a pig and asks Margaret to recite the signs that identify a witch: a voluntary confession and proof by the testimony of two witnesses. The next day, when Margaret and Sarah return from the barn, they are met by Sarah's father who informs them that their grandmother



has died but that Tom, Andrew and Richard are alive. He also tells Sarah that her mother is alive; they board the wagon and head back home.

December 1690-March 1691 Analysis

At first taken in by the endless fanciful tales of her alcoholic uncle, Sarah feels more comfortable with the Toothakers than her own struggling family. Uncle Toothaker, a physician, is book-learned and literate; he talks from sunrise to sunset, weaving stories that amuse, amaze and entertain. Usually gregarious, there are times when Uncle Roger seems withdrawn and moody, undoubtedly when nursing a hangover. Sarah compares this to her own father who is taciturn, solemn, and steady. This causes her to become critical and short-tempered with her mother and father who she sees as drab, uninteresting and small-minded. Of course, this is also a sign of adolescence - a phase of development that Sarah must go through wherever she lives. Sarah also loves being with Margaret; they even sleep in the same bed. Uncle Roger calls them his "twins," though Margaret is dark-haired with a creamy complexion while Sarah is red-headed with freckles.

Sarah gets her first real glimpse into the working of the adult world by "trading scandalous stories." Sarah learns that "sharing secrets is the way in which women tie themselves together" through bonds of complicity, secrecy and mutual trust. But Sarah learns that this kind of binding can also produce a passive-aggressive relationship, as demonstrated in her relationship with the servant girl Mercy who is at first her friend and then accuses her of being a witch. After the girls allow a Quaker who is escaping from his community to spend the night in the barn to a Quaker, Margaret explains to Sarah that she felt she had to do so because "the little people in the cupboard" told her so. Sarah believes her cousin is mad, but vows to herself that it is "a secret I would gladly keep." Sarah begins to question Uncle Roger's sanity, too, when he returns home one evening to tell her in slurred speech that he has been practicing magic, trying to disappear.



April 1691-August 1691

April 1691-August 1691 Summary

Sarah finds her mother near exhaustion with the extra responsibilities of caring for Andrew, who is fighting smallpox, in addition to her regular duties. Mother and daughter clash as a result of extreme tension, and Sarah tries to comfort herself by caring for Hannah. Sarah notices her brother Andrew seemingly recovered from the disease, his face deeply scarred, but evidently having suffered brain damage. Andrew's attention span is short, his memory fragmentary and his ability to hold a lucid conversation all but wiped out. Her father, Thomas, goes hunting every day to provide food for the family. Most days he comes home with a rabbit, or bird, or some other source of protein. When he kills a bear, the family rejoices in its good fortune. But some days he comes home empty-handed and the family goes to bed hungry.

Martha, Sarah's mother, has a clash with The Reverend Barnard at Grandmother's funeral where he chastises her for her "rebellious" against the authority of the church. She responds by quoting scripture to the effect that Christians must be free from "hypocrisy, envy and slander." It is at that moment, according to Sarah's narrative, that Reverend Barnard wishes the Carrier family "gone forever." Trying but failing to connect with her mother and brothers, Sarah observes that "in the space of a few months, I had become a stranger to my family, my only companion a demanding Hannah, two months shy of her second birthday." Fear of a raid by the Wabanaki Indians parallels fear of smallpox; word among the colonists is that the Indians themselves have suffered greatly because of smallpox, having lost many of their braves. Men build a wall of sharpened spikes around the village to ward off an Indian attack.

Into this climate of fear, Mercy Williams arrives as an indentured servant to the Carriers. She exhibits many of the "uncivilized" traits of her Indian captors who had sold her into ransom. She is a wild-haired, uninhibited young woman who has just discovered sex and is interested in Richard, who tries to ignore her advances and endless chatter. Mercy is also interested in all the unmarried men of the village. Allen Toothaker, nephew of Margaret, shows up and gets into a heated argument with Martha about inheritance rights to Grandmother Carrier's house. Enraged by Allen's claim that the Toothakers were rightful inheritors of the estate, Martha chases him away with a broomstick. Mercy gets into a fight with Richard, and she hooks her foot behind one of his ankles, pushing him backward. He falls with a great crash to the ground. Then he looks up at her and asks where she learned the maneuver. "The Indians," Mercy says. "Teach me that," Richard demands.

One spring night as a powerful thunderstorm moves across the land, Sarah runs out to the hayloft in the barn to get a better view of the spectacle. There, in the intermittent flashes of lightning, she sees Richard and Mercy consorting in the hay. Sensing her presence, they quiet down and remain motionless. Sarah, who earlier had seen Mercy sneaking out of their room, returns to the house and her bed. Tom suddenly awakens



and yells: "Fire, Sarah! The fields are on fire!" Thomas and another man work feverishly to clear a path between the burning hay and their wheat crop. Martha tells Sarah to run to the barn and retrieve the scythes and a hoe for digging the trench. With Hannah fearfully clutching her neck, Sarah ties her to the barn, gets the tools and runs back to the field to deliver them. She at last remembers Hannah and runs back to rescue her and return to the house as the fire is subdued. The fire burns the hay but spares the wheat and corn.

Sarah and Mercy reconcile as they both work to cut down the shafts of burned wheat. Rain comes to further dampen any recurrence of the blaze. Mercy announces that she is pregnant with Richard's child, and says Richard must now marry her to preserve the family's good name. Enraged, Martha pushes Mercy down on the table and inspects her genitalia. She announces that Mercy's maidenhead (hymen) is intact and thus "it would be a fine trick to pass a child through your birth canal without having had a man pass through it first." They call each other liar, and Mercy threatens to blacken the Carrier name in the village unless Richard marries her. Martha slaps her across the face and they stare at each other hatefully. Mercy grabs her few possessions and leaves.

