Daughters of the Witching Hill by Mary Sharratt

Beautifully Written Historical Fiction!

Product Description Daughters of the Witching Hill brings history to life in a vivid and wrenching account of a family sustained by love as they try to survive the hysteria of a witch-hunt. Bess Southerns, an impoverished widow living in Pendle Forest, is haunted by visions and gains a reputation as a cunning woman. Drawing on the Catholic folk magic of her youth, Bess heals the sick and foretells the future. As she ages, she instructs her granddaughter, Alizon, in her craft, as well as her best friend, who ultimately turns to dark magic. When a peddler suffers a stroke after exchanging harsh words with Alizon, a local magistrate, eager to make his name as a witch finder, plays neighbors and family members against one another until suspicion and paranoia reach frenzied heights. Sharratt interweaves well-researched historical details of the 1612 Pendle witch-hunt with a beautifully imagined story of strong women, family, and betrayal. Daughters of the Witching Hill is a powerful novel of intrigue and
Dear Amazon Reader,

Do you believe in magic? Our ancestors did. Let me introduce you to a woman of power who changed my life forever. The wild, brooding landscape of Pendle Hill, my home for the past seven years, gave birth to my new novel, Daughters of the Witching Hill, which tells the true story of Elizabeth Southern, cunning woman, more commonly known by her nickname, Mother Demdike. In 1612, seven women and two men from Pendle Forest were hanged as witches. Yet Mother Demdike, the most notorious of the accused, the ringleader who initiated all the others into witchcraft, cheated the hangman by dying in prison. This is how Thomas Potts describes her in The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster: She was a very old woman, about the age of Four-score yeares, and had been a Witch for fiftie yeares. Shee dwelt in the Forrest of Pendle, a vast place, fitte for her profession: What shee committed in her time, no man knows. . . . Shee was a generall agent for the Devill in all these partes: no man escaped her, or her Furies. Not bad for an eighty-year-old lady! Reading the trial transcripts against the grain, I was amazed at how her strength of character blazed forth in the document written expressly to condemn her. When interrogated by her magistrate, she freely admitted to being a healer and a cunning woman. Mother Demdike was so frightening to her foes because she was a woman who embraced her powers wholeheartedly. As I sought to uncover the bones of her story, I was drawn into a new world of mystery and magic. Every stereotype I'd held of historical witches and cunning folk was dashed to pieces. Mother Demdike became a true presence, a shining light in my life. An ancestor of my heart, if not my blood. Her life unfolded almost literally in my backyard. Once in a place called Malkin Tower, there lived a widow, Bess Southern, called Demdike. Matriarch of her clan, she lived with her widowed daughter and her three grandchildren, the most promising one being Alizon Device, a young woman who showed every promise of becoming a cunning woman as mighty as her grandmother. What fascinated me was not that Bess was arrested on witchcraft charges but that the authorities only turned on her near the end of her long, productive career. She practiced her craft for decades before anybody dared to interfere with her. Cunning craft—the art of using charms to heal both humans and livestock—was Bess's family trade. Their spells, recorded in the trial documents, were Roman Catholic prayer charms—the kind of folk magic that would have flourished before the Reformation. Yet she also drew on an even older source of power: Tibb, her familiar spirit, who appeared to her in the guise of a beautiful young man. Other books have been written about the Pendle Witches—both fiction and nonfiction, nuanced and lurid. Mine is the first to tell the tale from Bess's point of view. I longed to give Bess Southern what her world denied her—her own voice. As a writer, I am obsessed with history and place, how the true stories of our ancestors haunt the living landscape. No one in Pendle can remain
untouched by the witches legacy. As contemporary British storyteller, Hugh Lupton, has said, if you go deep enough into the old tales and can present them in a meaningful way to a modern audience, you become the living voice in an ancient tradition. Mother Demdikes voice deserves to be heard. I hope you will be as moved by her story as I am. Mary Sharratt

(Photograph © Stuart Ainslie)

Spells from the Pendle Witch Trial Transcripts and Daughters of the Witching Hill (Click on Images for the Spell [PDF])

Mother Demdikes Charm  Charms of the Pendle Witches

Features:
* ISBN13: 9780547069678
* Condition: NEW
* Notes: Brand New from Publisher. No Remainder Mark.

