

I am a witch. Or so some would call me. Spaw...

'Absorbing and suspenseful'

SUNDAY TIMES

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION
20 YEARS

evil



Although I know

grandmother



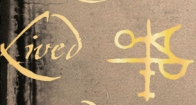
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Witch Child

CELIA REES

BLOOMSBURY

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Praise for *Witch Child*

'*Witch Child* marked a huge step change in YA historical fiction. There is a contemporary sharpness, an edge, to Rees's prose that felt new and bold, and marked the book out as a classic right from the start'

Catherine Johnson

'*Witch Child* is an out-and-out classic. A superb idea, beautifully realised. As fresh and original as it was when it first came out. Celia Rees is a wonderful writer and this is a fantastic book'

Chris Priestley

'Rees sends the reader back in time, and shows them the blood under the fingernails of the early settlers. The good and bad is laid bare, the sense of hope and camaraderie, limited by the entitlement and misogyny that permeates their society, and can be more deadly and dangerous to a young woman than any witches curse'

Deirdre O'Sullivan

'The sort of historical novel eleven- and twelve-year-olds will gobble up at a sitting'

Nina Bawden

'Absorbing and suspenseful'

Sunday Times

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become a major writer for teenage readers’

Independent

‘Cleverly constructed and written with
both grace and urgency’

Guardian

‘In *Mary*, Rees has created one of the most rounded,
strong and fascinating characters in recent fiction’

Irish Times

‘An exciting well-told tale’

Observer

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Sunday Herald

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‘A powerful, absorbing and unusual novel’

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Witch Child

Sorceress

Pirates!

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The Fool's Girl

This is Not Forgiveness

Glass Town Wars

For adults

Miss Graham's Cold War Cookbook

Witch Child

CELIA REES

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The following manuscript is made up from a remarkable collection of documents termed 'the Mary papers'. Found hidden inside a quilt dating from the colonial period, the papers seem to take the form of an irregularly kept journal or diary. All dates are guess-work, based on references within the text. The first entries are tentatively dated from March 1659. I have altered the original as little as possible, but punctuation, paragraphing and spellings have been standardised for the modern reader.

Alison Ellman
Boston, Mass.

beginning

entry 1 (early march.? 1659)

I am Mary.

I am a witch. Or so some would call me. ‘Spawn of the Devil’, ‘Witch child’, they hiss in the street, although I know neither father or mother. I know only my grandmother, Eliza Nuttall; Mother Nuttall to her neighbours. She brought me up from a baby. If she knew who my parents are, she has not told me.

‘Daughter of the Erl King and the Elfen Queen, that’s who you are.’

We live in a small cottage on the very edge of the forest, Grandmother, me and her cat and my rabbit. Lived. Live there no more.

Men came and dragged her away. Men in black coats

and hats as tall as steeples. They skewered the cat on a pike, they smashed the rabbit's skull by hitting him against the wall. They said that these were not God's creatures but familiars, the Devil himself in disguise. They threw the mess of fur and flesh on to the midden and threatened to do the same to me, to her, if she did not confess her sins to them.

They took her away then.

She was locked in the keep for more than a week. First they 'walked' her, marching her up and down, up and down between them, for a day and a night until she could no longer hobble, her feet all bloody and swollen. She would not confess. So they set about to prove she was a witch. They called a woman, a Witch Pricker, who stabbed her all over with long pins, probing for the spot that was numb, where no blood ran, the place where the familiars fed. The men watched as the woman did this and my grandmother was forced to stand before their gloating eyes, a naked old lady, deprived of modesty, dignity, the blood streaming down her withered body, and still she would not confess.

They decided to float her. They had plenty of evidence against her, you see. Plenty. All week folk had been coming to them with accusations. How she had overlooked them, bringing sickness to their livestock and families; how she had used magic, sticking pins in wax figures to bring on affliction; how she transformed herself and roamed the country for miles around as a great hare, how she did this by the use of ointment made from melted corpse fat. They questioned me. Demanding, 'Is this so?' She slept in the bed next to me every night. How do I know where she went when sleep took her?

It was all lies. Nonsense and lies.

These people accusing her, they were our friends, our neighbours. They had gone to *her*, pleading with *her* for help with beasts and children, sick or injured, a wife nearing her time. For she had the skill, in herbs, potions, in her hands, but the power came from in her, not from the Devil. The people trusted her, or they had until now, they had wanted her presence. Birth or death, my grandmother was asked to be there to assist in the passage from one world to the next.