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April 1691-August 1691 Analysis

The 10-year-old preadolescent Sarah is confronted at once with death in the form of smallpox and rebirth in the form of teenage sex involving Mercy Williams and her brother Richard. She also witnesses the strength of her mother in confronting an attempted blackmail by Mercy. At the same time, Sarah is the primary caregiver for her baby sister, Hannah. The reader thus gets an idea of how different currents in her life over which she has no control begin to push Sarah into an early adulthood. When her mother tells Sarah that she has an important red book in which she has written her thoughts and feelings over the years, mother and daughter grow closer when Martha says Sarah can have and read the book after her death. Sarah also glimpses that the adult world is no easier than the world of a child because of clashes between her mother and the clergy, for example, and the self-centered chatter of her Uncle Roger who acts himself like an egocentric infant, such as the two-year-old Hannah. The reader gets a clear impression that Sarah is mature beyond her years and certainly more grownup than her brothers.

Upon her return home to her mother after the death of her grandmother, Sarah experiences "Lucifer sparks" with her mother when her long-nurtured unhappiness with her own family rises to the surface. Having formed an older sister relationship with Margaret, two years her senior, Sarah shifts those feelings to the 17-year-old Mercy Williams when she comes to live with the Carriers as an indentured servant. But that tentative bond is broken when Sarah witnesses Mercy playing at sex with her brother in the barn, then trying to blackmail her mother by claiming pregnancy. When Mercy says her family had been better off than the Carriers before she was taken by the Indians, and calls their farm "a dung beetle's pile, she angers and insults both Sarah and her



mother. Martha retorts that Richard at least enough sense "to keep his rod in his pants with a girl so homely and rummy that even the Indians wouldn't have her." With that, Mercy grabs a few possessions and leaves. But the whole experience serves to further awaken Sarah's sexual drive, as she smells "an odor of hidden thoughts and furtive womanly desires" when she lays down to sleep on Mercy's bed.



September 1691-December 1691

September 1691-December 1691 Summary

Sarah's glowering resentment at being recalled from her cousin's house focuses on her mother. During the long, cold winter, relations between the Carriers and the Toothakers become strained. One day, Martha asks Sarah to come with her into the fields; Sarah fully expects a beating. They stop in a meadow to pick mushrooms. Sarah picks a mushroom that looks appetizing and raises it to her mouth. Her mother yells at her to stop and tells her to look at the underside of the mushroom. There she sees the telltale white gills of the destroying angel and one of the deadliest of wild mushrooms. Martha uses the experience to teach her daughter a moral lesson. Martha says the really dangerous mushrooms are those with smooth skins and the edible morels have pitted skin.

"People, too, are often not what they seem, even those whom you love," Martha tells her daughter. "You must look closely, Sarah." She tells Sarah that it is a good thing she loves Margaret and her mother, Mary. But, she says, Uncle Roger is an evil and selfish man beneath his deceptive charm. Roger once cheated her and Thomas out of some land, Martha says, and he would oust her from her grandmother's house "in the time it took to take off his boots" if he had the opportunity. Martha says love of family must come before everything, and says Roger is not blood family.

Sarah counters that she will not give up her love for Margaret because her mother has a quarrel with Roger. Martha also tells Sarah why Mercy was fired and explains why she almost became "a shamed woman." On the heels of the mushroom parable, Sarah realizes, her mother's timing is perfect because "I knew that a mushroom was often likened to a man's root," although she has trouble imagining how "such an organ could bring much pain at all to a woman or hold much interest beyond its ability to provide the spark for growing a babe in her belly." On the eve of a feast honoring the fall harvest, Sarah gets into a scuffle with Mercy and two of her friends. At the end, Mercy accuses Sarah of having "a witching way. But why else? She is her mother's daughter."

September 1691-December 1691 Analysis

Sarah's difficult relationship with her mother turns out to be blessing in disguise. Through their conflicts, Martha seizes the opportunity to provide her daughter with some character-building teachings. One of the most important is knowing one's own, as well as others', true nature. As in the case of Uncle Roger, Martha tells Sarah, appearances do not tell the whole story about others. For example, Uncle Roger despite his charm and blarney is a weak and conniving person who presents a happy-go-lucky facade to mask his truly selfish motives—such as angling to take possession of Grandmother's property despite its clear inheritance to Martha. Because of an underhanded episode in the past, Martha says, she has never trusted Uncle Roger no matter how many



entertaining stories he tells. The same is true for Mercy Williams, mother tells daughter. She is a selfish opportunist who wanted to use a frolic with Richard as a way to extort money from the Carriers.

Martha walks through the pleasant fall woods with Sarah as they head toward the home of their neighbor Goodman Preston. His wandering livestock had gotten into the Carriers' corn field, eaten some of the crop= and trampled more. With their fall harvest completed, Martha seeks "recompense" for her losses. Preston refuses to pay for the ruined corn, and Martha tells him in anger that the next time one of his cows wanders onto her property she will keep it. Previously, one of Preston's cows had wandered onto their land, gotten stuck in some brambles and was injured. Thomas had treated the animal's wounds and cared for it a few days before returning it to Preston, who accused Carrier of keeping it for a few days to steal its milk. Preston clenches his fist in a threatening manner, and Martha raises a large walking stick over her head. They walk off with plans to make pudding; Martha knows she's given her daughter another lesson in knowing a person's true nature, about the futility of hoarding and about cowardice.



January 1692-May 1692

January 1692-May 1692 Summary

Word of an Indian attack on colonists shocks settlers; Hanna pulls over a pot of boiling soup and burns herself; Sarah asks her mother what she is furtively writing in a red book. Martha replies it is only the counting book, but Sarah doesn't believe her—especially when her mother demands an oath that she will never mention the book. When Sarah asks why she hasn't seen her beloved cousin Margaret, her mother explains the bitterness between her and Uncle Roger over ownership of Grandmother's house. "Your grandmother came to know the worth of your father over a man who calls himself a healer and a man of God but spends his days with a cup in one hand and a bawd in the other," her mother says. Fascinated with her mother's scribblings, Sarah asks her mother to teach her to write and they begin lessons the same day.

Sarah gets into a laughing fit in church as a young black slave boy makes faces at her and imitates the grave demeanor of the pastor. After church Robert Russell, a neighbor, hints to Martha that people in the village are carrying on a whispering campaign that she is a witch. Martha replies that the long winter and idleness makes people gossip. Robert replies that "there are still smallpox and Indian raids not two days' ride from here. People are very much afraid, and fear makes fools of us all." But Martha shrugs off the gossip and acts as if nothing has caused her any disturbance.