**Personal Review: Daughters of the Witching Hill by Mary Sharratt**

I love historical fiction and I admit that I'm fascinated by the entire concept of witch hunts. So when I sat down to read DAUGHTERS OF THE WITCHING HILL by Mary Sharratt, I was definitely expecting to enjoy this novel. But I had no idea how much I'd end up loving this book! In fact, I hesitate to even write this review because I absolutely adored this novel; and I don't want to build your expectations up too high so that you'll be disappointed if you aren't as enthusiastic about it as I am. But I do have to say that I thought this book was excellent!

DAUGHTERS OF THE WITCHING HILL is based on the true story of a family that was involved in the Pendle witch-hunt of 1612. The author, Mary Sharratt, actually lives in Lancashire, England -- right near the location where this witch-hunt took place. Evidently, there are images of witches everywhere, and the author couldn't help but become interested in this story. She began reading about the Pendle witches and researching them; and the result of her endeavors is a terrific (and heartbreaking) novel.

I can't rave enough about Mary Sharratt. I really appreciated how she incorporated the historical facts into this novel. She did a remarkable job of blending fact with fiction (and I really don't think that's an easy thing to do.) I loved learning about the traditions and practices of that time period, especially as they related to "witchcraft" and religion. But I also think she did a great job of giving the background on the Pendle witches and their families. After reading DAUGHTERS OF THE WITCHING HILL, I can actually say that I learned not only a great deal about the witch hunts, but I also learned about the religions and political environments in England in the early 1600s.
I also think the author did an amazing job of bringing her characters to life. DAUGHTERS OF THE WITCHING HILL was told by two different characters -- Bess Southerns, the "ringleader" of the witches and her granddaughter Alizon. I was so impressed with how the author captured Bess' voice and I loved getting inside her mind and seeing her version of events. I admit that I was a little sad when Bess' section of the story ended and Alizon's began because I loved Bess so much. However, I was equally blown away by how Ms. Sharratt portrayed Alizon, and I ended up really liking her too. The two characters' voices were very separate and distinct; and I felt that both were very believable. I thought it was fascinating to see what each of them thought of their gifts, and how each of them chose to handle them.

Another thing I really think made this book extra-special was how much it affected me. Usually I read historical fiction to learn about an event. (You might remember that I said I like to be entertained while I learn!) However, DAUGHTERS OF THE WITCHING HILL was so much more than that for me. Part of the reason was because of Ms. Sharratt's research and writing style, but I also think that the story touched my heart because I became so attached to the characters. It's probably obvious that their story has a tragic ending, but their entire lives were just so sad. They were extremely poor and often times struggling for work and food; and they also had to face a lot of tragedies. And added to those things, they were also considered different because of their cunning and healing abilities. My heart just went out to the entire family, and I felt very much a part of their lives as I read their story.

As you can probably tell, I thought Ms. Sharratt's writing was wonderful. I have never read any of her other novels, but I can't wait to now! She has written quite a few other books, and I think THE VANISHING POINT and THE REAL MINERVA look terrific. I was in awe of how well Ms. Sharratt created the essence of the characters and their time periods in this novel. If her other books are even half as good as DAUGHTERS OF THE WITCHING HILL, I'll be in for a treat!

DAUGHTERS OF THE WITCHING HILL would make an excellent book club discussion book. Not only is the story fascinating (and I'm pretty sure everyone who reads this book will agree with that), but it is also beautifully written. I also think that there are many themes to discuss in this novel including England's history, religion, the power of prayer, healing, friendship, loyalty, family dynamics, mother/daughter relationships, fear, forgiveness, and redemption to name just a few. This book is rich with topics that warrant further analysis, and I think most book clubs would love to discuss this novel.

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