Unveiling the Past: Ben Wickey's More Weight

**Josh Hutchinson:** [00:00:00] Welcome to *The Thing About Salem* podcast. I'm Josh Hutchinson.

**Sarah Jack:** And I'm Sarah Jack. Thank you for joining us for the second of three parts of our interview with Ben Wickey, author and illustrator of *More Weight: A Salem Story*.

**Josh Hutchinson:** I really loved what you did with time in the book, how you handled, just weaving back and forth from one period to another, and I just loved that you included the Salem history at the end. I love Salem, so it's good to see all that history in there. And it's just so fun time traveling with you.

**Ben Wickey:** Yeah. And I think that was a, that was really something that I wanted to do because part of the, I I think a big message of the book is that history doesn't happen in a vacuum.There is such a disconnect, I think, between 1692 and the modern city of [00:01:00] Salem that you'll walk through.

So I wanted to, I have a kind of psychogeographical sense of place,wanting to really show that no, everything happens. History doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens in our backyard, and all you need to do is dig, and you need to do the necessary donkey work of getting your pick and shovel and researching and finding all sorts of things, beneath all the hype and beneath all the sort of glittering distractions and the spooky wallpaper and everything. No. Beneath that is something really real and human and relevant.

 But I did really wanna include these scenes between Longfellow and Hawthorne walking through 1860s era Salem, just not violently thrown back and forth between modern 2025 Salem and 1692 Salem. There is some midpoint where you can recognize the [00:02:00] street corner, recognize how the street layout has remained the same, recognize buildings that still existfrom the 17th century, butbuildings that still exist from the 19th century and see really see? itself, how the landscape has changed.See how the Jonathan Corwin House, now known branded as the Witch House, how that has changed, how that looks completely different in the 19th century and how it was brought back, and understanding people to understand when they visit that city, why they're seeing what they're seeing, why why they look, looks, the way it looks.Because I don't really think, there's not enough plaques in the city to tell you. People are obliged to do their own research, and not everybody has the time or interest to do that.

I wanted to do the book that I looked for in that city but couldn't find, a book that washonest about, oh no, no, this is why this is the way it is, this is why this is the way it is, [00:03:00] this changed, this didn't, and you can use it as a guidebook. You can walk around not only the city of Salem, the whole area of the whole geography of Danvers and Topsfield and places like that to see where these things happened and the traces still left behind, the echoes, the ghosts, the shadows.

**Sarah Jack:** And that's something that you can do with your style of art. Graphic novels allow for that type of storytelling where a regular piece of literature isn't gonna do that.

**Ben Wickey:** Yeah. You can do anything in comics. I mean, it really allows you a huge canvas of time and space. You can have as many characters as you want. You can haveas many locations as you want. A thing that always bothered me, even with very high budget, pristine movie or TV adaptions of the Salem Witch trials, what happened? Everything happens in the same building. All of the examinations happen [00:04:00] in Salem Village meeting house. All the trials seem to happen in the Salem Village meeting house. They never have another location change. You never see how things get bigger. You never, once the court of Oyer and Terminer gets put in place, everything moves to Salem Town. You're moving from the very rustic, rural Salem Village to the more cosmopolitan, opulent, mercantile Salem town. It's a bigger room, and it's the most sophisticated court. It's not a kangaroo court. It's not a, it's not a New Yorker cartoon, where everyone's got buckles on their hats and pitchforks and torches. No, it is the most sophisticated court that you could be standing in front, albeit an emergency court after return of the charter and a kind of return, because of course, the Massachusetts government had been languishing in legal limbo for a few years.

