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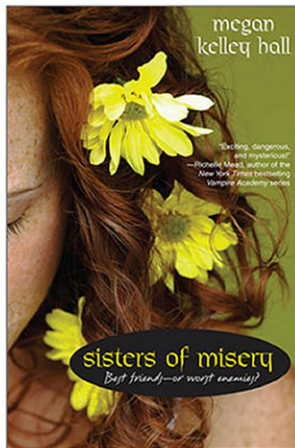


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Three debut novels stir up Salem's dark magic

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Mean girls: Megan Kelley Hall's *Sisters of Misery* is a young adult novel about teens behaving badly.

By Carol Memmott, USA TODAY

Something witchy is brewing in bookstores this summer.

Three debut novels share a link to Salem, Mass., site of the infamous witch trials of 1692.

Two occur in modern times, and the third is set in the 17th century, when escalating hysteria led to the imprisonment of more than 150 men, women and children and the deaths of at least 20 people.

•In *The Lace Reader* by Brunonia Barry (William Morrow, \$24.95, out July 29), a young woman descended from a line of women who can read the future in patterns in lace returns to Salem after her great aunt, also a "lace reader," disappears. The story draws metaphorically on the 17th-century witch hunts.

•*Sisters of Misery* by Megan Kelley Hall (Kensington, \$9.95, paperback original, young adult, out July 29) takes place in a seaside town near Salem where a teen investigating her cousin's disappearance faces the wrath of a high school clique whose members instigate a modern-day witch hunt. In 1692, a group of girls were responsible for the witchcraft charges brought against neighbors.

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•*The Heretic's Daughter* by Kathleen Kent (Little, Brown, \$24.99, out Sept. 3) is historical fiction about Martha Carrier, one of the first to be tried and hanged as a witch in Salem.

"Salem's rich and atmospheric history makes it the perfect setting for a novel," says Laurie Chittenden, the editor who acquired *The Lace Reader*. "Readers enjoy the ability to lose themselves in the worlds of highly atmospheric books. Salem is just one of those mystical places."

The Lace Reader and *The Heretic's Daughter* were highly touted editors' picks at last month's Book Expo America, a gathering of publishers and booksellers.

Salem's place in American literature is well-established. "Like the *Holocaust*, it's a tragedy that captured people's imagination," says Daniel Johnston of Salem's Cornerstone Books.

In his 1953 play, *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller used the witch trials as a metaphor for the McCarthy era. Jodi Picoult's 2001 novel, *Salem Falls*, was based loosely on *The Crucible*.

But historical context isn't the only reason for the fascination.

"Look at the success of the Harry Potter books," Barry says. "They give children, who were relatively powerless, the power to affect and change the world. In that very optimistic way, we all believe a little bit in magic."

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