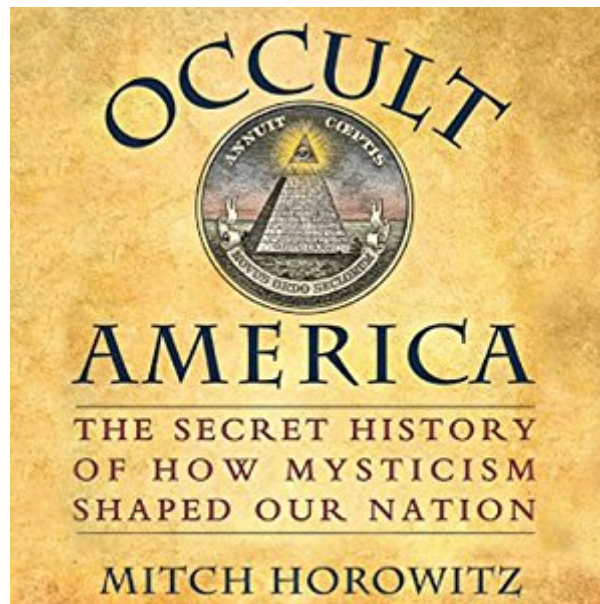


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Occult America: The Secret History Of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation



Synopsis

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. --This text refers to the Preloaded Digital Audio Player edition.

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Customer Reviews

Mitch Horowitz rescues many colorful characters from obscurity in this entertaining tour through the byways of American religious history. My favorite sections of the book were those describing individuals whose teachings flourished in the early twentieth century but are almost forgotten today. Psychiana was a successful mail-order religion that did not long survive the death of its founder Frank Robinson. Baird Spaulding concocted tall tales about encounters with Oriental spiritual Masters in books that were widely read in the 1930s and 40s. The Moorish Science Temple is a fascinating amalgamation of occult doctrines with black nationalism, whose founder Noble Drew Ali has been little studied by historians. Manly P. Hall authored an occult classic, The Secret Teachings

of All Ages, in his twenties and led an organization that epitomized southern California eclecticism through most of the twentieth century. Benjamin Williams popularized astrology and Tarot under his pen name C.C. Zain, but like Hall was famous mainly in the Los Angeles area. All these individuals are given their place in the American religious landscape as pioneers of a movement Horowitz calls occultism or "the occult" which he concludes "resulted in a vast reworking of arcane practices and beliefs from the Old World and the creation of a new spiritual culture." The obscure characters are placed into historical context with exploration of occult ideas in better known movements like Mormonism and New Thought, which contributed to a new spiritual culture. Familiar but little-understood topics like Hoodoo and the history of the Ouija board are illuminated in new ways by Horowitz's groundbreaking research.

Mitch Horowitz, as editor-in-chief at Tarcher/Penguin has brought forth many excellent volumes of esoteric and New Age books. The same depth of understanding of his material and outstanding research also contributes to this important historical account that he has delivered in "Occult America." In my opinion, this book is important because it ties together much of the esoteric history of the U.S. from a journalistic perspective, in a very readable manner. Horowitz knows his subject intellectually, historically, and as one who has cultivated the promotion of these ideas as his life work. His passion for, and depth of understanding of, his subject is obvious throughout this book. I found "Occult America" to be extremely interesting and entertaining, providing a view of the people and ideas that shaped the religious and philosophical life of the country, including Paul Foster Case, Manly Hall, Henry Steel Olcott, Ernest Holmes, Edgar Cayce, Joseph Smith, Henry A. Wallace, Frederick Douglass, Mary Baker Eddy, and the list goes on. Among the profiles of religious seekers, prophets, teachers, and often colorful individuals, one important point Horowitz makes is that some of these "New Age" beliefs have become widely-accepted, including:

1. Belief in the therapeutic value of spiritual or religious ideas.
2. Belief in a mind-body connection in health.
3. Belief that human consciousness is evolving to higher stages.
4. Belief that thoughts, in some greater or lesser measure, determine reality.
5. Belief that spiritual understanding is available without allegiance to a specific religion or doctrine.

I found Occult America to be an absolutely engaging historical account of the spiritual leaders and movements that helped pave the way for Mysticism in the world today. Many people were brought to my attention that I had never before heard of, but have played such a pivotal role in the spiritual movements such as Johannes Kelpius, Ann Lee, and Jemima Wilkinson to name just a few. Occult

America also discusses well known historical figures such as Mary Todd Lincoln (Abraham Lincoln's wife) and her fascination with the occult and occult practices, often getting her husband involved in White House seances. Lincoln was well-known for her involvement in Occult matters, especially after the assassination of her husband, the President. Another interesting "celebrity" involved in the occult, so I have found through Occult America, is Sylvia Plath who used the Ouija board along with her husband, Ted Hughes. This is to be believed to have been the inspiration for her poem, "Ouija". It is eerily said that the Ouija predicted fame for Plath, which would cost her both her life with her husband, and her own life. It is a little spooky, if you ask me. Horowitz's brief history of the Ouija that both thrilled and terrified me. The account taken from an excerpt in the 2001 International Journal of Parapsychology of an 18 year old's experiences with the Ouija is enough to give you nightmares for a day or two. Although Occult America is brief in the subjects it does introduce the reader to (and that is my only true complaint), Horowitz did a wonderful job of introducing subject matters not before heavily discussed. However, because of this - I really felt as if this was almost more of an introductory book about the history of the occult rather than any sort of true detailed literature.

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