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Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation (Library Edition)

By Mitch Horowitz



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Americans have long had a fixation with the occult. Now well-known writer and expert on the occult Mitch Horowitz presents a meticulously researched, compulsively readable history of the mystical and spiritual experience in our country. Focusing on the tremendous impact that nineteenth-century movements such as Freemasonry, Spiritualism, and Transcendentalism have had on America, Horowitz explains the origins of the Ouija board, the political influence of Spiritualism on the Senate, and the source of the mysterious slogan on the back of the dollar bill. The colorful cast of characters extends from those on the margins of documented history to famous heroes like Abraham Lincoln. Occult America will appeal to history buffs, spirituality enthusiasts, and everyone who savors fascinating narrative nonfiction.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Book Description

It touched lives as disparate as those of Frederick Douglass, Franklin Roosevelt, and Mary Todd Lincoln--who once convinced her husband, Abe, to host a séance in the White House. Americans all, they were among the famous figures whose paths intertwined with the mystical and esoteric movement broadly known as the occult. Brought over from the Old World and spread throughout the New by some of the most obscure but gifted men and women of early U.S. history, this "hidden wisdom" transformed the spiritual life of the still-young nation and, through it, much of the Western world.

Yet the story of the American occult has remained largely untold. Now a leading writer on the subject of alternative spirituality brings it out of the shadows. Here is a rich, fascinating, and colorful history of a religious revolution and an epic of offbeat history.

From the meaning of the symbols on the one-dollar bill to the origins of the Ouija board, *Occult America* briskly sweeps from the nation's earliest days to the birth of the New Age era and traces many people and episodes, including:

- The spirit medium who became America's first female religious leader in 1776
- The supernatural passions that marked the career of Mormon prophet Joseph Smith
- The rural Sunday-school teacher whose clairvoyant visions instigated the dawn of the New Age
- The prominence of mind-power mysticism in the black-nationalist politics of Marcus Garvey
- The Idaho druggist whose mail-order mystical religion ranked as the eighth-largest faith in the world during the Great Depression

Here, too, are America's homegrown religious movements, from transcendentalism to spiritualism to Christian Science to the positive-thinking philosophy that continues to exert such a powerful pull on the public today. A feast for believers in alternative spirituality, an eye-opener for anyone curious about the unknown byroads of American history, *Occult America* is an engaging, long-overdue portrait of one nation, under many gods, whose revolutionary influence is still being felt in every corner of the globe.

Amazon Exclusive: Mitch Horowitz on the Occult in American History

Scholars of American history have often dismissed occult traditions, such as Spiritualism, Mesmerism, divination, channeling, and mental-healing, as little more than oddball social trends to be analyzed, fretted over, and debunked. This is a mistake. To really grasp the religious development of our nation, its occult movements and believers must be understood for what they are: communities of belief, who left a profound impact on the culture of America and the modern world.



Early American history is entwined with esoteric spirituality. North America's first intentional mystical community reached its shores in the summer of 1694. That year, the determined spiritual philosopher Johannes Kelpius led about forty pilgrims out of Central Germany--a region decimated by the Thirty Years' War--and to the banks of the Wissahickon Creek, just beyond Philadelphia. The city then hosted only about 500 houses, but it represented a Mecca of freedom for the Kelpius circle, who longed for a new homeland where they could practice their brands of astrology, alchemy, numerology, and mystical Christianity without fear of harassment from church or government.

Soon more mystical thinkers from the Rhine Valley journeyed to America, building a larger commune at Ephrata, Pennsylvania. A young woman named Ann Lee fled persecution in her native Manchester, England and relocated her esoteric sect, the "Shaking Quakers"--or the Shakers--to upstate New York in 1776. That same year, a Rhode Island girl, Jemima Wilkinson, declared herself a spirit channeler, took the name Publick Universal Friend, and began to preach across the northeast. The trend was set: America became a destination for religious idealists, especially those of a supernatural bent.

By the 1830s and 40s, a region of central New York State called "the Burned-Over District" (so-named for its religious passions) became the magnetic center for the religious radicalism sweeping the young nation. Stretching from Albany to Buffalo, it was the Mt. Sinai of American mysticism, giving birth to new religions such as Mormonism and Seventh-Day Adventism, and also to Spiritualism, mediumship, table-rapping, séances, and other occult sensations--many of which mirrored, and aided, the rise of Suffragism and related progressive movements. The nation's occult culture gave women their first opportunity to openly serve as religious leaders--in this case as spirit mediums, seers, and channlers. America's social and spiritual radicals were becoming joined, and the partnership would never fade.

Indeed, the robust growth of occult and mystical movements in nineteenth-century America--aided by the influence of Freemasonry and Transcendentalism--helped transform the young nation into a laboratory for religious experiment and a launching pad for the revolutions in alternative and New Age spirituality that eventually swept the globe. In the early twentieth century, the new spiritual therapies--from meditation to mind-body healing to motivational thinking--began revolutionizing how religion was understood in contemporary times: not only as a source of salvation but as a means of healing. In this sense, occult America had changed our world. --*Mitch Horowitz*

From Publishers Weekly

America has provided fertile ground for alternative spirituality, particularly the form known as occult, whose American leaders, unlike their more grandiose European counterparts, sought to remake mystical ideas as tools of public good and self-help, says Horowitz, editor-in-chief at Tarcher. Looking back at the growth of the spiritualist and utopian movements, he introduces the reader to a parade of personalities, both familiar and obscure: dreamers and planners who flourished along the Psychic Highway. He begins with Shaker Mother Ann, who arrived in America in 1774 followed by, among many others, pioneer prophetess Jemima Wilkinson; Poughkeepsie Seer Andrew Jackson Davis; Madame Blavatsky, who founded the Theosophical

Society in 1875 and popularized the word occultism; Frank B. Robinson, the Mail Order Messiah; and Edgar Cayce with his past-life readings. Horowitz covers a wide variety of topics, from voodoo to the tenets of the New Age, psychics in the White House, Rosicrucianism, Wicca, arcane Masonic imagery, Tarot cards, the controversial reincarnation of Bridey Murphy and the origin of the science fictional Shaver mystery.

Employing extensive research while writing with an authoritative tone, Horowitz succeeds in showing how a new spiritual culture developed in America. (*Sept. 15*)

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Review

Employing extensive research while writing with an authoritative tone, Horowitz succeeds in showing how a new spiritual culture developed in America. --Publishers Weekly

What a fascinating book. So it happens that another equally compelling take on our complicated national narrative lies just beneath the surface of things, not the grand procession of presidents, generals, and wars, but something more hidden, more mysterious, but often no less revealing. --Ken Burns, award-winning documentary filmmaker

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jon Gonzalez:

Nowadays reading books become more and more than want or need but also turn into a life style. This reading practice give you lot of advantages. The advantages you got of course the knowledge the actual information inside the book that improve your knowledge and information. The info you get based on what kind of book you read, if you want drive more knowledge just go with education and learning books but if you want truly feel happy read one together with theme for entertaining including comic or novel. The Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation (Library Edition) is kind of reserve which is giving the reader unforeseen experience.

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