

Bitter Magic: Inspired by the True Story of a Confessed Witch

Nancy Hayes Kilgore

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Based on the life story of a confessed witch, Nancy Hayes Kilgore's engrossing historical novel *Bitter Magic* concerns a teenager with a dangerous interest in magic.

In the harsh religious climate of seventeenth-century Scotland, Catholics and Protestants fight for control, and the poor and uneducated often participate in pre-Christian celebrations. In this setting, Isobel is a cunning witch, known equally for her cures and her curses, while seventeen-year-old Margaret is the daughter of a powerful laird. When Margaret's best friend is captured by a raiding clan, Margaret goes to Isobel for help. Later, she continues to visit Isobel, wanting to learn to use magic herself, which she sees as only good.

The facts of Isobel's life are the pillar around which Margaret's story is told, resulting in interesting, if somewhat uneven, characterizations. Margaret is developed best, in terms of her hopes, dreams, and full personality, while Isobel—a wife and a mother—is most active when it comes to her status as a witch. She comes to represent the many women who were accused of witchcraft during her brutal period.

Ample details about the religious and political landscape of 1660s Scotland enliven the text, including around the struggle for dominance between Catholics and Protestants, and the emerging importance of rationality in religious discourse. Characters discuss the crimes committed by witches, their hardships, and the glaring inequities in wealth distribution among people who were supposed to be equal in the eyes of God.

Though Isobel's actual fate is unknown, *Bitter Magic* concludes with a satisfying blend of hopefulness and realism, and with a helpful author's note that separates fact from fiction. The result is an entertaining historical novel in which magic meets with the dark realities of those who wished to suppress it.

CATHERINE THURESON (July / August 2021)

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