In March, the Carriers go "mapling," or collecting sap from maple trees to make into syrup. As a reward, the children are given some sweet syrup to make "sugar-on-the-snow," or maple syrup poured over clean, white snow. Later that month, they find Allen Toothaker, Margaret's brother, in their barn and catch him as he tries to flee. They accuse him of trying to set the barn afire. Martha Carrier rams a bunch of flaming straw in his face and dares him to ever set foot on their property again. Allen reasserts his father's claim that the house and property is his by rights. Word comes of more witch arrests, trials and executions in Salem. In church, Reverend Barnard tells the congregation that Reverend Nason will travel to Salem to give testimony against a physician from Billerica who uses charms and spells, practicing witchcraft. After church, Sarah is approached by Mercy and two other girls and pushed into the mud. They chant "witch, witch, witch" until Martha grabs Phoebe Chandler—one of the three—and shakes her by the shoulders until the three run away.

Robert Russell brings word that Martha is herself to be arrested the next morning to go before the Salem magistrates. He begs her to flee, but she says she will remain and fight the allegations. "They are lawyers and judges and must rue by law," she says. "If I do not do this thing, then it may go on and on." Martha urges her children, if apprehended, to freely confess to whatever the charges are so they may save themselves from hanging. The next morning, as warned, a wagon approaches; Martha is arrested and carried off to Salem.



January 1692-May 1692 Analysis

The duplicity that springs from fear and cowardice provides another lesson for Sarah as friends, family and neighbors turn against one another in the witchcraft fury. The Reverend George Burroughs, seemingly respected and loved in his community of Wells, is accused of witchcraft for writing a vivid account of an Indian raid on a settlement he'd witnessed. The families of some of those killed in the raid testify against him and ensure that he is hanged for practicing witchcraft. Martha herself is accosted by three girls—including two of her friends— outside the church and accused of witchery. She begins to draw closer to her mother as she learns that her moral compass is the only way to endure the insanity that swirls around them.

The madness comes home quickly. Just as rumors of people calling Martha a witch surface, a constable comes to arrest her. Shocked, Sarah and others implore her to admit the charges and thus go free. But Sarah gets another lesson - this time on courage - from her mother who faces her accusers with a ramrod-straight spine and a quiet fire in her eyes. Martha says she is not afraid of the cowardly judges and not afraid to die; she tells her family she must tell the truth and thus stand up to the mindless scapegoating of innocent people. Father Carrier sums it all up: "They are like dogs sniffing their own asses. There's no' so sweet a smell as the corruption you put forth yourself." When Thomas is pressed to convince his wife she should confess for the sake of the family, he answers that she has made her decision, which he understands and respects. The lesson in courage is thus doubled in its impact on Sarah. The reader also sees how conflict defines character - both in life and in literature.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Sarah Carrier tells the reader about the court records from her mother's witchcraft trial of May 28, 1692 as transcribed by a clerk under hire to her husband. In all, there are seven complaints filed by several citizens against her as well as "Mary Toothaker and daughter" (Margaret). The first complaint, signed by Joseph Houlton and John Wallcott, accuses Martha of "sundry acts of witchcraft...to the hurt and injury of their bodies." One deposition by John Roger accuses Martha of bewitching and stealing two "lusty sowes" after an argument with her. Another by Samuel Preston claims that he lost a cow "in a strange manner" after having differences with Martha Carrier. Allen Toothaker, Martha's nephew, says that she "clapped her hands at me and within a day or two, I lost a three-year-old heffer, next a yearling, and then a cow." Phoebe Chandler, one of the three young women who harassed Sarah after church, claims that on the day of Martha Carrier's arrest she heard "a voice in the bushes" that she thought sounded like Martha's.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Depositions against Martha Carrier from those who barely know her but have been carrying a grudge, all unsubstantiated claims of being harmed by her, make up the body of legal complaints. The reader sees explicitly how thin the veneer between civilization and atavistic fear can be in its horrifying implications for life and death. These so-called courts that try, convict and sentence so-called witches are revealed as the irrational and absurd evil of men unfettered by logic, compassion, or reasonable doubt.



May 1692-July 1692

May 1692-July 1692 Summary

Martha Carrier Carrier is dubbed "the witch of Andover" as she is arrested and carried in handcuffs off to Salem. Locals watch in silence as she passes by in the company of a constable, followed by her son, Richard, on foot. Richard follows the full 17 miles into Salem. Martha is led into the courtroom to face three "judges," and under questioning three hysterical young women in turn point at her and tell the panel how her witchcraft has harmed them. ("Goody Carrier bites and pinches me and tells me she would cut my throat if I did not sign her book." Chapter 7, p. 192) She denies all charges of witchcraft, and one of the three witnesses rises and shouts that she "looks upon the black man." Martha says she knows no black man and when pressed by one of the panel answers: "I saw no black man but your own presence." The young girls resume their hysterical behavior, jumping up and down and writhing upon the floor. Martha turns toward the girls and walks a few steps in their direction; they suddenly fall silent. She tells the panel it is "shameful" that they should give credence to the plainly demented young women. One of the three girls says she had a dream that Martha Carrier had been a witch for 40 years. Martha answers that would have been "a neat trick" since she would have been only two years old.

During Martha's imprisonment the rest of the family takes turns bringing her food and fresh clothing and visiting with her. Because of her absence, everyone's workload at the farm is doubled. The children are all affected. Richard becomes bitter and withdrawn; Andrew starts moaning for hours at a time; Hannah seems to become "ever more brittle and fragile." The children try to cope by telling each other they believe their mother will be home soon, but Richard finally tells how he witnessed one woman who was convicted of witchcraft purely on hearsay and put to death for the same so-called evidence. They receive news that Uncle Roger has died in his Boston cell, where he was placed awaiting trial for witchcraft. Martha is to be held in jail until her sentencing in August. When the children press their father to do something for their mother, he replies that "no country deacon or judge or magistrate can separate us from the truth." It is because of his love and respect for his wife, Thomas says, that he "will not seek to sway her from the truth, even if it means she will die for it."