They were all there for the swimming, standing both sides of the river, lining the bridge, staring down at the place, a wide pool where the water shows black and deep. The men in tall hats dragged my grandmother from the stinking hole where they had been keeping her. They cross bound her, tying her right toe to her left thumb, and vice versa, making sure the cords were thin and taut. Then they threw her in. The crowd watched in silence, the only sound the shuffle of many feet edging forwards to see what she would do.

‘She floats!’

The chant started with just one person remarking, in a quiet voice almost of wonder, then it spread from one to another, until all were shouting with one voice, like some monstrous howling thing. To float was a sure proof of guilt. They hooked her, pulling her back to shore like a bundle of old washing. They did not want her drowning, because that would deprive the people of a hanging.

entry 2

It is a cold day, even for early spring. White frost on the ground and green barely touching the trees, but folk come from far and near for the hanging. They crowd the market square worse than Mop Day.

It is dangerous for me to be there. I see them glancing and whispering, 'That's her, the granddaughter', 'daughter of the Devil, more like', then they turn away, sniggering, hands covering their mouths, faces turning red at the lewd images they conjure in their own mind's eye. The evil is in themselves.

I should flee, get away. They will turn on me next unless I go. But where to? What am I to do? Get lost. Die in the forest. I look around. Eyes, hard with hatred, slide from

mine. Mouths twitch between leering and sneering. I will not run away into the forest because that is what they want me to do.

I keep my eyes forward now, staring at the gallows. They have hammered away for a night and a day putting it up. You can smell the fresh cut wood even where I am at the back of the crowd.

What powers do they think we have, my grandmother and I? If she had real power, would she not be able to undo the locks to their stinking dungeon and fly through the air to safety? Would she not call up her master, Satan, to blast and shrivel them to dust and powder? And if *I* had any powers, any at all, I would destroy them all, right here and now. I would turn them into a mass of fornicating toads. I would turn them into leprous blind newts and set them to eat themselves. I would cover their bodies with suppurating plague sores. I would curse them from generation to generation, down through the ages, so their children and their children's children bore gagging half-wits. I would addle their heads, curdling, corrupting the insides of their skulls until their brains dripped from their noses like bloody mucus ...

I was so lost in my curses that only the sudden silence of the crowd brought me back to what was about to happen. Black figures stood on the pale boards, silhouetted against the white of the sky: Witchfinder, Minister, Hangman. In the unexpected quiet, a sneeze sounded loud. Obadiah Wilson's thin figure bent forward, suddenly convulsed. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and held it to his face as sneeze after sneeze racked him. When he took it away the crowd drew breath, blood bloomed thick and red on the snow white linen. It was the only colour on the whole platform.

My grandmother was brought forward for all the crowd to see. She was held, arms pinioned behind her, and pushed to the foot of the ladder which leant against the gallows tree. She ignored the eyes on her, looking over the upturned heads, searching for me. Her eyes found mine and she smiled. Her glance went sideways to Obadiah Wilson, self-appointed Witchfinder, trying to staunch the blood pouring from his nostrils and she nodded very slightly, as if to say 'well done'. She nodded again to someone behind me.

That was the last I saw of her. The hangman stepped

forward, hood raised to cover her face, and at the same time a cloak closed around me. I was taken down one of the steep alleys leading from the market and was stepping into a waiting carriage when I heard the crowd's roar.

entry 3

The woman sitting opposite me said not a word, nor I to her. She stared out of the window, studying the passing scene while I studied her. She was obviously a lady, richly appavelled. Her cloak was soft dark wool fastened at the throat with a silver clasp and chain; her dress was green silk velvet, the shifting shade of young beech leaves turning in a spring wind. Her hands were gloved, her fingers long and thin, and beneath the soft leather I could see the bulge of many rings. Her face was veiled. Black gauze as fine as mist obscured her features, but I could see enough to know that she was young and comely. Her skin was pale and I could make out the shadowed jut of high cheekbones and the curve of finely moulded lips. I could not see her eyes

and, anyway, they were not upon me. They stared outwards steadily.

If she was aware of my scrutiny, she showed no sign of it and made no comment as the coach rumbled on. I wondered if she stared out to look for robbers, for these are lawless times, the roads infested with bands of soldiers left over from both armies, and other roaming packs of sundry vagabonds. Many are fearful to travel, and she made no attempt to hide her wealth.