William Phips comes in, and May of [00:05:00] 1692, okay, we have a government now. We have a new charter. We're not gonna wait for the General Court to assemble. We're gonna create an emergency court of Oyer and Terminer. Let's get these very prestigious, wealthy, land-owning, albeit, but Harvard educated people to stand in judgment of these people that have been accused of witchcraft and to have it in Salem town,the kind of ground zero, if Tad Baker is correct, and I think he is, the ground zero of the Puritan hegemony itself. It may very, very well may be the place where John Winthrop first made his city upon a hill speech. It is the first town. It really was, Salem really was this, a kind of sentimental place for the Puritan hegemony, which was in, by the 1690s, in this kind of visible decline. And so you see this kind of idea of, okay, not only has Satan obviously declared war upon us, but [00:06:00] he's done it, he's really hit it at the heart of, he hasn't done it in Boston. He's done it at the heart of the Massachusetts Bay colony, in Salem, the first town, the beating heart of the colony.We can't have the mother country knowing about this. We've gotta really nip this in the bud. And so the, not to get too conspiratorial, but of course the priorities shift. It's less about finding out who is guilty and who is innocent and more about preserving the Puritan hegemony, which was already in a perceived decline, when you consider this new charter, which recognized Baptists, Quakers. Quakers, we've been boring holes in the tongues of Quakers for generations, and now they are recognized in this new charter. What next, the antichrist? What next, atheists and Catholics. This was a real outrage. They were just happy to have any charter at all, but of course, Puritanism in New England [00:07:00] was perceived to be on tender hooks. And so this, there's this idea of, okay, if Satan has declared war on us, on New England, then Puritanism has to be visibly winning that war, visibly on top of things. Of course, William Phips,an illiterate treasure hunter, who has now become governor of Massachusetts, scampers off to Maine to fight the French and indigenous combatants. And he leaves the government in charge of William Stoughton, not only the Lieutenant Governor, but the chief justice of this new court.

 You don't often see this in pop culture portrayals. You don't often see this in miniseries or movies or things like that. The whole political catalyst for how this thing was able to reach the heights that it did.

We're always focusing on the afflicted girls. We're always just trying to [00:08:00] figure out why did they, what was their fits about? Was it ergotism? Was it actual fraud? Was it actual possession? I'm less interested in that, because I don't really think that the girls are that, I mean, obviously they allowed, they kept this up, but they only had so much agency. They're little girls in 17th century New England. They can't admit that this has all been for attention or fraud or whatever, or post-traumatic stress disorder, in the cases of some. You consider some of them were war refugees from King Phillips War.

I'm mostly focusing on the adults in the room, these Harvard-educated people who allowed it to go the lengths that it did. And no one's talking about that, at least in pop culture. You see it often, of course, you see the truth in the works of Emerson Baker and Marilynne Roach and Daniel Gagnon andall these amazing people. Richard Trask. These are the giants upon which I'm perched as a little [00:09:00] vulture with my little pen and ink, drying and scribbling my little drawings. My hope was to do something that at least in pop culture, which is, comics is a pop culture medium, to do something that was honest about at least the sociopolitical catalysts for everything and how it was all able to happen and how that's still relevant to today, whether in America or whether in places in, as I said, India and Africa, where witch hunts are, actual witch hunts, are still happening. Yeah.

**Josh Hutchinson:** In *More Weight*, I love in the scenes, in the examination scenes, the courtroom scenes at the Salem Village meeting house, you have the characters speak in words that are actually documented in the records that survive. And I just love that they're speaking in their, basically their own voices. So thank you for [00:10:00] facilitating that. It really adds something to the story.

**Ben Wickey:** That for me was one of the most, I hasten the word to say, use the word fun, but it was always a wonderful challenge and way of working, 'cause I would just go through all the transcripts and highlight the bits that I thought really brought home the gravity of every situation. And I focused mostly on the examinations of people who had become the victims. Some non executed people, as well, like Tituba or Mary Black or or Abigail Hobbs or people like that, people that weren't executed, but what they had to say in court is still very interesting.You read those documents, and they do read like a play. You wonder why Arthur Miller made up as much as he did. It's all, the material is itself more riveting than anything he could make up or invent, you know? And I thought, well, I'm not gonna make anything [00:11:00] up. Why should I? The truth is here and it's speaking to you.