Sarah rides with her father in the wagon to the forge, where they encounter eight men standing around in a group gossiping. Thomas grabs his large, rusted scythe by the handle and heads directly toward the group in his usual quick gait. At first the men do not move, suggesting some kind of violent encounter, but they part as Thomas approaches and let him into the forge where he heats and sharpens his implement. While he is at work, some of the men approach the wagon where Sarah sits waiting and make snide comments about witches and execution. Then Thomas roars out from the forge to the men by name and address one at a time, asking sarcastically who is next in line to use the forge. They grow silent and once again allow him passage. Sarah notes that her father, at least one and a half feet taller than the tallest of the men, seems



immune from any angry or aggressive behavior because the village cowards are afraid of him. This makes her feel secure, she notes. He places his sharpened scythe carefully in the straw and they return home.

Constable John Ballard arrives in his cart after Thomas leaves for his regular walk to Salem to visit Martha. He reads the arrest warrant for witchery, ties the hands of Richard and Andrew and carries them off to Salem for imprisonment. Richard says he will never confess although it means death. But when he sees the terror and suffering in his younger brother's face, he relents and decides to tell the justices whatever they want to hear to avoid execution. When Thomas returns home and sees the boys missing, "the look on his face was truly terrible." In the evening darkness, Thomas gathers Sarah and Hannah to his side and for the first time allows his tears to mix with hers.

May 1692-July 1692 Analysis

Father Carrier makes a dramatic demonstration of courage hard on the heels of his wife's defiance toward the witch court. Riding in the cart with her father, Sarah witnesses him carry a scythe through a crowd of eight or nine local men clumped into a group in front of the forge, where he could sharpen his cutting instrument. Thomas carries the large bladed instrument in a slightly menacing manner as he stares each of the men in the eyes. From inside the forge, Thomas calls out the names of each of the men and states their precise address in a similarly menacing tone of voice. When he returns to the cart with his scythe, the other men part to make way for his seven-foot frame. Sarah sees another kind of strength and courage in action, and sees her father in a different light.

When Andrew and Richard are arrested by a constable and carried off to Salem for their own witch trials, Richard at first protests that he will never confess anything he didn't do, following his mother's example. But Sarah runs after the cart and tells her brother to think of the effect his denial will have on Andrew's case. Richard later confesses in the meetinghouse that he and his brother are both witches, following his mother's advice rather than her example. Asked to name other witches, Richard mentions the names of people he knows have already been arrested. When Father Carrier returns home and sees his sons missing, he weeps and Sarah joins him. The last barrier between father and daughter is thus eradicated. Family unity trumps persecution and outrageous destiny.



July-August 1692

July-August 1692 Summary

Martha Carrier Carrier is sentenced to be hanged Aug. 19, 1692 along with The Rev. George Burroughs and several other people. Nine days before the scheduled execution, another constable shows up to arrest Sarah and her older brother, Tom. While the constable is in the process of making the arrests, Thomas Carrier stares at him with a murderous gaze. Before the constable leaves with his two children, Thomas stops him by grabbing the horse's halter and tells him that he knows his name, John Ballard, and that his children had better arrive in Salem the same way they left. When Sarah is brought before the magistrate, he asks her how long she's been a witch. She replies that she's been a witch for six years, since the age of five. She also testifies that her mother led her into witchery. Those who testify against Sarah include Phoebe Chandler, her after-church tormenter, and her cousin Allen Toothaker. Sarah and Tom are carried to dank prison cells in Salem; The darkness and foul odor make both of them sick. Sarah sees a figure move in a cell across the corridor. She calls out "Mother?" several times, until she finally gets a response: "Here, Sarah, I am here." Then she realizes that Andrew and Richard are in another cell, a smaller men's cell. When her father comes to visit, he is shocked to see his children manacled and spends his time running between the cells, grasping hands and giving out bread and other food to his family.

Sarah is quickly infested with fleas; her scratching causes sores on her skin and scalp. Her sleep is interrupted every night by a poor old woman who shrieks all night. Sarah observes the other women in their tattered, filthy clothes and their slovenly appearance. Then Sarah is overjoyed to find her aunt Mary and cousin Margaret in another part of the women's cell. These women prisoners are joined by a newcomer, the daughter of Reverend Dane. Andrew has a gash on one arm that becomes infected, and soon he is in agony. The local physician comes to see him, but won't treat him until he is paid. Sarah tells him that her father will arrive later that day and can pay him. Meanwhile, Andrew gets sicker and more terrified that his arm will be amputated. When the doctor comes again to amputate the arm, Tom throws a load of straw bearing accumulated feces in his face. The doctor, offended, rises and says Andrew will die before morning. All through the night, Sarah dreams about her brother and when she awakens, Tom calls to her to see the dramatically reduced red area on his arm, and they rejoice when Andrew opens his eyes and is lucid.

They are visited in their cells by a young physician known as Doctor Ames. He is astonished at Andrew's miraculous recovery, and tends to the needs of everyone. He tells Sarah that he and his friends will do everything they can to help her father. "This is not the world," he tells Sarah, sweeping his arm around the cell. "There are many who believe this, all of this is a shame to humanity." When Martha is taken from her cell, malnourished and covered with sores, for execution she passes by the cells of her children but is forbidden to touch them. When she passes by Sarah she taps her finger on her chest then extends it in her direction to indicate the strength of their bond. Today,



Sarah says, there is only a stand of locust trees to mark the spot where her mother was hanged.

July-August 1692 Analysis

With Martha's execution close at hand, the witch court sends another constable to arrest both Sarah and Tom. The constable confiscates Hannah's puppet to show as evidence of witchcraft. They depart in John Ballard's cart, followed by a screaming and crying Hannah. Thomas Carrier stands alone like a man wounded in battle. But some of his strength is passed along to his family on his visits to them in jail. Thomas brings food and clean clothing, and by his presence imparts a sense of hope. He also tells his children strategies for coping, such as shewing the bread he brings slowly to it lasts longer. Father Carrier's visits to the hellish prison, filled with rats, lice, and human excrement, are similar to the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in which Eurydice is taken to the underworld by evil spirits and Orpheus, her lover, must descend into hell to rescue her. Fortunately, in this story, the only one who dies as a result of this descent into hell is Martha; the others are eventually released as the Massachusetts legislature moves to put an end to the witch episode.