She did not seem inclined to tell me who she was and I did not ask her. In my mind, an old rhyme began to chime. As we travelled onwards, the wheels of the carriage took up the rhythm:

‘In the town live witches nine, three in worsted, three in rags, and three in velvet fine ...’

journey 1

entry 4 (march, 1659)

The changing motion of the carriage woke me. I must have fallen asleep, my senses dulled by exhaustion and lulled by the constant swaying movement. I started awake to the sound of horses' hooves clattering on cobblestones. Outside the day had darkened. I judged it to be late afternoon, although tall buildings crowded out the sky. The coachman called and the horses neighed in answer as the coach turned into a wide inn yard.

‘Where are we?’

My companion still said nothing, merely smiled beneath her veil and put one gloved finger to her lips. The coach had come to a halt. I drew back the leather curtain a little more to peer out. The coachman opened the door for my

companion to step down. People came running: an ostler to hold the horses, the innkeeper bowing, his wife dropping curtsies. Their eyes widened somewhat as my companion turned back to help me out, but they said nothing. It was as if we were expected. I stumbled slightly, my legs stiff from sitting so long and my head still rocking with the motion of the coach. The hand on mine tightened and did not let go.

We were shown to a spacious room, part bed chamber, part parlour; obviously the best the inn could provide. The landlady brought food and drink: pewter plates laden with stewed meat, mutton by the smell of it, wheaten bread and cheese, a mug of beer for me and wine for my companion. The woman laid the food, bobbed her head at both of us and left us.

My companion ate little, just lifted her veil to sip her wine, crumbled some bread between her gloved fingers and pushed the stew about on her plate. Perhaps the food was too rough for her taste. I was aware of her eyes upon me, that now I was the object of her study, but I did not look up until all the food was finished, the last smears of

gravy wiped around with bread, for despite her scrutiny, and despite all the things that had happened to me, I found that I was very hungry indeed.

‘Are you sufficed?’ Her thin fingers drummed the table.

I nodded.

‘Is this room to your liking?’

I nodded again.

‘Good.’ She stood up. ‘Now I must leave you. I have much to do. Annie, the landlady, will care for you. You will be safe with her, have no fear.’

With that she left. Outside the room, I heard her talking to the landlady, ordering a bath for me. This duly arrived. A great tub lined with linen, followed by maids bringing pitchers of steaming water. I had never even seen such a thing before, let alone been in one. At home, my eyes stung a little at the thought of it, at home we bathed in the river, if we bathed at all. The landlady came bustling in when all was ready and took charge of me. I was ordered to undress.

‘That too,’ she said, when I was down to my shift.

A maid collected my clothes and took them away with her.

‘Where is she taking them?’

‘To be burned.’

‘What am I to wear?’

‘This until tomorrow.’ She had a long white linen gown over her arm.

I was left standing naked before her. My hand went to my neck. I wore a small leather pouch there, made for me by my grandmother. It contained things, special things, not to be seen by anyone. The hot blood rushed to my cheeks. I feared that I was undone.

‘You are safe with me,’ she said quietly, as if she knew who I was and what I had come from. ‘Put it aside and then into the tub with you.’

Annie was a big woman with little black eyes set like currants in a round bun of a face. She rolled her sleeves to show forearms as thick as ham hocks, caught me in a farmer’s grip and began to scrub me clean. I had not thought myself especially dirty, not compared to most in our village anyway, but it took two changes of water before Annie was happy. My hair caused the most difficulty. It was tangled and knotted, snarling up the comb so she had to shear hunks of it away. Then she anointed me with a sharp-smelling concoction.

‘Black alder bark boiled in vinegar,’ she replied when I questioned her. ‘You’re as lousy as a beggar’s dog.’

She left that to soak while she scrubbed away at the rest of me with lumpy balls of hard soap and bags of sweet herbs. Then she attacked my head again with a fine tooth comb to remove all the nits and lice. It felt as though most of my hair was going with them and my scalp was near bleeding before she was satisfied. I was sitting in the tub until the water was cold and I was shivering. Finally she bade me get out and rubbed me pink and warm again inside a sheet of coarse linen.

‘There,’ she held me at arm’s length, her face red and sweating. She parted my hair and peered at my scalp and then looked me over from head to foot before pronouncing, ‘I think you’ll do.’ She held the nightgown for me. ‘Into bed with you. I’ll bring you up a posset.’ Her homely faced creased in a smile. ‘You’re quite a pretty one under all that dirt.’ Suddenly, she hugged me. ‘Poor little maid. What’s to become of you?’

