
In *Witches of America*, popular writer and filmmaker Alex Mar ventures into three contemporary Pagan and occult communities in search of belonging and purpose. Exposed to a particular strand of Pagan witchcraft through the production of her documentary *American Mystic* (2010), Mar tries to pinpoint a personal, unanticipated longing for the magical. Despite her Ivy League secularism and upper middle-class upbringing, Mar finds herself envying her subjects, who have something she does not: “…they have guidance; they have clarity; their days have structure and meaning.” (7)

First and foremost, readers must understand that this is not an academic text, nor is it a popular survey of contemporary American witchcraft. Despite its somewhat misleading title, *Witches of America* is neither Tanya Luhrmann’s *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, nor is it Margot Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon*. Mar’s objective is not to provide us with scholarly insight into any religious movement. She does not collect surveys, conduct formal interviews, consider prior works on the subject, familiarize herself with wider contexts, or conduct comparative analysis. She is also not playing the role of curious journalist, collecting curiosities for the retelling. Rather, *Witches of America* is an intimate account of one woman’s desire for personal meaning.

In nineteen narrative-driven chapters, spanning five years, Mar builds a personal relationship with Morpheus Ravenna, participating in rituals with Ravenna’s various California-based witchcraft communities and documenting the formation of her tradition dedicated to the Morrigan. Entranced by Ravenna’s confidence and influence, Mar wonders if she herself could become a priestess, or if the power—and the clarity she desires—is inborn. To find answers, Mar become a student of the Feri tradition of witchcraft, studying with a teacher based in New England. Simultaneously, she pursues membership in a New Orleans-based chapter of the Ordo Templi Orientis. Her relationships with Ravenna and an assortment of other witches and occultists develop in alternating vignettes, interspersed with personal stories about family, growing up, and dating.

For scholars, Mar provides potentially useful insight into the relationship between religion and socioeconomic class. Many of her
contacts and teachers are financially disadvantaged, and Mar details her own inability, as the product of wealth, to relate to practitioners of traditions that seem to rely on individual suffering. Mar’s perspective will be familiar to anthropologists and sociologists exploring the connections between poverty, personal struggle, and the practice of magic. Those interested in the construction of religious authenticity through suffering may also find *Witches of America* to be a useful primary source, particularly as a platform for further exploration of less well-documented Pagan and occult traditions.

For Pagan practitioners, Mar poses some unsettling—but necessary—questions. Time spent amongst prominent priestesses Morpheus Ravenna, Thorn Coyle, and Karina BlackHeart leads Mar to wonder about the roles that personal charisma, sex appeal, and secrecy play in the passing of religious authority. Where is power located and how is it cultivated? The decision to initiate into the Ordo Templi Orientis and an encounter with a necromancer raise concerns about the purpose of magic and the boundaries surrounding magical communities. If power lies in transgression, where are the limits and who decides?

As a spiritual seeker and as a memoirist, Mar will appeal most to middle-class, educated skeptics. Mar is a disillusioned Millennial, coming to grips with life as a thirty-something. Her fixation on the power of priestesses (and their bodies) stems from conscious discomfort at the prospect of her own aging. She describes struggles with an eating disorder, as well as familial insecurities that drive her fascination with mortality, legacy, and individuality.

To compare *Witches of America* to other treatments of American witchcraft or contemporary Paganism is to miss the point. *Witches of America* is about Mar herself, not the witchcraft she pursues. She is no researcher. Yet, to dismiss this work as a mere piece of spiritual tourism is to fail to appreciate a wider trend in American religion that Mar exemplifies. *Witches of America* could easily be considered along with other works about the “spiritual but not religious” or the quest for individuality central to the “seeker” phenomenon. Typical of the genre, Mar ultimately finds that meaning in herself, eschewing the constraints of established hierarchies and protocols (for better or worse). Witchcraft, it turns out, is just another extraneous religious formality in the search for self.

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