Broom Sweeps Witches' World

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From broom closet to book jacket comes an evolving literary definition of the thoroughly mainstream witch: a teen-age girl casting economy spells on crabby teachers, or a sleek Wiccan high priestess with a coven, a law degree and the three press agents to promote the resulting spiritual memoir.

"Why am I writing this book?" said Phyllis Curott, 44, a New York lawyer with her own practice and a Circle of Ara coven, whose "Book of Shadows" shares with readers her religious enlightenment as well as mugwort potions for psychic dreams. "You don't want to get hate mail, but you make choices. And I feel that we're at a critical moment in our history, and I really deeply believe that people may change their attitudes by reading about an educated professional who is a witch."

To achieve this goal, she has carefully cultivated an image as a hip, upwardly mobile witch, wearing a strappy brown Morgan LeFaydress and wispy blond hair for her dust jacket, Donna Karan for the publicity photos. She hired one independent public relations agency to promote her book among readers of New Age spiritual books, another to work with the mainstream audience. A media coach provided her with tips on demeanor and earthly sound bites.

"The most important thing is to shine the light of truth on this and dispose the negative stereotypes of the green-faced hideous hag," she said. "What I'm hoping to reveal is that behind the mask of an evil witch is the ancient and very beautiful face of the goddess."

And so are an assortment of other young and middle-aged witches whose rising literary output of self-help titles and memoirs is propelled, in part, by a yearning for social acceptance and a

growing demand for information about the highly individual, nature-based folk religion of Wicca, which worships ancient deities and, as one author put it, has suffered from "centuries of bad press."

The wide assortment of books has reaped some authors six-figure advances and contracts with large publishing houses. Other writers complain that literary openness has cost them friends and, in some cases, day jobs that augmented meager royalty checks.

Increasing demand has also inspired some smaller publishers to stack their lists with witchcraft titles and to haunt New Age trade shows and witch camps and retreats in search of new talent and themes that are reaching, and in some cases targeting, an audience of teen-age girls.

No title has actually soared on a broomstick to the top of a best-seller list, but publishers large and small have found that many of the books are steady perennial sellers. Over the last two decades, the literature has evolved from academic and scholarly books to more practical titles that women are willing to buy, said Karen Bouris, director of marketing for Harper San Francisco.

In the late 1980's, sales of Wicca titles averaged 3,000 to 4,000 copies a year at the Carol Publishing Group, but in the last two years, sales have increased, with some of the popular titles selling up to 40,000, said Steven Schragis, the publisher.

"Every morning, I put a spell on Random House and Simon & Schuster, using nothing you can't buy in a regular grocery store: Velveeta, paprika and Orange Crush," joked Mr. Schragis, who has expanded the company's list of Wiccan titles from 2 to 29, including guides for men, young witches and gardeners.

But no spell could stop the large publishing houses, which are also pursuing literary witches. In November, Bantam Books is to publish "Circle Round," Starhawk's how-to book on raising a second generation of witches, while Harper San Francisco is promoting its "fun and empowering" guide, "Be a Goddess!"

For $9.99, St. Martin's Press is offering "The Supermarket Sorceress's Enchanted Evenings," by Lexa Rosean, who manages Enchantment, a white-magic shop in Manhattan. The paperback

provides easy-mix recipes for spells concocted from widely available ingredients.
(Apartment-hunting spell: tinfoil, cinnamon, salt, sugar, bread, pennies.)

Witches Who Make Their Own Rules

With its lack of a central hierarchy and rigid rules, the earth-based religion of Wicca draws members from a mix of movements: feminists, environmentalists and New Age seekers who worship the gods and goddesses of nature by casting sacred circles and celebrating the changing seasons. This leaves wide room for interpretation of rituals, some dating back to pre-Christian religions, others rising from merely mundane modern issues like dealing with a balky computer mouse.

"The rituals today come from a variety of places," said Helen Berger, an associate professor of sociology at West Chester University in Pennsylvania, who has written a book about modern witchcraft. "These are very avid readers who have recreated older practices throughout the world and usually mixed them with modern issues and concerns about gender equity. Some of the rituals come from people's re-creations or from movies and novels and poetry."