The bath was cleared away, the dirty water emptied in a great sloosh out in the yard and I was left alone. I took the candle and went over to the cracked and misted mirror

that stood on top of a tall chest of drawers. Soap suds and kind words had brought the tears stinging to my eyes. They stared back, red-rimmed, the irises black-bordered, luminous grey flecked with yellow, gazing out of a face all pink and white and many shades paler than before. My hair fell down in thick cords, grey as ash bark, the tips drying to dull gold, the colour of oak leaves in winter. It framed a face full of unfamiliar hollows and shadows. Perhaps it was the candle's flickering light, but I seemed to be looking into another's face, a stranger's face. The face of a woman, not a child.

A knock at the door made the grey eyes start wide as a deer's. It was the maid carrying my posset. The mess of bread was well soaked in hot milk, generously flavoured with brandy, honey and spices. I stirred it with the horn spoon and ate it slowly, letting its warmth comfort me. I stayed, curled up in a chair in front of the fire, until the logs fell to red embers. Only then did I climb into bed.

I had never been in a bed like this before. I had only known the little sleeping platform in the smoky loft of our one-room cottage, rough homespun blankets, straw-stuffed palliasse. The bed was heated by a brass pan full of coals,

but that was no comfort. I missed my grandmother's warm bulk next to me. She was all that I knew, all that was dear. I'd loved her and she'd loved me. Now I was alone in the world. How would I do without her? My thoughts echoed the landlady: What would become of me? I turned my face into the feather bolster, and clutched tight on the woollen blanket and smooth white linen. I drew them about my head to muffle the sound as I wept.

entry 5

I did not see the woman who had brought me here until towards the next evening. In the meantime, Annie looked after me, feeding me and bringing new clothes: linen, skirt, bodice and jacket, a cap to cover my hair. Good material. Not of the finest, but better than the rough homespun stuff that I was used to. Plain dark colours. Sad colours. Puritan colours. I should have guessed my fate.

My window had a good view of the yard. I turned the chair and sat there in my new clothes looking out. I had been told to keep to my room, so spying was my only amusement. Just as the light was fading I saw her coach turn into the yard. She got down, but told the coachman to wait. An ostler came out to feed and water the horses but

he did not take them from their traces. We were to travel on together, or so I thought.

‘Quite the little Puritan,’ she said as she came in through the door. ‘Let me see you.’ She came over to my place at the window. ‘You will do well enough. At least you look the part.’

‘Well enough for what?’

I looked at her, comparing my plain clothes with her rich attire. I suddenly knew that I would not be going with her.

She seated herself in a chair opposite to me. ‘We live in difficult times. Lord Protector Cromwell is dead. His son’s rule will not last much longer. Charles will come from exile and we will have a King again. Already the people are clamouring for him and there are plots aplenty to get him here. Then who knows what will happen?’

I looked at her, trying to see through her veil to search her face for clues as to what this had to do with me.

‘There are those who do not want to stay. Here. In this country. Puritans, Separatists, people who fear that their faith will no longer be tolerated. They are leaving for a new life. In America.’

Puritans. Separatists. I looked down at myself.

‘And I am to join them?’

She nodded.

‘America!’

I could not have been more astonished if she had told me that I was bound for the realm of Faerie. In fact, that seemed more real to me. I had visited it often enough through my grandmother’s stories, but a new world across the ocean? I had heard of it. I knew that such a place existed, but I had never thought to visit it and I had no way of imagining what it could be like there.

‘Yes, America. They take ship soon. You will go from here to meet them in Southampton.’

‘Why?’

‘It is not safe for you here. My husband was a soldier in Cromwell’s army. Some of their number served under him. They are good people, they will care for you.’

‘What shall I tell them? About myself? Who I am.’ I bit my lip. They were bound to be curious and Puritans do not like witches. This seemed a dangerous course to take.

‘You are Mary Newbury. An orphan. Father a soldier, killed at the Battle of Worcester fighting in Cromwell’s army. Your mother dead of a wasting sickness. Grandmother too feeble to care for you.’

‘Where am I from?’

‘Your mother was on the road until she fell ill. Your grandmother lived in a little village, no more than a hamlet, outside Warwick. Near to where she really lived, but not too near. You were only with your grandmother a short while. That is the story you will tell. Though I doubt that you will be questioned too closely. They are departing the country, and have concerns of their own. You should slip among them without much notice. I will give you a letter of introduction. Give it to John Rivers, along with your fare.’

‘But why must I go with them? Why can I not stay with you?’

She shook her head. ‘That would be impossible.’

‘Why?’

‘I am in danger myself.’

I did not believe her. To me, she seemed untouchable.