With barely enough food to stave off starvation, no sunlight, no exercise and very little fellowship, the members of the Carrier family look forward to the visits of their father and are further uplifted by the caring ministrations of Dr. Ames who lets them know there are many people who find the entire process of witch hunting abominable. Thus, as the author points out, it takes very little to nurture a spirit of hope in the face of extreme adversity. She likens the process to that of a little child who is able to grow and blossom even in the dark if provided with kindness and caring.



August-October 1692

August-October 1692 Summary

Sarah regrets having cried out to her mother as she was led away from her cell to the hangman's noose because she realizes how much more difficult it must have made that courageous woman's last moments on earth. In the interminable boredom of the prison, Sarah sees a black, shiny face. She realizes this woman is Tituba, one of the first women to have been tried and convicted in Salem. She was taken from her home in the Caribbean to be a slave to Reverend Parris, who had beat her so hard to extract from her a confession of witchcraft that she walked thereafter with a crooked back. When she is released, she will be sold to another owner and disappear. Eight more women are sent to be hanged, but their cart gets stuck in the mud en route.

Then Sarah herself gets sick and is nursed by her brother Tom just as he'd nursed Andrew. Dr. Ames visits and encourages Sarah to have faith that she will be released. He also tells her that friends are taking up a collection to offer as bail for her and the other children; that petitions are being circulated to send the governor calling for an investigation into the witch trials being conducted by Increase and Cotton Mather. Sarah is somewhat comforted, too, by the fact that neither Tom nor Margaret left her side for any period of time. Increase Mather, father of Cotton Mather, makes an unannounced visit to the jail. He steps inside, pulls his cape across his face to stop the stench, and mutters, "My God, my God, my God." After that, the infamous clergyman works to change the character of the Salem trials, or to end them. In October, a blacksmith arrives in the jail to cut the prisoners free.

Slowly, weakly, Sarah walks out of the dungeon into the daylight, which is a shock to her body. She and the others follow their father to the wagon to return home forever. To release her own courage, Sarah remembers her mother's courage and knows that she will survive.

August-October 1692 Analysis

When she hears the creaking of the prison door as her mother is led away to be hanged, Sarah is overcome with a sense of profound guilt. She berates herself with thoughts that she could have done something to change her mother's fate. But when her father comes to take her and the other children home, Sarah walks stiffly and weakly toward his wagon and "with every step I thought of her pride, her strength, her love. And with every step I thought, I am my mother's daughter." When her father shows the children where their mother is buried, Sarah puts her ear to the ground and wonders "what song my mother's bones would make." As she listens, Sarah realizes that the sound she hears is "a gentle rustling, an odd whistling—the sound the birdfoot violet makes as it grows through the early frosts of winter."



October 1692-May 1735

October 1692-May 1735 Summary

All of the 56 remaining prisoners are released by May. One judge makes a public apology for his part in the witch hunts; shortly thereafter Mercy Williams the servant who had falsely testified against Sarah, dies. In 1695, Sarah's beloved cousin Margaret is kidnapped by a band of Wabanaki Indians who hack her mother, Aunt Mary, to death in a raid on Billerica. In 1701, Thomas Carrier at the age of 75 builds a homestead for his children at Colchester, Connecticut. Sarah gets custody of her mother's "little red book," a personal diary she kept through the years leading up to her death. In 1711, a state court in Massachusetts reverses the attainders of those wrongly accused of witchcraft. Families of these victims receive a small recompense of seven pounds for the murder of his wife. He dies in 1735 at the age of 109 leaving five children, 39 grandchildren, and 38 great-great grandchildren

October 1692-May 1735 Analysis

As an adult, Sarah Carrier looks back over her life and the death of her mother; she realizes the terrible price that must sometimes be paid for integrity and is grateful for all that her mother gave her. She takes comfort in the fact that her mother's little red diary and family history is safely tucked away among the everyday blessings of daily life, like quilts stored for winter's cold, "like a step-stone in a swift-moving river."



Characters

Sarah Carrier

Sarah Carrier is the 10-year-old daughter of Thomas and Martha Carrier and the narrator of the story. She is a girl of high ideals, intelligence, and a sense of justice. She hates stuffed shirts and fears religious crazies. She is the perfect vessel to absorb and pass on her mother's example of integrity, courage, and love once she overcomes some resentments against her.

Martha Carrier

Martha Carrier, wife to Thomas and mother of five children, is the high-spirited and highly-intelligent woman who sacrifices her life to prove her witch-hunting tormentors cowards and manipulators. Martha comes from an old family in Massachusetts (Carrier) and displays the independence from social norms that often accompanies that elevated status. By her intelligence, wit and facile conversation she is not only the heroine of the book but the real strength of her family.

Thomas Carrier

Thomas Carrier is the nearly seven-foot-tall giant who runs the family farm in Billerica. A Welshman, Carrier is constantly aware of his status in the colony as a newcomer. Although possessed of strong opinions as well as a strong sense of right and wrong, Thomas generally avoids interactions with the other farmers and townsfolk for fear of standing out as a misfit at a time when witch-pursuers race across the landscape looking for scapegoats. He nurtures resentments at local people for blaming him for causing smallpox.

Richard Carrier

Richard Carrier is the nonidentical twin of Sarah Carrier. Perhaps because they are twins, the two have an especially close relationship.

Hannah Carrier

Hannah Carrier is the nearly two-year-old infant daughter of the family. She and Sarah develop a strong and almost maternal bond.



Tom Carrier

Tom Carrier is the oldest of five children in the Carrier family.

Andrew Carrier

Andrew Carrier is the second oldest of the three sons in the Carrier family.

Reverend Francis Dane

Reverend Dane is a well-known clergyman who is accused of witchcraft, tried, and executed.

Aunt Mary Toothaker

Mary is Martha's sister, and each has her own style of raising children and managing her family; Mary is easygoing and relaxed with her children while Martha is strict and not particularly communicative. Sarah, the narrator, prefers being with her Aunt and Uncle Toothaker after a visit during the smallpox epidemic.

Uncle Roger Toothaker

Uncle Roger is an alcoholic womanizer and a cheater as well as a physician. His character defects have earned him the everlasting enmity of Martha Carrier who in trying to explain them to her daughter Sarah, also must impart some birds-and-bees knowledge to her 10-year-old.

