

Book Reviews

Helen A. Berger and Douglas Ezzy, editors, *Teenage Witches: Magical Youth and the Search for Self* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2007) xvii+278 pp. \$21.95 (paper).

In *Teenage Witches*, Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy examine the social organization of young Witches in the United States, England and Australia and explore how they define themselves and their religion. Using personal interviews conducted by the two authors, the book provides an overview of the Witches' beliefs, practices, and how they form connections with other Witches and Pagans both near and far.

Starting with a discussion of possible social factors that may lead some teens to WitchCraft, the authors note the prevalence of books and information about WitchCraft and Paganism on the Internet, as well as a mainstream acceptance of fantasy and magic in popular movies and television shows. Many teens become interested in Wicca, or magic but few stay with it for very long.

The teens interviewed are part of the minority of teens who "convert" to Paganism, though Berger and Ezzy differentiate the way in which many young people become Pagans from the traditional conversion model typically associated with religions. As many Contemporary Pagans have written in their own accounts of their spiritual journeys, most of the interviewees express "conversion" more readily as finding a name for a pre-existing and developing set of beliefs. Past experiences are key to their religious self-identification as Witches, because they are integral to their spiritual understanding and personal theology.

The past experiences of teen Witches typically reveal teens who have faced problems that many of their peers have not, including broken homes, abusive relationships, or depression. Instead of remaining in the tragedy and trauma of these past experiences, most teen Witches instead celebrate being different and learn to value themselves as such. Their past difficulties are vital to the development of personal beliefs and the need for forms of self affirmation and self healing that are typically the focus of rituals performed by the interviewees.

While Berger and Ezzy find many young Witches who were perhaps interested in magic initially for love spells or improving their status, most of their magical work is aimed at self-love and the aid of others whom they care about. Magical accumulation of wealth or power does not bring young Witches to the Craft or drive their understanding of the world. Instead they find magical practices and rituals provoke changes within themselves and Paganism provides answers that resonate with them on ethical, spiritual and practical issues more so than other religions.

While most of the teens interviewed by Berger and Ezzy identify as solitary practitioners, almost all also say that they are part of a community. For some this is as simple as online chat-rooms about Paganism or the Craft. Others have become friends with other Witches their own age or older and spend time with them in a more social setting.

The last few chapters of the book focus on the meaning that young Witches create for themselves through their religious practice and their communities. The connection of Contemporary Paganism with feminism and environmentalism has been noted in many books, and Berger and Ezzy explore it here as well. It is not so much

that teen Witches intentionally are “feminists” or “tree-huggers” out of principle but more that their overall beliefs fit more closely with ideas of gender equity and respect for the environment. What primarily drives young Witches morally is an attempt to take care of oneself while simultaneously striving to do no harm to others. Most of the teens explain, however, that “doing no harm” makes it seem simpler that it actually is. An ability to empathize with and understand the perspective of others seems of primary importance to the ethics of young Witches in their attempt to “harm none.”

Throughout the book, Berger and Ezzy work to dispel myths and rumors about Wicca and Witchcraft—such as the comparisons made between Paganism and cults, or between Witches and Satanists made by many Christian groups. They emphasize that Paganism does not indoctrinate teens but instead shows them ways to value their individual attributes and ideas, and the radical form of empathy that teen Witches advocate goes directly against self-centered Satanist teachings. These comparisons, the authors correctly assert, actually tell us more about contemporary Christianity than they do about Witches today. Such common misconceptions nevertheless illuminate an important aspect of the social world that young Witches inhabit and have to clarify quite often.

Berger and Ezzy use personal vignettes from many of their interviewees to connect overall sociological trends with individual experience. Their use of vignettes, as well as quotes within the regular text of the book, contributes to the understanding of mass media trends in the larger sense, but also in how the media affects people on a more personal level. This frame allows the book to have great range in perspective, including not only the people Berger and Ezzy interviewed, but the larger context they share and how they situate themselves within it.

While the book shows great range in perspective and in subject, there are still many questions and topics left relatively unexplored or merely mentioned in the book. The authors, while focusing on teens and twenty-something Pagans, make multiple comparisons between new, younger Pagans or Witches and those of the previous generation. What is missing is a more concise description of what is unique to today’s young Witches and what remains consistent between generations within the Pagan community.

The other topic that was never clearly fleshed out, although it shows up within many sections of the book, is that of modernity. While Berger and Ezzy discuss the propagation of science-fiction and fantasy in mainstream culture and the transmission of this culture on a world-wide basis, as well as the importance of the world wide web on the development of religious practice, they never discuss the subtle and complex relationship between those modern trends and the spirit of “old world” religion that is also prevalent within Paganism.

I mention these two omissions with the caveat that the topics the book does explore are covered very well. It is impossible, with a religion as large and diverse as Paganism, or even just what would be called Wicca or Witchcraft, to explain everything within a single work. In fact, Berger and Ezzy make it quite clear that Witches don’t have a single, authoritative book—something that might actually be antithetical to the movement itself. Berger and Ezzy add to a large cannon of works that have helped to shed light on many forms and flavors of contemporary Paganism. In short, *Teenage Witches* is an informative and moving book sure to become a valuable part of your research library.

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