Ben Wickey's "More Weight" - The Artist Behind Salem's Most Anticipated Graphic Novel

[00:00:00]

**Josh Hutchinson:** Welcome to *The Thing About Salem*. I'm Josh Hutchson.

**Sarah Jack:** And I'm Sarah Jack. Today we begin a three-part series with author and illustrator Ben Wickey about his amazing new graphic novel, *More Weight: A Salem Story*, which focuses on the story of Giles Cory, the only victim of the Salem Witch Trials to be pressed to death under large stones. Welcome to the podcast, Ben Wickey. Today, we get to talk with you about your new graphic novel, *More Weight*. Please tell us a little bit about you and your work.

**Ben Wickey:** Thank you. I'm aMassachusetts-born illustrator and comic book artist and animator. I'm originally from Cape Ann of Rockport and Gloucester, about 30 minutes north of Salem, but all my friends live in Salem, so I grew up, you know, going there constantly and soaking up slowly over my whole life the history of that place.I am a graduate of [00:01:00] CalArts. I did a stop motion animated version of the *House of the Seven Gables* by Hawthorne as a short, 30 minute short film.That premiered at the Gables in 2018.

I have been an illustrator. I worked on a book called *The Illustrated Vivian Stanshal,* book with Ki Longfellow in 2017. I'm a contributing artist of Alan Moore's and Steve Moore's grimoire *The Moon and Serpent Bumper Book of Magic* and for 10 years I've been working on this depressing behemoth,*More Weight,*  which is finally out and I'm very relieved. Thank you for having me.

**Josh Hutchinson:** So I understand that we're actually all cousins through Mary Easty. Is that true?

**Ben Wickey:** Yes, and I didn't actually know that I was a dis descendant of Mary Esty until I was halfway through the book doing this. It was 2018 or something like that. My [00:02:00] cousin Holly in Michigan messaged me out of the blue and said, oh, did you know that we're related to to somebody, somebody from the Salem Witch Trials? She didn't even know that I was doing this book. It was under my hat for so long. It was just this little thing I had on the back burner, little passion project.

And so I think that reallychanged my attitude towards what I was doing. It heightened my convictions in what I was doing.And then we talked a little bit more, and then she provided the genealogy. I guess I'm her 10th great-grandson.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Sounds right.

**Ben Wickey:** On the Ellis side. So yeah.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Cool.

**Ben Wickey:** It was very,it was very moving, very moving revelation.

**Sarah Jack:** Yeah. I had known that I descended from Rebecca Nurse since I was a teenager, but then about six years ago or seven years ago, I discovered that Mary and Rebecca had grandchildren that married, and then that's [00:03:00] the line. It's all these Russells out of Massachusetts that ended up in Iowa when I was born. There's something about Mary, because of her petition. It was such a proclamation and such, you know?So I can imagine since she was the one that you found yourself tied to, and you're giving such a message with your project, how that must have struck you. Yeah.

**Ben Wickey:** It really struck me. I mean, I hadn't drawn, thankfully, I hadn't drawn her scenes until I found that out. So it really infused a lot of emotion and yeah, I really felt like I was portraying a family member, you know. It's kind of, it might seem silly to some people, 330 years on, but no,I really identified with her, and, yes, the book is about Giles and Martha Corey,and I still think they're such an interesting duo to focus on when you consider Giles' [00:04:00] obvious flaws and his sort of arc, semi path to redemption,and his death, which I still think is one of the first documented protests in American history. I think that's very important to, to to look at.

Just drawingMary Esty, I kind of based her a little bit off photographs of my great-grandmother, Bessie, who I never met, but I gave her her nose and her cheeks and I based Mary Esty off of Bessie.

**Sarah Jack:** That's awesome.

**Ben Wickey:** Yeah.

**Sarah Jack:** That's great.

And her petition never fails to make me very emotional and teary eyed. Yeah.

**Ben Wickey:** And it's very similar to, I mean, in the book I do have quotes side by side of Mary Bradbury's petition with her descendant, Ray Bradbury's, messageto the Republican party that he put in a, he paid a for a page in Variety in the [00:05:00] 1950s at the height of the McCarthy years, where he said let's send McCarthy and his goons back to Salem in the 17th century. The ripples in time of generations trying to say the same thing, oflet's not accuse the innocent, let's protect people. Let'snot give into fear and hysteria and paranoia. Yeah.