Mercy Williams

Mercy Williams is the feral 17-year-old who is bought as an indentured servant by Thomas Carrier for a five-year period, so she can work off the debt she owes her rescuers who snatched her from the Wabanaki Indians after they massacred the rest of her family. Marcy is crude and vulgar with the instincts for self-preservation of a sewer rat. Ultimately, she betrays Martha Carrier and the entire family by accusing them of being witches.

Reverend George Burroughs

Reverend George Burroughs of Wells, formerly the minister of Salem, gives the town council of Boston a lurid description of an attack by Abanaki Indians on colonial settlements along the Agamenticus River. Later, his friends and former parishioners in Salem arrest, try, and hang him for witchery.



Objects/Places

Bellerica, Massachusetts

Bellerica is the small farming community where the Carrier family lives in Massachusetts.

Andover, Massachusetts

Andover is the town where the Carrier family relocates because of the smallpox epidemic. The Carriers stay for a three-month period with Aunt and Uncle Toothaker, where they isolate themselves from the spreading physical disease to encounter a spiritual contagion in the form of witch paranoia.

Salem, Massachusetts

Salem is the capitol city of Massachusetts and the location for the witch trials.

Iron Bessie

Iron Bessie is a slotted spoon Martha Carrier sometimes uses to discipline her children.

Smallpox

Smallpox is the deadly disease that sweeps the Massachusetts colony at the time of the Salem witch trials. At the time of this story there is no known treatment or prevention for the disease, before the widespread use of immunization programs. Smallpox deforms and disfigures its victims with ugly scars and usually some degree of neurological damage, if they should survive. The mortality rate for smallpox is high, and it is very contagious, which helps to feed a general climate of fear.

Bucephalus

Bucephalus is Uncle Roger's horse, named for Alexander the Great's horse. The moniker translates as "oxhead."

Grandmother's house

The house in Andover owned by Grandmother Carrier is large and comfortable. When she dies, there is a dispute between Margaret and Martha Carrier about whose house it should become.



The Caribbean

The Caribbean is the home and point of origin of a small black slave boy who plays with Sarah in church as well as the slave woman known as Tituba.

Court of Oyer and Terminer

The Court of Oyer and Terminer is the quasi-official jurisdiction in Salem that conducts the witch trials and decides on execution for the guilty.

Wales

Wales, located in the southwest of the United Kingdom adjacent to England.

Themes

Individual vs. Society

Although America was founded on the principle of religious freedom, in the decades before the American Revolution northern colonists struggled with a form of Puritanism that was rigid, punitive, and even paranoid. If everyday folks could suddenly be vilified as witches and heretics, the word soon got around that conformity was the only way to survive. Thus any extreme form of individualism in speech, thought, or action was regarded with suspicion and could sometimes be fatal. Puritan preachers and their minions performed the role of societal enforcers who, when they weren't burning witches, stayed busy placing the adultery letter "A" on the clothing of those so accused and generally practicing a kind of domestic terrorism unknown in modern times until the rise of the Nazis, followed by the Soviets.

The Carrier family of Billerica is, in this story, defiant of authority, independent, and self-sufficient. When the struggling family leaves Billerica to join other relatives on a farm in Andover, Mass., they bring their free lifestyle with themselves. Martha Carrier, strong-willed and strong-minded, has no inclination to go to church but is warned by her sister Margaret that to be absent from church would be to incur the wrath of the entire community and, most dangerously, the priest who would be alerted to any sign the devil was making inroads into the Christian folks of Andover. She assents, but her seven-foot-tall Welsh husband takes orders or directions from no one and, because of his size and physical strength, is never harassed about religious practices or beliefs.

Sarah, the narrator, thus ascribes her own independent streak to both of her parents who were strong enough to sacrifice anything for their children. Her mother, Martha, surrenders willingly to the witch hunters and "confesses" to being a witch for one reason only: to keep the homicidal defenders of the faith from taking and executing her children. As an adult, Sarah later realizes the priceless gift of love her mother's sacrifice is and admires her even more for this act of unselfishness. In assenting to be taken away by these marauders, Martha demonstrates the power of her individualism by consciously sacrificing it for the survival of her family.

Fear/Paranoia

Societies in distress tend to produce extreme political movements. The Russian revolution was powered by the communists, who were powered by the fear and discontent of the masses. By directing this fear into the action of overthrowing the Russian imperial government, the communists gained power. Germany, falling ever deeper into economic depression in the 1930s, followed Adolf Hitler's lead in identifying the Jews as scapegoats for German fear; seeking world domination as a form of victory over fear thus seemed like the best course for many Germans who entered World War II. The New England colonists, faced with constant threats of disease, deprivation and



decapitation, invented or rather resurrected a handy scapegoat from the Dark Ages—witches. From this paranoia a kind of fascist church-state evolved in colonial America to maintain at least the illusion of control over powers far greater than witches, including the inherent evil in men's hearts..

Although witches are identified as the source of all the problems of the Massachusetts colonists, their arrest, incarceration and execution does not seem to make much difference in overall quality of life except for those unjustly executed and those who feared the same fate. Obviously, this kind of mass paranoia knows no bounds and feeds upon itself as it begins to self-destruct. This fear-driven behavior, focused outside the self, is simply one form of denial that is dysfunctional because it does not resolve the perceived threat and allows fear to keep growing. Only legislative action of the Massachusetts state assembly began to curtail this frenzy and to quiet the preachers who instigated and profited from fear-mongering. Perhaps the judgment of history will be that this era was necessary as an objective lesson in intolerance and a warning about the dangers of any sort of authoritarianism. Kathleen Kent's book demonstrate in granular detail the toll of this destructive social climate on the lives of ordinary citizens.

Family Bonds

Throughout the book, the reader is aware of the story unfolding within a family network. The narrator, Sarah, cares for the infant child Hannah who is a constant presence in her life, as are her brothers. When the smallpox epidemic threatens the Carrier family, all except the father go to stay with Aunt Mary and Uncle Roger in Andover. There, Sarah strengthens her bonds with her cousin Margaret, who is two years older than she. During their stay of several months, Sarah comes to feel an uneasy sense of Alienation from her nuclear family and from her home. But the family bonds are soon resurrected once the Carriers return to their farm and are reunited with their father. Although Sarah feels a bond with the Toothakers, she is later scolded by her mother for crying when her uncle dies in prison after being charged with witchcraft. Martha explains that she has no love for her brother-in-law because he was a drunk who patronized not only bars but also prostitutes, and schemed underhanded ways to inherit property from her side of the family.

