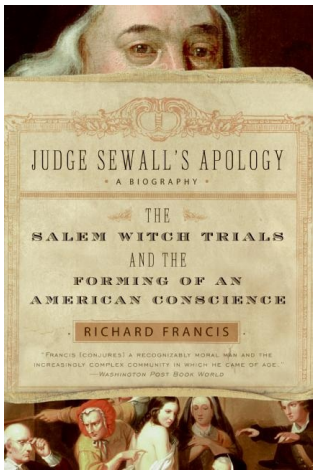

Judge Sewall's Apology

By Richard Francis
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Introduction

In January 1692, two young girls in Salem, MA, suffered convulsions that were said to be far more severe than epileptic fits. A month later, two older girls were similarly afflicted. Afraid of being accused of witchcraft, the second pair managed to convince the populace that they were victims, not perpetrators, and pointed their fingers at three of the town's most marginalized members.

Thus began the Salem witch trial, one of the most well-known and shameful incidents in American history. Less known, however, is the fact that Judge Samuel Sewall, a presiding member of the court at the time, publicly apologized for his role five years later. In *Judge Sewall's Apology*, Richard Francis outlines the factors that lead to the Salem witch hysteria; explores the ramifications of Sewall's unusual and courageous apology; and using the Judge's own detailed journals, paints an intimate portrait of a warm, thoughtful and complicated man on the cusp of a new American modernity.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the various social, political, and environmental factors contributing to the witchcraft hysteria: guilt for usurping Indian land; fear of the wilderness, Indians, the French, and an unknown country; pressures from the British Crown; and an increasing secularization among the next generation, the "onset of capitalist alienation." Do you think the trials functioned as a sort of release valve for the pressures and "claustrophobia" in the milieu?

2. Consider the Puritans' allegorical view of good and evil. How were the accused and the accusers stuck in a no-win situation as a result of these "binary alternatives" articulated by Samuel Parris, the Salem Village minister—"We are either saints or devils: the Scripture gives us no medium"?

3. What strategy did Tituba Indian unknowingly hit upon that ensured her survival? How did the "cast of the drama" multiply when others followed her example? What other factors contributed to a situation that was "intrinsically structured so it would get out of hand'?

4. What effect did pardoning the pirate, Thomas Hawkins, have on Sewall's future judgment? How did his "guilt at allowing himself to be browbeaten" in that case, lead to accepting William Stoughton as a "stern guide"?

5. What were Mary Easty, Margaret Jacobs, Giles Corey and John Proctor's similarly heroic actions as the trials progressed? Why does the author distinguish Judge Sewall's apology from those of Samuel Parris, Thomas Fiske, and Ann Putnam Jr., who all saw "guilt as a manner of external manipulation"?

6. Trace the stirrings of a "psychological view of evil" - the role played by an individual's psyche - as it begins in John Proctor's explanation of "delusion," in Rebecca Nurse's statement, "you do not know my heart," and culminates in Sewall's apology.

7. As the accusations of witchcraft gathered momentum, how did the crisis become an "explicit repudiation of class structure"? Although "this moral leveling might be sinister," how is it ultimately part of the "birth pangs of the modern world"?

8. As Sewall took responsibility for his actions and stood accountable, ready to "take the Blame & Shame of it," what were the repercussions of his apology? Why is an apology, at least in the political arena, seen as an admission of defeat and weakness in contemporary culture?

9. In the biographical elements of the second half of the book, as Sewell fights for Indian rights, writes anti-slavery tracts, argues against the wearing of wigs, and woos several women, can we see changes in his understanding of human nature? Do you agree that he could be an archetype of the formation of an American conscience?

10. *The Crucible*, by playwright Arthur Miller, famously depicted the Salem witch trials as an allegory for McCarthyism and the Red Scare of the 1950s. More recently, America has experienced outbreaks of child-abuse allegations that eventually proved false, and currently grapples with fundamentalists both within and without its borders. Do you think America has entirely shed the external view of good and evil that preoccupied its Puritan ancestors?

About the Author

Richard Francis is currently a professor of creative writing at the prestigious Bath University in England. A biographer and novelist, he has spent two years as an American Studies Fellow at Harvard and a year as a professor of American literature at the University of Missouri.