



The Last Witchfinder

By James Morrow
ISBN: 9780060821807

Introduction

The Last Witchfinder tells of one woman's heroic quest to overturn the Parliamentary Witchcraft Act of 1604. Set in Restoration England and the American provinces, James Morrow's historical epic is a meticulously researched and richly detailed narrative of sorcery, science, and the sea change from the witch-hunting era to the Age of Reason.

Jennet Stearne, the daughter of Witchfinder-General Walter Stearne, is quick-witted, sharp-tongued, and hungry for knowledge. Under the tutelage of her beloved Aunt Isobel, our heroine acquires a passion for "natural philosophy" and an abhorrence of her father's work. After witnessing Isobel's unjust execution as a witch, Jennet makes it her life's mission to destroy the statute that sanctions the hanging and burning of innocent women.

In a tour-de-force writing performance, Morrow follows Jennet as she emigrates with her family from Colchester to America, where she becomes entangled in the machinations of the Salem Witch Court, the designs of her Nimacook Indian captors, and the bedsheets of her fascinating lover, the young Benjamin Franklin. But Jennet faces the ultimate challenge when she courageously puts herself on trial for sorcery in Colonial Philadelphia, thus sparking a monumental confrontation between two incompatible worldviews.

Set many generations ago, *The Last Witchfinder* features characters whose goals and obsessions sometimes seem remote from our way of thinking. Nevertheless, Jennet's adventures raise many issues—concerning religious beliefs, the scientific picture of reality, and the role of women in public life—that resonate for contemporary readers. We hope the following questions will help you connect the universe of James Morrow's novel to our modern, post-Enlightenment world.

Questions for Discussion

1. It's easy to see why Jennet Stearne calls her campaign against the 1604 Parliamentary Witchcraft Act a "quest." If it succeeds, her mission will have enormous social ramifications. But must a "quest" always be so lofty? Did you ever undertake a personal project that also felt like a quest?
2. Walter Stearne, the self-appointed "Witchfinder-General" who dominates the first third of the novel, systematically detects Satanists using such "proofs" as "swimming the witch" and pricking her supposed Devil's mark. In performing these tests, is Walter practicing a kind of science? How do Walter's "proofs" differ from the experiments with light and acceleration that Jennet and Aunt Isobel perform in chapter one?
3. In the late 1750s the playwright Oliver Goldsmith remarked that he "who would court a lady must be capable of discussing Newton and Locke." Goldsmith meant that, for his generation and those immediately before it, women no less than men took a keen interest in "natural philosophy." Does this same situation hold today? Does an intelligent man assume that his female friends will want to discuss scientific and philosophical matters?
4. The author periodically interrupts the narrative flow with commentary by a conscious, immortal, opinionated book: Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*. How does the *Principia's* commentary help us grasp the fuller implications of Jennet's adventures? Do the book's remarks sometimes seem biased or self-serving?
5. During her life Jennet acquires five lovers: Okommaka, Tobias Crompton, Benjamin Franklin, Pussough, and—unbeknownst to herself—the *Principia* narrator. Which of these characters understands our heroine best? Could Jennet have found long-term happiness in any of these relationships?
6. Upon her deliverance from the Nimacooks by Tobias Crompton, Jennet happily plights her troth to him, knowing that this union will enable her to continue the quest. How do you feel about Jennet's "marriage of convenience"? Did she have any alternatives?
7. After Jennet's first *argumentum grande* is rejected by Parliament, she resolves to write a superior sequel, even though her husband worries that "in constructing this second and more elaborate treatise, you will grievously neglect our daughter." Should Jennet have taken Tobias's fears more seriously, postponing her project until Rachel became self-sufficient? Is Tobias holding Jennet to a standard of parental self-sacrifice that men have normally been free to ignore?
8. In the second half of the novel we witness Jennet's brother, the "last witchfinder" of the title, executing people for supposed heresy. What is the root of Dunstan's cruelty? Is he innately evil? Or is the *Principia* narrator correct when he asserts, in chapter three, "You must remain mindful, however, that the true villains of my story are not depraved persons but psychotic theologies"?
9. Marooned on a Caribbean island, Jennet finally discovers the "demon disproof" she has sought all her life. Explaining her *argumentum grande* to Benjamin Franklin, she notes that "but for my years as a savage Indian, I would ne'er have hit upon this proposition." What role did Jennet's Nimacook past play in her conclusion that the world is holistic and "alive"?
10. At one level *The Last Witchfinder* is about the historical clash between religion and science. But must faith and reason

necessarily conflict? Does Jennet lay the groundwork for a reconciliation when, pleading her case before the Philadelphia witch court, she asserts that "God hath gifted His creatures with two great books, one called Scripture, the other Nature"?

11. For Jennet it seems to go without saying that she must sign her treatises "J. S. Crompton," rather than using her full name and thus revealing her sex. At some point in her quest should she have disclosed her gender to the world?

12. Throughout *The Last Witchfinder* the author uses historical figures to personify the Age of Reason—Franklin, Newton, Hooke, Montesquieu—all of them presented as wild and quixotic characters. Does Morrow succeed in his apparent ambition to dramatize the human side of science? Would you join him in questioning the common dichotomy between intellect and passion?

13. Perhaps you've attended a revival of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, or maybe you've seen the 1997 film adaptation starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder. Whereas Miller sees the Salem Witch Trials as foreshadowing the McCarthy era, with ruthless people exploiting a transient hysteria to advance their own interests, Morrow evidently interprets the Salem tragedy as one more battle in a protracted war between Renaissance theology and scientific rationality. Which understanding of the 1692 trials do you find more compelling?

14. *The Last Witchfinder* contains an epilogue in which contemporary equivalents of Jennet and Aunt Isobel participate in a middle-school rocket club. Why do you think the author included this coda?

15. Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of the *Principia* narrator is his romantic feelings toward Jennet. Do you sometimes feel that books have lives of their own? Do you love your favorite books as friends?

About the Author

James Morrow is the author of eight previous novels. He lives in State College, Pennsylvania, where he is working on another satiric epic, which he describes as a "combination of *Frankenstein* and *Lolita*." Visit his website at www.jamesmorrow.net.