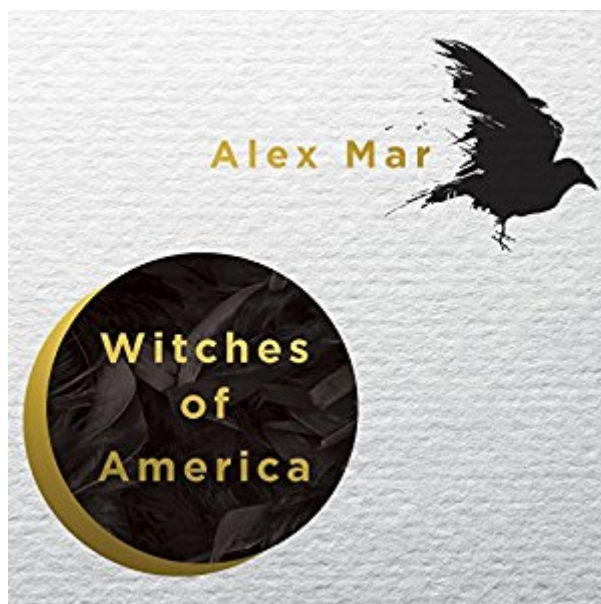


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# Witches Of America



## Synopsis

When most people hear the word witches, they think of horror films and Halloween, but to the nearly one million Americans who practice paganism today, it's a nature-worshipping, polytheistic, and very real religion. So Alex Mar discovers when she sets out to film a documentary and finds herself drawn deep into the world of present-day witchcraft. *Witches of America* follows Mar on her immersive five-year trip into the occult, charting modern paganism from its roots in 1950s England to its current American mecca in the San Francisco Bay Area. Along the way she takes part in dozens of rituals and becomes involved with a wild array of characters: a government employee who founds a California priesthood dedicated to a Celtic goddess of war; American disciples of Aleister Crowley whose elaborate ceremonies turn the Catholic mass on its head; second-wave feminist Wiccans who practice a radical separatist witchcraft; and a growing "mystery cult" whose initiates trace their rites back to a blind shaman in rural Oregon.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book stands in the same tradition as numerous exploitation books of the '50s through the '70s, in which intrepid journalists misrepresent themselves to enter the secret (or is that vulnerable, abused, and endangered?) world of witchcraft, only to turn around and make a buck by caricaturing their subjects. Indeed, there is little here that hasn't been done before – the disingenuous pseudo-sympathy, the betrayal of confidence, the publishing of inappropriate private

communication, the accounts of rituals that make sure to make much of nudity, as if that were still titillating in the age of internet porn. It's a tired old formula, steeped in sordidness, cheap thrills, and shady ethics. The book is not especially interesting, nor, with the exception of the story of Jonathan the Necromancer, is it shocking. Those looking for horror will be disappointed. The only horror here is in the violation of its subjects. The expose of the book is the expose of people's private dreams and romantic lives, things of no interest to any decent person except the ones directly concerned. Interestingly, even with the book's exploitative intent, the powerful, positive, and admirable natures of Morpheus Ravenna and the Coru Cathubodua shine through. As distorted as Mar's portrayal is, it cannot disguise that here are profoundly good people, worshipping a real and powerful Goddess, who deserved better. The story of Jonathan the Necromancer is worthy of special attention. Here, Mar would have us believe that a man, with a posse of followers, broke into above ground burial vaults, then broke into modern caskets, then removed the heads from partially decomposed bodies, all of it so easily.

WITCHES OF AMERICA presents itself as part journalistic account of modern witchcraft and occultism, part spiritual memoir of a journalist who "goes native" while studying these movements. Unfortunately, the book is unsuccessful in both respects. As a journalistic account, the book has a shallow grasp of historical material and many factual inaccuracies. Biographies of major figures in the Pagan movement are cribbed from three major Pagan studies books, but the biographies are stripped of any cultural or historical context. Figures such as Gardner are made to seem like exotic misfits rather than as reflections of their time and place. When speaking of events that her shallow research does not cover, Mar prints speculation and potentially malicious gossip as fact. Examples include rumors about Gardner's infidelity, and an account of the "Sundering of Feri" that -- having nothing in common with accounts published by reputable Pagan media sources -- seems to be one individual's pet theory. I also agree with other reviewers here that the "necromancer" is most likely putting Mar on; due to soil conditions, bodies are buried only temporarily in New Orleans tombs before being moved to a permanent place of interment, so any graverobbing of tombs on the scale suggested would quickly be noticed and prosecuted. For many reasons, therefore, the book is not a reliable factual source. WITCHES OF AMERICA is also unsuccessful as a spiritual memoir. Seemingly unaware of her own narcissism, Mar blithely expresses her desire to fill her own aching need for authentic experience with the sincere spirituality of others.

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