

BOOK CLUB KIT

“A gorgeous and thrilling paean to the ferocious power of women.
The characters live, bleed, and roar.”

—LAINI TAYLOR, *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR



ALIX E. HARROW
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DEAR READER,

The Once and Future Witches is the book I wrote based on a three-word pitch—suffragists, but witches! It sounded so clever, so fun. But somewhere after my second rewrite but before my third, I was forced to admit that I wasn't having much fun at all.

Women's history, as it turns out, is fairly bleak. It's full of suffering, repression, violence, colonization, enslavement, and horror. There's resistance, too, of course, but their victories were often bittersweet and incremental, largely meaningless unless you were white, wealthy, straight, gender-conforming, educated, and preferably married. We're told we won the vote in 1920, but who is we? A Chinese American woman couldn't vote until 1943; a Black woman in the south couldn't vote until 1965; a woman convicted of a felony still can't vote today, in nine states.

None of this was news to me, really—I used to teach history—but I was still struggling. The book was too dark, too slow, too mean. I started over again and again. I questioned everything. The plot, the pacing, the characters, the concept of magic itself. I realized that, despite thirty years of consuming and producing fantasy, I didn't have a very clear definition of magic. The more I thought about it the less clear it became, like staring too hard at an optical illusion. Magic is the impossible, the inexplicable, the unreal. It is what isn't, a concept defined by its nonexistence.

But it must be important to us, because we keep telling stories about it. We return again and again to the promise that there's some secret power that can render the impossible possible, that can close the gap between what we have and what we need. Considered in that light, magic becomes an inherently radical force. It's a power that can't be taken away, a literalization of agency that lends itself to disruption, revolution, resistance. To change.

I had, until that point, been writing a book that adhered fairly closely to actual history. But witchcraft—magic—would change history. It would fill the gap between what was and what should have been. Instead of a fettered, segregated suffrage movement, maybe the women's movement would become a witches' movement, wicked and wild. Maybe three sisters—tired and scared, nearly broken by the world—could learn to believe in magic again, and fight for a better future.

Lynda Barry, the cartoonist, has this great quote: “We don't create a fantasy world to escape reality, we create it to be able to stay.” I hope this one helps you stay, and fight.

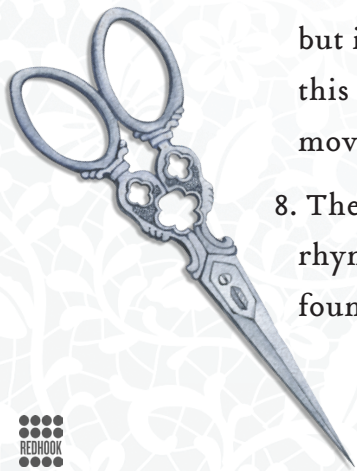
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ALIX



READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Throughout the book there are references to feminized versions of real literary and historical figures (the Sisters Grimm, Andrea Lang, Alexandra Pope, etc). What does this say about the world of New Salem? How does it speak to the broader themes of the book?
2. The main events of the text happen in 1893, but there are references to many real-world events that occurred earlier or later, including the Pullman Strike and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Why? Why not adhere to a more accurate historical timeline?
3. The Maiden, Mother, and Crone are traditional figures in Western folklore and mythology. In what ways do Juniper, Agnes, and Bella fulfill or subvert their archetypal roles? What about the Last Three?
4. The return of magic is a classic trope in fantasy fiction, usually accomplished by a prophesized hero or a grand spell; restoring witchcraft is a little more difficult for the Sisters of Avalon. What setbacks do they encounter? Why are those challenges significant, in a thematic sense?
5. There are seven retold fairy tales in this book, all of them significantly altered from their familiar versions. How were they altered, and why? How do they complement the central story?
6. In *The Once and Future Witches*, witchcraft requires particular words and ways, but women from different cultural backgrounds use very different spells. Why isn't witchcraft universal? Why are there so many different languages and approaches?
7. The American suffrage movement was successful and admirable, but it was also riddled with racism, classism, and division. How does this story grapple with both the heroism and villainy of the suffrage movement?
8. The Sisters of Avalon find many of their spells hidden in nursery rhymes and children's songs. Why would such important words be found in such seemingly frivolous sources?