When Martha and her children are arrested and imprisoned on charges of consorting with the devil, their bonds help them survive. Although Martha is in an isolation cell, and her children in another, the family manages to shout to one another and even pass bits of food back and forth. Thomas Carrier comes to see his family whenever allowed and brings them food and reading material. Although some of the children might wish for an easier life, they know and the reader knows that their real strength derives from the family unit. And Martha Carrier sets a real example of courage for the children to emulate as she faces her inquisitors and denies the charges—an act she knew would mean the death sentence. Martha has made up her mind to try and put a stop to the witch insanity, and her actions give everyone pause. It is from this example plus the steely courage of their father that the children derive strength and security. The feel-

good message is that unity, cooperation, and mutual caring are much stronger than smallpox, Indians or even deranged ecclesiastical potentates.



Style

Point of View

The story is recounted from the vantage point of, Sarah Carrier who is 10 years old when the story opens in 1690. She is the older of two daughters and sister to three brothers in the Carrier household. Due to her age, Sarah is particularly close to her mother Martha. She is a surrogate mother to Hannah, her infant sister, and occasional mother proxy to brothers Richard, Andrew and Tom. She is witness to her mother's quiet dignity and courage when accused of witchcraft in the Salem witch trials and sentenced to death. Sarah internalizes this lesson and seems certain to pass along to her offspring her idea of strong womanhood. The device of using a family member as narrator of what is admittedly a family history, enhanced by some scholarship on the author's part, is quite effective at drawing the reader into the heart of the narrative. Instead of experiencing the story as something that happens to someone else in a far distant past, the reader is swept into the action as though it were happening today. Since the primary point of view is that of one of the Carrier children, the points of view of her siblings are given almost equal weight in the story's progression.

Setting

The book is set in colonial Massachusetts in Billerica where the Carrier family lives and farms, in Andover, and Salem in Middlesex County. Culturally, the setting is post-Puritan New England where the colony is experiencing for the first time the kind of crowd hysteria produced by fear-mongering preachers who would periodically throughout American history gain for themselves a kind of earthly power based on the manipulation of people's fears. In this instance the colony is under the thrall of Increase and Cotton Mather, two fundamentalist preachers who launched the colonial equivalent of the Spanish Inquisition. These preachers, and others, arrogated to themselves the power of divining witchcraft, trying and prosecuting supposed witches. The setting, thus, is one of fear because of the witch hunts and because of diseases such as smallpox that were killing colonists unabated.

The socio-cultural setting of the book is eerily similar to the communist "witch hunts" of the 1950s spurred by the paranoid investigations of the House of Representatives Committee on un-American Activities established and conducted by Sen. Joseph McCarthy. In an identical example of crowd psychology, this committee sought to objectify evil within American society during the time of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. By creating supposed villains who could then be prosecuted and destroyed personally or politically, the paranoid right wing was able to gain some sense of control over its fears of nuclear annihilation at the hands of the Soviets. Similarly, during the time of the colonial witch hunts, some preachers were able to demonstrate to their followers that they were working to cast evil out of their society when colonists felt threatened by Indians, disease, crop failure and British colonialism itself.



The author goes to great pains to paint the setting in lovingly complete detail, for at least the first third of the book. By the time the action and interaction get underway, the reader has had a chance - assisted by plenty of immersion in the colonial world - to get comfortable in the jarringly different 17th Century world of Massachusetts.

Language and Meaning

The language is that of English colonists in the late 17th Century, before the American Revolution, rendered convincingly by the author in both direct conversation and in her narrative of events. Although not peppered with "thees" and "thous" of Quaker or Mennonite colonies, the language nevertheless displays subtleties of expression that suggest a much earlier, more formal time when speech seems unduly indirect and prolix to modern eyes and ears. In addition the speech of Thomas Carrier, patriarch of the family, is flavored with a Gaelic bent reflecting the fact he is a Welshman. Here is one instance where the narrator herself explains a linguistic peculiarity:

"Mother called the scarecrow a murmet. A scarecrow was a thing of bold-faced tactics, out in the full light of day. A murmet, the 'r' softly rolling against the tongue, spoke of murmuring stealth, as though it hunted marauding cows in the darkening twilight. It was the name that people who came from the south of England used. Places such as Devon, Basing and Ramsey where the old tongue was spoken" (Chapter 4, p. 108).

A flavor of the contemporary language, as well as the patent absurdity of the witch trials, occurs when 10-year-old Sarah Carrier is brought before the so-called judges after her mother is arrested and imprisoned on charges of witchcraft. John Hathorne, the same man who sentenced her mother to death by hanging, chillingly asks, "How long hast thou been a witch?" Coached by her mother to cooperate with the prosecutors to save her own life, Sarah answers: "Ever since I was six years old."

Another linguistic anachronism: "Ten of the clock" (Chapter 8, p. 262).

Structure

The structure of the novel is loosely the same as that employed in the great majority of mainstream novels with the format of problem leads to conflict that escalates to crisis and leads to resolution. The primary problem faced by the characters is the ongoing witch hunt but lesser problems include disease, Indians and poor agriculture. The conflict builds in intensity because of the heretical disdain shown by both Thomas and Margaret Carrier toward the witch hunts and their ecclesiastical perpetrators. The crisis arrives when Margaret is arrested and thrown in jail on charges of witchcraft, which profoundly disturbs the entire family because her children - Sarah, Tom, Hannah, Andrew, and Richard - are also thrown into the dank and disease-ridden dungeon. The resolution occurs after Martha Carrier is hanged and the rest of her family are at last released as the Salem witch trials come to an end. Part of the resolution is the profound lesson in female courage and loyalty that Sarah learns from her mother - a lesson that is passed down through generations of Carrier women.

Quotes

"It was not defiance only that made me study her [Martha] so, although our cat-and-mouse games did become a kind of battle. It was also because she with a deliberation bordering on the unseemly, set herself apart from what a woman should be and was as surprising as a flood or a brush fire. She had a will, and a demeanor, as forceful as a church deacon's. And she had a tongue, the sharpness of which would gut a man as quick as a Gloucester fisherman could clean a lamprey eel" (Chapter 1, p. 7).