**Sarah Jack:** Yeah. What do we need to know about the early life of Giles Cory or about him?

**Ben Wickey:** That was fun. That was very fascinating. It's only really Upham's book that kind of touches on the records of Giles' 50 years in Salem before the witch trials. I went into the now digitized quarterlycourt records of Essex County, and I just went through the index. I found all the references to Giles Corey, and I just made lists of all the shenanigans that he was getting into.

And I [00:06:00] am pretty much convinced that he did murder a guy 1670s. Like this isn't a sugarcoated version of Giles in my portrayal of him.

but there is a character composite, a kind of character profile that I created over time of, oh God, this is a guy that got away with practically everything except for the one thing that he didn't do, which was sorcery. Very colorful, fascinating guy. You look at his times as a watchmanin Salem Town, which is now the city of Salem, above theSalem Town meeting house, which I think would probably be where Rockafella's is, the restaurant is, now in in Salem.

And he's part of a firewood heist on the South River and all this crazy stuff. Stealing from George Corwin, Jonathan Corwin's father, the sacks loads of household goods and owing people and just debt and just all these sort of things that really create [00:07:00] a colorful, entertaining rogue, a roguish figure and then obviously, a murderer, obviously somebody who had a very dangerous and checkered past that sort of, it all came to a head by the time he wasaccused of witchcraft. It was almost as if it was the one thing that they could finally use to dispose of him, because, and this is the same in places where witch hunts still exist, India and Africa the moment, as we're sitting here talking.

Accusations of witchcraft have been easiest way to dispose peoplefor the petty, not for supernatural reasons, not for sorcery, not for anything, for the petty, mundane human reasons of jealousy, land lust, petty vengeance.It always happens in times of socioeconomic pressures and bad economy and things like that.It was sort of, you know, matter of [00:08:00] time for all that to come biting Giles in the bum.

 My own version of Giles Corey. The whole beginning of this book was just simply a kind of graphic novel adaption of this play that I found by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms*, in which he gives a portrayal of this man, this Giles Corey is very, very unlike any character that you see anything from Longfellow. Even his version of Miles Standish is more, you know, Miles Standish, who impaled the heads of indigenous people on pikes, is less grim and angry than this version of Giles Corey.

 Part of what the book became was an examination into why did this character of Giles Corey speak to Longfellow and this very tumultuous decade of the 1860s, which had not only the horrific death of Longfellow's wife, but [00:09:00] also the Civil War, which his son had enlisted in and barely survived,andthe social issues of slavery that he was very, very publiclyimmersed in.

And so the book became over, at the beginning, it was sort of me going, oh, well, I'll just do a historically accurate version of Longfellow's play, because as I was looking at it, I was thinking, oh, well, I have access to all sorts of historical material that Longfellow didn't have in the 1860s, when all he had was Upham's book, *Witchcraft* by Charles Wentworth Upham. And so I I was going through and I thought, well, Giles didn't live on the Ipswich River. Well, I'll just change that. And then over time, the Longfellow bits got smaller and smaller. My own bits got bigger and bigger,thanks in no small part to realizing that Mary Esty was my ancestor. And the more you research, the more you have an [00:10:00] opinion of the facts, which are extremely troubling and relevant and infuriating. You read the facts, and you're infuriated the basic human level,the injustice and the atrocity of it all, and the ways in which it's still still extremely politically relevant to these despotic times. That's my rambling answer to very simple question.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Thank

**Sarah Jack:** We don't consider that rambling, so thanks.

**Ben Wickey:** I've been working on this book without talking about it, so it's kind of weird talking about it, but

**Sarah Jack:** Yeah, I bet. I bet.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Yeah,

**Ben Wickey:** A lot of fun.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Pre-order your copy of *More Weight* from bookshop.org/shop/EndWitchHunts. *More Weight* is intended for mature audiences.

 And remember to meet us here next week for the next installment of our interview with Ben about this incredible work.