*Intery, mintery, cutery-corn,
Apple seed and apple thorn;
Feather fine, five-fold
Turn it all to gold.*

**A SPELL FOR A GOLDEN APPLE,
REQUIRING FIVE FEATHERS & A PRICKED THUMB**

If she desires a golden apple, a witch need only prick her thumb and smear a drop of blood on the skin of an unripe apple. She ought to hold five feathers in her sinister hand—any feathers will do, although crows and magpies are known to work best—and speak the spell above. But I'll tell you two secrets: the words and ways don't matter nearly so much as the will. And, given the will, anyone at all might be a witch.



HISTORICAL EASTER EGGS

I used to be an historian (sort of). I spent lots of hours pursuing, considering, weighing, and writing the truth. Now, of course, I'm a professional liar.

This book in particular is full of lies. I lied about the names of cities and people and the dates of the Pullman Strike and the Triangle Shirtwaist fire. I made up an entire alternate history of witchcraft and worker's rights. I combined real people and condensed timelines so that I could fit something as vast and diverse and diffuse as the women's suffrage movement into a single book.

But the best lies are the ones that are based on the truth. You know that Twain quote—"history never repeats itself, but it rhymes"? This book isn't real history, but it rhymes. (I enjoy the fact that Twain may or may not have said that; nobody seems to know where it came from, but it persists, one of history's little white lies).

So, here are 8 bits of truth hidden in 500 pages of lies.

1. . . WHO KEEPS MUTTERING ABOUT CHAINING THEMSELVES TO PUBLIC BUILDINGS LIKE THE ENGLISH LADIES DID. JUNIPER DOESN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT THIS IS SUPPOSED TO ACHIEVE, BUT SHE ADMIRES THE SPIRIT OF IT AND LIKES ELECTA VERY MUCH.

The English ladies chained themselves to several things. I especially liked Helen Fox and her friend, who so effectively chained themselves to the grille in Parliament that the entire thing had to be removed and taken to prison with them while they shouted and threw pamphlets. Bless.

2. MOLY AND SPITE A WOMAN MAKE, MAY EVERY MAN HIS TRUE FORM TAKE. A SPELL FOR SWINE, REQUIRING WINE & WICKED INTENT.

A reference to *The Odyssey*, but more honestly a reference to Madeline Miller's *Circe*, which is a reexamination of Greek mythology through the eyes of its women and witches. It's a perfect book.

3. LATER THAT EVENING AGNES WALKS PAST THE BLACK REMAINS OF THE SQUARE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY ON ST. LAMENTATION. SHE READ IN THE PAPERS THAT FORTY-SIX WOMEN DIED IN THE FIRE, AND ANOTHER THIRTEEN LEAPT FROM THE HIGH WINDOWS. "IT'S COMPANY POLICY TO LOCK THE DOORS," THE OWNER ARGUED IN COURT. "SO THE GIRLS DON'T GET SHIFTLESS." HE AND HIS PARTNER HAD PAID A FINE OF SEVENTY-FIVE DOLLARS."

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire didn't happen until years later, but that's honestly what the owners said in court, and that's the actual fine they had to pay.

GIRLS WANTED. HENRY GLINTENKAMP, ARTIST; PUBLISHED IN: THE MASSES, (FEBRUARY 1916)



4. A PERFECTLY ORDINARY PIECE OF EMBROIDERY:
A CROOKED HOUSE FRAMED BY A PAIR OF DARK
TREES, WITH THREE LUMPY WOMEN STANDING
IN THE FOREGROUND BESIDE A SCATTERING
OF ANIMALS. CLUMSY LETTERS RUN ACROSS
THE TOP: “WORKED BY POLLY PEKKALA IN THE
TWELFTH YEAR OF HER AGE, 1782.”

This is a real piece of embroidery recovered from the actual Salem! I changed the name of the girl to Pekkala, because I like alliteration, and because Serafina Pekkala remains one of fantasy’s best witches.

