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Jean La Fontaine, *Witches and Demons: A Comparative Perspective on Witchcraft and Satanism* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), 150 pp., £60 (cloth), £17.50 (paper)

This concise and accessible little book consists of a collection of essays on the topic of "Devil worship, black magic and witchcraft." The author, Jean La Fontaine, is one of the best known anthropological authorities on the subject, having published a string of works dealing with such beliefs in both Uganda and Britain since the early 1960s—indeed, a number of the essays in this volume have already appeared in print elsewhere. *Witches and Demons* has been issued as the tenth volume in Berghahn's "Studies in Public and Applied Anthropology" series, and appears to be aimed at a largely non-specialist audience, making it ideal for students or those wishing to gain a basic understanding of the subject matter without having to delve through a range of dense tomes. In this it succeeds admirably.

An anthropologist, La Fontaine constructs her approach around the comparative method. In particular, she seeks to compare two different beliefs surrounding witchcraft and Satanism, both of them drawn from the past thirty years of English history: on the one hand beliefs about Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA), and on the other those surrounding African child witches.

The essays in the first half of the book deal largely with the impact of the SRA phenomenon which was brought to England from the United States during the 1980s and which continued to make its presence felt into the mid-1990s. SRA is a topic that La Fontaine has much familiarity with, having published one of the foremost studies of the subject, *Speak of the Devil: Tales of Satanic Abuse in Contemporary England*, in 1997. Spread in large part by evangelical Christian groups, the SRA hysteria revolved around the fear that Satanist groups were involved in the widespread abuse and murder of children, an idea eagerly promoted by more sensationalistic elements of the media and by a number of professional therapists and social workers. While some isolated cases in which children were sexually abused by perpetrators who adopted ritual trappings have come to light (and indeed continue to come to light), it is nevertheless apparent that the majority of allegations about SRA lack any corroborating evidence. Moreover, the conspiracy theory that there is a global

cabal of Satanists regularly molesting and murdering children as part of their rites carries no more weight than the similar absurdities about nefarious international conspiracies entailing Jews, Freemasons, and reptilian extra-terrestrials.

The latter chapters turn their attention to another phenomenon found in Britain, albeit one that is restricted largely to the country's African diasporic community: the belief that certain children are themselves witches and a threat to both their families and their communities. As La Fontaine explains, the idea of the child witch is a fairly new development within African witchcraft belief(s), having only arisen in the past few decades. She suggests various reasons for this, one of which is the changing perceptions of children in a continent afflicted with AIDS and child soldiers, and another of which is the growing influence of Pentecostal Christianity both in Africa and in its British diaspora. As she suggests, Pentecostal pastors have much to gain from identifying and exorcising child witches within the African community, both to accrue financial reward and to advance their own status as a spiritual power to be reckoned with in a competitive religious marketplace. However, as has become apparent, the exorcism of these children can be a brutal affair, having resulted in the physical abuse and even death of several in England over the past few years. Amid her examination of these issues, La Fontaine also turns her attention to the torso of a West African boy found floating in the River Thames in 2001; rejecting the idea that he was a victim of human sacrifice, she critically examines both the police and wider media response to the incident and suggests that he may have been killed to fuel the demand for human body parts by some African traditional healers.

La Fontaine also draws historical comparisons into her anthropological discussion, particularly between the SRA panic and the witch trials that afflicted early modern Christendom. While comparisons between the two is hardly a novel idea, it is nevertheless a good one. Unfortunately, when dealing with these historical events, the book is on shakier ground. Key texts in witchcraft historiography are cited, with Norman Cohn, Alan Macfarlene, and Keith Thomas all making an appearance, but there is little or no engagement with more recent scholarship on the subject. Accordingly, some of the claims made in this area are certainly up for debate. La Fontaine's suggestion that "modern historians of the witch-hunts agree" that the accusations were triggered by the Christianising efforts of the Church (19) will likely raise some eyebrows. Similarly, the statement that belief in

malevolent witchcraft died out in Europe during the nineteenth century (3) flies in the face of evidence to the contrary produced by the likes of the historian Thomas Waters and the anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada.

Despite these minor misgivings, this is a work that I would certainly recommend as a fairly light read (at least by academic standards) on a rather dark subject. It does very much come across as a set of essays as opposed to a more cohesive tome, but the thematic links nevertheless help to bring it all together nicely. Given that this is not a book about modern Paganism, nor even about the pre-Christian belief systems which inspire said new religious movements, it might legitimately be asked of what relevance it is to readers of *The Pomegranate*. Certainly, I wouldn't place it on any essential reading lists for newcomers seeking to delve into the study of modern Paganism. Nevertheless, for scholars who are acquainted only with witchcraft as a form of modern Pagan religion, this will be a useful eye-opener, highlighting that for a great many people—in the present as in the past—witches aren't peaceable nature-loving religionists, but terrifying forces of evil to be feared, countered, and even destroyed.

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