"For all Grandmother was soft and gentle, she was also persuasive, and like water wearing down rock she worked on Mother until she agreed to attend [church] services on the morrow. Mother said under her breath, 'I'd rather eat stones'" (Chapter 1, p. 12).

"Henry was 13, slender and dark. To my mind he was a furtive and a sneak, and often when Aunt was not looking he would poke at Hannah or cause her to fall. Once when he thought we were alone he crept up behind me and pulled hard at the tender hairs on the back of my neck. My eyes watered but I said nothing and waited. The next morning he found the piss barrel upended over his shoes" (Chapter 2, p. 32).

"My cousin [Margaret] and I did everything as with one hand. Whatever work one of us was sent to do, the other would find some strategy to accomplish that same task, so that Uncle [Toothaker] would often say with great relish, 'Ah, here come my twins.' And Margaret and I would laugh as we looked at each other, she with black hair and skin like potted cream and I with my flaming hair and spotted face" (Chapter 2, p. 41).

"Margaret's secrets were more interesting than mine, she being two years older and more experienced in the world than I. She seemed to know many unsavory things about her neighbors, but endlessly fascinating to me was her knowledge of the Invisible World. She knew how to tell a witch by the markings on her body. A witch's teat could be disguised as a mole or any raised pustule on the skin. A witch could not say the Lord's Prayer in full without stumbling over the words. A witch would not sink if thrown into a body of water but rather float upon the surface" (Chapter 2, p. 46).

"The Reverend [Nason of Billerica] praised Aunt's cooking, invoking the Bible in defense of his gluttony. One would have thought Aunt had served up angel's bread rather than an aged and pungent spit of mutton. As he chewed, he pulled pieces of gristle and fat from between his teeth and wiped his oily hands on his trousers. In awe of the sound of his own voice, the Reverend closed his mouth only to swallow...The Reverend took his leave late, crumbs following behind him like a cloud" (Chapter 2, p. 62).

"[Andrew] had been much affected by the smallpox that kept him near death for three months. His face would forever be scarred and it would signify to the world that he would never again be at risk in falling to the disease. But his mind, which was reluctant to thoughts before the illness, had slowed to a crawling pace and would scatter like a flock of birds before completing a sentence. He would often stop speaking mid-word and walk away" (Chapter 3, p. 72).



"Mercy Williams had been born in Topsfield and had moved with her family to the so-called Eastward, the wild territory to the far north and east of the colonies. Her parents and all her brothers and sisters had been killed by the Wabanakis and she had been taken captive into Canada. With the exchange of 20 muskets she had become a laborer and would have to work for five years to pay back her rescuers. Father had wanted a manservant to help on our farm, but we could not afford to pay the indenture for a man, so we settled for an orphan girl nobody else wanted" (Chapter 3, p. 76).

"The day had been so very lovely, the summering shades of plant and rock and sky showing the goodness, the reasonability of order from the Master's hand. And yet with a shifting of sunlight I had seen, as through looking into a killing pond, that beyond the restive landscape of the living, the Master stood poised, razor in hand, to cut and scrape away our delicate flesh, leaving only bone and weathered shell" (Chapter 4, p. 117).

"I was not pretty and quick like Margaret or bland and pliable like Phoebe Chandler. There was a glittering hardness about me like mica and I thought of my fingers wrapped around the rock I had carried against Samuel Preston" (Chapter 4, p. 143).

"My eyes wandered to the gallery above and I spied sitting there the little black slave boy. He was looking at me as though he had been waiting only for my gaze to meet his. The orbs of his eyes crossed and he stuck out his tongue, the tip of it passing beyond his chin. I smiled at his antics and he started mimicking the Reverend as he preached his sermon, exaggerating every movement of his face and body. When the Reverend's eyes gazed heavenward to invoke the Almighty, the boy rolled his eyes upwards in the thrall of a palsied fit. And so I laughed. The silence following my exhaled breath built slowly" (Chapter 5, p. 153).

"We spoke of the newly arrested women in Salem. One of them was an old woman so greatly loved by the men and women in the village that they cried in the streets when she was carried away from her sickbed to the magistrates. It never entered our minds that, like the pox, witchcraft honors neither border nor boundary." (Chapter 5, p. 162)

"Twenty-five more men and women had been arrested and were hed in Salem Village for consorting with the devil. The arrested were from surrounding Topsfield, Ipswich, Reading, Beverly, Salem Village and one from as far away as Boston. Yet not one soul from Andover. The best minds in theology and the law that Salem could produce, proclaimed that there were more witches yet to be found" (Chapter 5, p. 167).

"We did our share of work, made twofold because of Mother's absence. but we finished every task as though we were completely alone in our endeavors. Richard's quiet reserve darkened and and settled harshly into a bitter, implacable wordlessness. Andrew, confused and distressed over Mother's absence, began to moan for hours at a time. Hanna, though she had never fully settled into my mother's care again, became ever more brittle and fragile in her mind after Mother's arrest" (Chapter 7. p. 199).

"Finally, long after evening had filled the common room [Father's] voice called to us out of the shadows and he brought us each to his side, his arms encircling us with his



strength and raw-boned comfort. And for the first time in my life, my father held me and let my tears mix with his" (Chapter 7, p. 231).



Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast the simultaneous epidemics of witch paranoia and smallpox that beset the Massachusetts colonists in this novel. How does this connect and relate to ignorance, superstition and fear in these communities?

Why is Thomas Carrier feared and shunned in the village of Billerica?

How does Martha Carrier's attitude toward the church affect her identification as a witch?

What is it about her mother that Sarah Carrier only comes to revere later in life, after her mother has been executed as a witch?

In what fundamental way is Mercy Williams different from any of the Carrier children?

Is there any evidence in the novel that smallpox is considered a communicable disease? Is its method of infection well understood?

What finally puts an end to the witch hunts and trials in Salem?

Who is it in the Carrier extended family that betrays Martha Carrier as a witch?

What are some of the lessons Sarah Carrier learns from her experiences in this book?

Why does Thomas Carrier command respect among the local residents?