5. THE WAYWARD SISTERS, HAND IN HAND, BURNED
AND BOUND, OUR STOLEN CROWN, BUT WHAT IS
LOST, THAT CAN’T BE FOUND? THE RHYME THEIR
MAMA MAGS ONCE SUNG TO THEM, THE VERSE
HIDDEN IN THE SISTERS GRIMM. EXCEPT THIS
TIME THE WORDS KEEP GOING: CAULDRON BUBBLE,
TOIL AND TROUBLE, WEAVE A CIRCLE ROUND THE
THRONE, MAIDEN, MOTHER, AND CRONE.

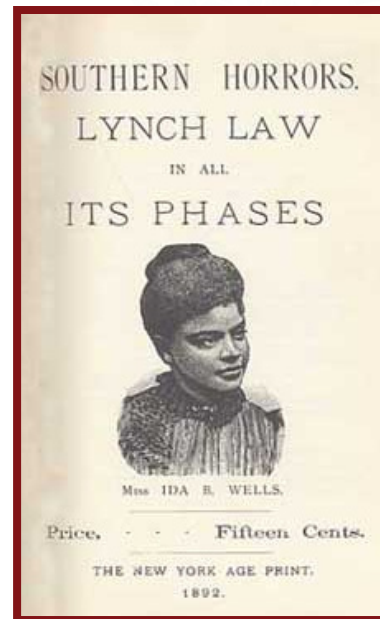
If this sounds familiar, it’s because it was partly stolen from *Macbeth*—“we weird sisters, hand in hand,” and “toil and trouble, fire burn and caldrion bubble”—and partly from Coleridge: “weave a circle round him thrice.”

6. MR. HENRY BLACKWELL

I named him Blackwell in honor of a dear friend, but also for Lucy Stone’s husband, Henry Blackwell. Henry proposed to her after hearing one of her angriest speeches and—when she refused him on the grounds that marriage was an unequal institution that would limit her personal freedom—funded a national speaking tour for her as a form of courtship. When they married, they read a list of grievances against the institution rather than vows.

7. “AND WIESENSTEIG IN THE FIFTEEN-SIXTIES,
BEFORE THAT, AND THE AULD KIRK GREEN AT
THE END OF THE CENTURY. NAVARRE IN THE
EARLY SIXTEEN-HUNDREDS.

67 women were burned for sorcery in Wiesensteig in 1563; 70 people were convicted in the North Berwick trial in 1590, and witches were accused of gathering at Auld Kirk Green; over 7,000 women were questioned during the Basque witch trials in Navarre, as part of the Spanish Inquisition.



8. CLEO INTENDS TO OBLIGE HIM, TO A CERTAIN
DEGREE; HER WORKING TITLE IS SOUTHERN
HORRORS,

The title is stolen from Ida B.’s pamphlet, “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases,” which was the first significant report on southern lynching as a cultural and legal phenomenon.

NAMESAKES

VICTORIA VIOLET HULL & TENNESSEE TANSY



HULL: These are the only two unaltered names in the book, because there are no witchier suffragists than the Hull sisters. A pair of sex workers, soothsayers, and radicals, one of whom was technically the first female presidential candidate.

ANNIE ASPHODEL FLYNN: Named for Annie Kenney, a legit working-class fighter who went to prison for assaulting a viscount.

YULIA BRUSNIKA DOMONTOVICH: Named for Alexandra Mikhailovna Kollontai (nee Domontovich), an early Marxist feminist activist in the Soviet Union.

FLORENCE FOXGLOVE PEARL: named for Florence Bayard Hilles, one of the founders of the National Woman's Party (which split from NWSA in order to take a more "deeds not words" approach).



ZINA ZEPHYR CARD: Name stolen from Zina P. Young Card, who was a women's rights activist and also the daughter of Brigham Young, and who would probably be pissed to have her name associated with an immigrant abortionist witch. It's her fault for having a cool-sounding name.

ROSE CHAVA WINSLOW: Named for Ruza Wenclawska, more widely known as Rose Winslow, one of the "iron-jawed angels" and a labor organizer.

GERTRUDE RED BIRD

BONNIN: Named for Zitkala-Ša (Red Bird / Gertrude Simmons Bonnin), a Yankton Dakota Sioux activist.



CADY CALAMINT STONE: Named after Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone, which is a little mean of me because actually they fought so badly over the 14th and 15th amendments that they formed competing women's rights organizations (NWSA and AWSA).