You read any of the documents, I've, I've been to Rowley, I've handled some of the documents myself. I handled Martha Corey's examination, which is this giant parchment folded six ways, and, you really do get very emotional holding it. This was in the room, and it's thanks to amazing people like Margo Burns. I mean, they're an amazing, not only an amazing historian, but a linguist. They were able to study the handwriting and figure out who was in the room and who wrote what, and gave so much more information and insight into what was going on in that room.

It helps people like me who has to draw everything,and I was constantly redrawing so many things. I started drawing everything in 2017. I constantly had to go back and redraw things. Oh, no, no, no,John Hale wouldn't have been in this room or so-and-so wouldn't have come to Salem [00:12:00] until this month. I got to redraw this, or I'm going to replace this person with Nicholas Noyes or whatever. A ton of redrawing went into this, really because I researched as I went along, which I thought was the wrong way of doing ituntil I read an interview withDavid McCullough, who wrote the John Adams biography, lots of great history books about the American Revolution and the Wright Brothers. And he said, no, no, no. It's always good to research as you write, because that means that you are working from a perspective of curiosity. You're asking questions as you go, and so therefore, you are encouraging your reader to also ask, be asking questions, different from doing all of your research and going, this happened because I said so, because I've spent all these years research you know? So part of the thing that, the effect that I like about what I did is that it does have a [00:13:00] Maysles brother inquiring eye documentarian effect, because I'm also looking around the room trying to figure out what's going on and who's in the room and what's happening, as much as anybody else.And I didn't think that I was in any way an expert on what I was doing.

Even after I finished the book, I thought, I, God, I still barely understand this, it's so confusing. It's such a insane episode of our history. Until I had dinner with Margo Burns and they patted me on the shoulder and they were like, no, no, no, no, no, you're one of us. No, no, you're not a historian. I tell people, I'm not a historian. I'm just a cartoonist who cares. If I've gained any expertise in this subject,I,I'd be very happy to say so, but I'm glad I left it up to someone else to say that.

It's one of those bits of history where there's still so much that we don't, not so much that we don't know in, in terms of the innocence [00:14:00] of people accused is not, it's not as if there's still room for doubt as to whether there was actual witchcraft or blah, blah, blah. That's very well established that no such thing happened. But it's still a thing where you, you do a whole, you do a 500 page book like this, and you're still rubbing your chin going, oh God, I still wanna know. I still have questions,but thankfully, the thing about this book that I am proud of is that there are about, at least like 30 pages at the end of research notes that say exactly what I invented, what comes from primary source documents, what comes from Longfellow, what comes from, you know, who said what, what is a theory from such and such a historian, where this building is now, what happened to this, what this person later went on to do, when did this person die? It's a book in and of itself. I just sat, I sat in this chair writing out all these research notes. I wish I took [00:15:00] notes while I was researching so I wouldn't have to go through all the research books in the shelf behind me and going through the index, trying to figure out where I got all the things that I got,but just to show, just to be, what's the word, upfront andtransparent with people. There's some things that happen behind closed doors that I can't prove, but I'm going to at least tell you that this bit is something that I wrote this bit is something that somebody else wrote this bit is, this bit comes from actual documents, because the truth is so much crazier than fiction. There's some bits, what is it, the death of Daniel Wilkins? You read that and you're like, no, I, there's no way that that could have actually happened. It did.And, yeah. it's a bizarre episode of our history that you need to back up with some sources.

**Sarah Jack:** Ben Wickey has given us two books to give away to our listeners. His new book, More Weight,

**Josh Hutchinson:** Tells the [00:16:00] story of this fellow right here, Giles Corey.

**Sarah Jack:** To get the details on Ben's book giveaway,

go to our podcast YouTube channels and to our Patreon community.

**Josh Hutchinson:** *More Weight* is available now. Order your copies today at bookshop.org/shop/EndWitchHunts. I promise you will not be disappointed. *More Weight* is intended for mature audiences.