



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

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

"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

"Invisible and mysterious forces have shaped and guided the destiny of individuals and nations throughout history. From Moses to Gandhi, Jesus to Muhammad, Lincoln to Obama, hidden dimensions, in both our personal and collective consciousness, were conceiving, constructing, and shaping the course of civilization. In his precise and often detailed history of mysticism in America, Mitch Horowitz, has, in a way, tracked the evolution of our consciousness over 300 years." —Deepak Chopra

"A sparkling, down-to-earth and often deeply touching account of a powerful, much misunderstood force in the formation of America's cultural and spiritual identity." —Jacob Needleman, author of *The American Soul* and *The New Religions*."

"**Occult America** is a truly remarkable achievement. Exhaustively researched, it takes the reader from the early concepts of the supernatural, personified by Mother Ann Lee, Joseph Smith, and Madame Blavatsky, through such modern-day figures as Henry A. Wallace and Norman Vincent Peale. It opens the eyes of the relatively uninitiated, in which I include myself, to the effect the occult has had, is having, and will have on the American experience." —John S.D. Eisenhower, author of *The Bitter Woods: The Battle of the Bulge and So Far From God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846-1848*

"Religious people tend to be afraid of the word occult. Horowitz examines this aspect of life and religion in penetrating ways...and revealing its not unsubstantial influence on mainline Christianity. Truth seekers have always come from the edges. Religion itself should be glad they do." —John Shelby Spong, author of *Jesus for the Non-Religious*

"This book is a delightfully original tour through American history, as seen through the lives of men and women devoted to all manner of mysticism. Across these pages troop spiritualists, prophets, seers, psychics, numerologists, transcendentalists, theosophists, and historical figures from Mary Todd Lincoln to Marcus Garvey to Henry Wallace. Their stories are part of the deep-seated American tradition of searching for the new—a tradition that *Occult America* both explains and enriches." —Stephen Kinzer, author of *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* and *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*

"Fascinating...**Occult America** is a serious, wide-ranging study of all the magical, mystical, and spiritual movements that have arisen and influenced American history in often-surprising ways." —*Washington Post Book World* Podcast

"**Occult America** treats esoteric ideas and movements with an even-handed intellectual studiousness that is too often lost in today's raised-voice discussions about religion and belief systems." —*Washington Post*

Express

“One of the most readable histories of American mysticism ever written...This is historical reporting that is crafted so well, it holds the reader much like a Voodoo spell.”—*Tucson Citizen*

“Horowitz teases out fascinating stories of the ‘dreamers and planners who flourished along the Psychic Highway’...In showing how the paths of these figures occasionally intersected with the likes of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Horowitz argues that the influence of the occult extends beyond the séance room and into the mainstream of American thought.” —*Washington Post Book World*

“A brilliant job of tracking down how positive thinker Norman Vincent Peale borrowed his core self-help philosophy from a religious movement called New Thought.” —*Washington Times*

“Exhaustively researched and written in a very accessible style...**Occult America** fills a gap in the knowledge of religion for most people.” —*Huntington News, VA*

“Excellent.” —*Library Journal*

“One of the best recent books on patterns of belief.” —*Fortean Times*

“A fantastic tour guide to the fringes of reason, high weirdness, deep esoterica, secret societies, and mystery religions.” —*Boing Boing*

“Employing extensive research while writing with an authoritative tone, Horowitz succeeds in showing how a ‘new spiritual culture’ developed in America.”—*Publishers Weekly*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

James Lindberg:

Have you spare time for any day? What do you do when you have considerably more or little spare time? Sure, you can choose the suitable activity with regard to spend your time. Any person spent their very own spare time to take a wander, shopping, or went to often the Mall. How about open or perhaps read a book allowed Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation? Maybe it is to get best activity for you. You already know beside you can spend your time using your favorite's book, you can more intelligent than before. Do you agree with the opinion or you have other opinion?

Kyle Guthrie:

In this 21st century, people become competitive in each and every way. By being competitive right now, people have do something to make these survives, being in the middle of the crowded place and notice by simply surrounding. One thing that sometimes many people have underestimated this for a while is reading. Yeah, by reading a e-book your ability to survive improve then having chance to stay than other is high. For you who want to start reading any book, we give you this specific Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation book as beginning and daily reading guide. Why, because this book is

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Laura Burnham:

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James Hanson:

On this era which is the greater man or woman or who has ability in doing something more are more valuable than other. Do you want to become certainly one of it? It is just simple approach to have that. What you need to do is just spending your time very little but quite enough to enjoy a look at some books. Among the books in the top checklist in your reading list is usually Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation. This book which can be qualified as The Hungry Slopes can get you closer in turning out to be precious person. By looking up and review this publication you can get many advantages.

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