JENNIE GEMINI LIND: Name stolen from Jennie June, one of the first trans americans to publish an autobiography.

ELECTA EUPHRASIA GAGE: named for Matilda



Joslyn Gage, whose middle name at birth was Electa, and who wrote about witches as the original suffragists.

INEZ IVY GILLMORE:

Named for Inez Milholland Boissevain, who was the super hot suffragist who famously rode the white horse in the 1913 parade; her character is more like Alva Vanderbilt, a sympathetic financier.

CLEOPATRA POLARIS

QUINN: Quinn is very much fashioned in Ida B.'s illustrious image, but the quinn comes from Hallie Quinn Brown, a slightly earlier Black activist and educator



A PLAYLIST FOR THE

MODERN WITCH

Rocks and Water

DEB TALVAN

Workin' Woman Blues

VALERIE JUNE

Raise Hell

BRANDIE CARLILE

Water Witch

THE SECRET SISTERS

Stay Down

JULIEN BAKER

Baby Outlaw

ELLE KING

I Don't Belong to You

MILCK

Delilah

FLORENCE + THE MACHINE

Speak Loud

TRILLS

The World We Made

RUELLE

As it Was

HOZIER



SCAN THIS CODE IN YOUR SPOTIFY APP.



ARAMINTA

ANDROMEDA

WELLS: Her last name is for Ida B. Well's, but Araminta is a reference to

Tubman's given name.

FRANKIE URSA BLACK:

Named for Juno Frankie Pierce, the daughter of a freed woman in Tennessee who became a prominent activist, educator, and suffragist.



GRACE WIGGIN: Named for Kate Douglas Wiggin, a children's author who actively and stridently campaigned against women's rights.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

1848: The first women's rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, New York. 68 women and 32 men sign a Declaration of Sentiments, which outlines grievances and sets the agenda for the women's rights movement.

1850: The first National Women's Rights Convention takes place in Worcester, Massachusetts, attracting more than 1,000 participants, including Frederick Douglass, Paulina Wright Davis, Abby Kelley Foster, and Sojourner Truth.

1851: At a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth, a former slave, delivers her speech, "Ain't I a woman?"

1868: Ratification of the 14th amendment, which granted citizenship to all people "born or naturalized in the United States."

1869: Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton form the National Woman Suffrage Association. The primary goal is to achieve voting rights for women through an amendment to the Constitution.

Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell, and others form the American Woman Suffrage Association, which focused on gaining women voting rights through the individual state constitutions.

1870: Ratification of the 15th amendment, which granted the right to vote to all males regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

1871: Victoria Woodhull addresses the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives

arguing that women have the right to vote under the 14th amendment.

1872: Susan B. Anthony is one of several women arrested for voting for Ulysses S. Grant in the presidential election.

1874: In *Minor v. Happersett*, the Supreme Court decides that citizenship does not give women the right to vote, and that women's political rights are under the jurisdiction of individual state.

1878: The Women's Suffrage Amendment is introduced to Congress.

1880: Mary Ann Shadd Cary establishes the Colored Women's Franchise Association in Washington, DC.

1890: The National Women Suffrage Association and the American Women Suffrage Association merge to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).

1893: Colorado is the first state to adopt an amendment granting women the right to vote.

1896: Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Frances E.W. Harper and others form the National Association of Colored Women with the goal of achieving equality for women of color.

1912: Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party becomes the first national major political party to support women's suffrage.

1913: Alice Paul and Lucy Burns formed the Congressional Union for Women Suffrage.

The group is later renamed the National Women's Party.

1916: Jeannette Rankin is the first woman elected to US Congress.

1917: The National Woman's Party organizes pickets outside the White House. This is the first time the White House is picketed by protesters.

1918: Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin introduces the 19th Amendment to House of Representatives.

1919: The Woman Suffrage Amendment is passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate.

1920: The 19th Amendment to the Constitution is certified as law.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING:

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Alix E. Harrow is an ex-historian with lots of opinions and excessive library fines, currently living in Virginia with her husband and their semi-feral children. She won a Hugo for her short fiction, and has been nominated for the Nebula, Locus, and World Fantasy Awards.

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