‘It is true, I do assure you. My husband put his name to the old King’s death warrant. All who signed will be arrested as soon as the new King returns.’ She sighed, and when she spoke again her voice was quiet and bitter. ‘He might as well have signed his own.’

I did not know what to say. Her husband must be a man of very great importance to be involved in such high affairs of state. This made her even grander in my eyes, but it was not just that which silenced me. My grandmother was no Royalist, she’d been on the side of Parliament in the War, but she’d seen the killing of an anointed king as a dread sin. To be married to one with *that* blood on his hands filled me with awe.

‘If that be so – why do *you* not flee to America instead of me?’

She shook her head again. ‘That cannot be. My husband will not leave, he would see it as cowardice, and I must stand by him. Anyway, he would not be safe there. He will not be safe anywhere once Charles is on the throne. It will be time to go soon,’ she added, abruptly switching to practical matters. ‘Gather your things together.’

I looked around at a loss. I was standing in all I possessed. She seemed to remember this.

‘Your box is already loaded. I have tried to anticipate your needs.’ She handed me a purse. ‘Here is money for your fare and should you wish to purchase anything else. There are rogues everywhere, so keep it close and guard it well. John Rivers and his party wait to take ship in an inn in Southampton. The carter knows where. He will take you there. Give this to Rivers as soon as you arrive.’

She thrust the letter at me and turned abruptly, as if to go.

‘Wait! Wait, madam!’ I took her sleeve to restrain her. ‘There are some things that I must know.’

‘Well?’

Her voice retained its cold formality. The questions dried in my throat, but I did not let go. I would not let her leave. Not until I knew.

‘Why?’ I said finally. ‘Why me?’

‘I owe a great debt to Eliza Nuttall, the woman you call grandmother. She was my nurse. As a child, I held her in great affection. I was as close to her as you are. Were,’ she

corrected. ‘Later, she helped me in a time of trouble, when no other could. She rendered me a service and now it is my turn. Over the years, I have tried to help her, make sure she was comfortable.’

How did Eliza Nuttall live so well with no man to keep her? That had long triggered suspicion.

‘But my husband is a soldier and latterly a politician, following him took me far away. I came when I heard of her trouble, but I was too late, too late to prevent –’ she stopped for a moment to collect herself. ‘The only way I can repay her now is through you. Now haste, there is no time to waste.’

She came towards me and lifted her veil. She took me into her arms in the briefest of embraces. She smelt of flowers. For a moment I breathed the sweet haunting scent of roses, then she let me go.

‘Here. Take this as a token and talisman.’

She took a ring from her finger. A purple stone, flat cut, engraved with the initial *E* at the centre. My fingers closed around it. The gold weighed heavy in my hand.

I looked into her eyes, and saw my own staring back, the

same peculiar shade, pale grey, flecked with yellow, rimmed with black. Now I knew the nature of her debt. It had weighed on her conscience for fourteen years. I was looking into the eyes of my mother and I knew that I would never see her again.

entry 6

The carter picked me up as if I weighed nothing. He was a big man, hunched over, with long arms stretching down. He was wrapped up in layers of clothing and wore a big black hat, shapeless and greasy, pulled low over his forehead. He put me on the little bench above the horses, swinging himself up next to me with surprising agility. The horses pulled in their traces, impatient to get started. The heavy animals stamped their great feet, snorting and blowing, their breath showing like plumes. I pulled my cloak about me, glad that it was thick wool and of good quality, for the air was chill.

The carter sniffed the air and muttered, 'Frost tonight, you see if there ent.'

He wound his scarf tighter and whipped up the horses and we were clattering out of the inn yard and into the cobbled street.

Soon the cobbles ended and the thick wheels jolted over the rutted track which was the road south. I said little to the carter, he even less to me. I felt small next to him, and lonely, full of doubt and uncertainty. I could see no end to the journey I was starting.

I must have fallen asleep, for I woke to find us crossing a vast open plain.

‘Them’s Merlin’s Stones, them is.’

The carter waved his whip towards huge stones looming to the right of us, rearing up out of the close cropped grass. I stared, transfixed. This must be the great Temple of the Winds. My grandmother had told me about it. A circle of stones, much, much greater than any other, built far to the south of us. Such places are sacred to those who live by the Old Religion. At certain times of the year my grandmother would set off for some stones that lay a day’s journey or so from where we lived. She never told me what went on there, or who else attended, and I knew better

than to ask her. The rituals practised there were mysteries, the celebrants known only to each other.

Soon the great stones faded. Darkness drew in on either side and there was only the road unwinding like a white thread in the moonlight.

Beyond that all was black.