

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Salem Witch Judge

by

Eve LaPlante

1. Why did Samuel Sewall decide, as a judge at the Salem witchcraft trials, to condemn and hang people as witches? Had you been there, appointed by the governor to serve as a judge of the Court of Oyer and Terminer, what would you have done? How would you have justified your actions to your peers?
2. In 1942, historian Frank Grinnell spoke at the Massachusetts State House for the dedication of the Sewall mural (*1647: Dawn of Tolerance in Massachusetts*). He said, “[Sewall’s] repentance represents the greatest movement in modern history, not only in theory, but in its practical application. . . . [It marks] the beginning of the recognition of the ‘quality of mercy’ in human affairs. No principle of Christ has been longer in obtaining whole-hearted acceptance than . . . the saying, ‘Be ye merciful even as your Father is merciful.’”

Do you agree with Grinnell? What other people or movements in American history emphasize the “quality of mercy” in human affairs?

3. What sort of wife was Hannah Hull Sewall? How did her personality—what we know of it—complement Samuel’s character? Could Samuel have accomplished what he did without her?
4. Sewall’s final work, published in 1725, concerns the natural “right of women,” a revolutionary notion in the English colonies at the time. That essay, “*Talitha Cumi*” (Damsel, arise), was ignored and until recently existed only in draft manuscript form at the Massachusetts Historical Society, inaccessible to the public. What life events contributed to Sewall’s late views on gender equality? How did his long repentance for the Salem witch hunt contribute to the ideas in “*Talitha Cumi*”?
5. Samuel Sewall once described himself as a “lover of music to a fault.” How did music affect him throughout his life? In particular, how did his daily singing of the Psalms inform him spiritually and emotionally?
6. Eve LaPlante compares the Reverend Samuel Willard to Nathan in the Old Testament, and Sewall to King David. Do you agree with this comparison?
7. Given that Puritans left England largely to escape Catholic influences in the Church of England, it’s surprising that scholars find so many similarities between the devotional practices of seventeenth-century Puritans and Roman Catholics. Considering

in particular chapter 15, “The Blame and Shame of It,” analyze the links between Catholic and Puritan devotional practices. Do you see similar links today among their spiritual descendants?

8. In his 1697 essay *Phaenomena quaedam Apocalyptica*, Sewall determines that Plum Island, in northeast Massachusetts, is a likely place for Jesus Christ to return to earth at his Second Coming. Perry Miller and other literary scholars consider this essay the first work of American literature in the sense of being conscious of itself *as* American. Do you agree?
9. What was it about Sewall’s character and experience that enabled him in 1700 to stand apart from his society, which was actively engaged in the slave trade, and write the first abolitionist statement in American history?
10. What aspects of the Puritan worldview do you see in modern American life? What modern figures or situations might benefit from a perspective like Sewall’s? How might someone today, following his example, experience a change of heart?