Wicca members tend to be white, college-educated, middle-class women, many of whom have families, said Ms. Berger, who said the religion was becoming more institutionalized as the members aged. "It was fun to be an outsider and a witch in their 20's," she said, "and now they are in their 40's and they want acceptance for their children."

The fear of a backlash has never disappeared, said Ms. Berger, who added that the false stereotype that witches worship Satan endures. She cited several examples of women whose religious views raised anxiety in Texas and Tennessee, where she said a mother joined a Christian church to avoid losing her children in a custody case that uncovered her interest in Wiccan themes and books.

Silver RavenWolf, formerly Jeanine Trayer, is a 32-year-old mother of four and onetime Baptist from the Harrisburg, Pa., area who has just published a guide called "Teen Witch," intended precisely for a new generation of witches.

Her own children have been initiated into the religion, but she said they have faced taunts from their peers for their beliefs. She said her sons had been teased and her daughter's school locker

had been painted with derogatory slogans. Her daughters actually advised her, she said, in writing her book, which offers 30 spells made with low-cost and accessible ingredients. Still, she discourages young would-be witches from starting their own covens until they are adults who can train with older witches.

"I have letters from kids saying their parents have burned their books and destroyed their altars," the author said. "Basically, it's because of a misconception, and what they fear isn't true. Hollywood movies and bad publicity have made witches look evil and that they hurt people and they really don't. I'm just as worried about my own kids out there in the world today."

Even so, other publishers express wariness about publishing a book that is so clearly intended for the teen-age market. "We talked about, and we didn't do it," said Mr. Schragis, of Carol Publishing. "We have stayed away from publishing a book that specifically uses the word teen or teen-ager" in the title.

"Teen Witch" is published by Llewellyn International, a company based in St. Paul with a long history of publishing astrology books and annual revenues of $17 million. Two years ago, the company's executives noticed a surge in sales with the the popularity of "The Craft," a B-movie about a small coven of good, bad and moderately well-behaved teen-age witches dressed in knee-highs and school uniforms by day, hip clothes by night.

Typical Reader Is Getting Younger

Llewellyn responded by publishing a variety of books on witchcraft for beginners, including "Teen Witch," with a cover of bemused 15-year-old girls in jeans and short skirts posed like a movie poster for "The Craft." Today, more than half of the 100 titles that Llewellyn publishes annual revolve around Wiccan themes.

"Our typical reader had been a boomer who grew up in the 60's who had been looking for a more appealing explanation of spirituality," said Von Braschler, Llewellyn's director of trade sales. "Now our typical reader is becoming a very young woman in her teens. We're basing this on the letters we get for the authors."

Llewellyn's authors typically receive no advances and hold other jobs to supplement their royalties. Their experiences are far less glamorous than those of authors like Ms. Curott, who

was able to sell her memoir on the strength of her background to a large publisher after a competitive auction with five bidding companies.

"It gave me tremendous credibility," Ms. Curott said of her education at Brown University and her law degree from New York University. "When people think of Wicca, they think of either Satanism or silly mumbo jumbo."

Dorothy Morrison, 43, a Llewellyn author of "Everyday Magic" and "Everyday Needlework," said she learned this lesson the hard way in the Missouri town where she lives and has tried to promote her work as a budding author of witchcraft titles. She suspects that she was dismissed in June from her job at an animal shelter near Jackson, Mo., after a bookstore clerk recognized her name and picture on one of the books that described her as a Wiccan high priestess.

"People are afraid of what they don't understand," said Ms. Morrison, 43, a former Roman Catholic whose books offer spells for coping with computer crashes or speeding up modems. "Unfortunately, it does no good to educate people in this area because they don't want to be educated."

"New Age authors really don't make a lot of money," she added. "I'm fortunate my husband makes good money, and yes, I'm missing my salary from the animal shelter. I read cards when I go to book signings. I'm allowed to do workshops, and -- goddess willing -- I'll be able to find a job to work full time."

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