Slender Man and Salem

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

**Sarah Jack:** I'm Sarah Jack Skellington.

**Josh Hutchinson:** So we are looking at monsters this month, because witches are monsters and we wanna find answers to questions about monsters. What is a monster? Why do we need monsters? And why do we treat humans as monsters? What does that do for us?

**Sarah Jack:** Today we're joined by returning guests, fellow podcasters, Sean and Carrie of the amazing podcast, *Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie,* to talk about the internet's most infamous creation.

**Sarah Jack:** We're talking Slender Man, the faceless boogeyman born in the digital age.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And we end up talking about Salem, because of course we do.

**Josh Hutchinson:** We always find our way back to the witch trials.

**Sarah Jack:** Let's get started.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** [00:01:00] We thought it would be interesting today to talk about Slender Man, in particular. I think your audience will be familiar with the concept of Slender Man. But that is a story that has evolved from basically a post on an image board to something that eventually jumped in a very scary way into real life and into the news. Yeah. It's sort of a case study on internet folklore, which is kind of one of the most popular kinds of, of new age folklore nowadays is because like how is everyone connected?

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Usually back in the day it was word of mouth or books and things like that, but now with the internet, things move so quickly and you can connect to so many people across such a vast space that these stories really spread and evolve and take on minds of their own even more than the urban legends we grew up whispering at summer camp.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** So these internet-based urban [00:02:00] legends, they're called creepypasta,and that's kind of from the term copypasta, which was like those emails that you'd get back in the day that was like, copy this and then send it to 10 friends or you'll have bad luck or whatever. So creepypasta was sort of the internet horror story version of that.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** So no one was going into this thinking, oh, this is like a ghost photo that someone really took, or this is someone's real experience. It was like, how legit can they make it seem? Like, how interesting can they make the story? So people started to submit to this back in 2009. It was just one message thread.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** And it's sort of at the, the intersection of like creation and fantasy and real life fear that the Slender Man story eventually led to what was eventually called the Slender Man Stabbing. Well, that is a spoiler. Well,it's an attempted murder case. We're gonna [00:03:00] spoil that up top, because there are children involved here and there was an attempted murder.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** But in May 2014, the basic story is that two 12-year-old Wisconsin girls stabbed their friend in the woods. She was also their age. They had fully intended to kill her, and it was meant to appease what they believed to be the real Slender Man, to prove themselves to him. And,I think it's hard to believe that 12-year-old children could be capable of such horror.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** At the same time, it's also hard to believe that children as old as 12, 12 feels a little too, when you've, on the face of it, it feels a little too old for this level of falling into a fantasy. Right. So it's surprising in both ways. Yeah. Now this is, it was combined with obvious other issues at play, probably mental illness. And so this [00:04:00] idea of like this hysteria and shared madness is really prevalent in a lot of stories that both of our podcasts cover, and this event really was evocative to me of the Salem Witch Trials. Now, of course, it's the one that I know the best, but the fact of the young girls being the catalyst here, they're influenced by a variety of factors that are still debated even to today. Wasn't ergot.

**Josh Hutchinson:** No.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** But they're, they include societal pressures, paranoia. In their cases, the real difficulties of colonial living and being a young girl in the pre-revolutionary era and the, just the dreadful boredom. You don't have much to do from childhood to getting married. You're just getting ready to get married a lot of the time. You're helping your mom, you're helping around the house, and then you're lots of socks to darn, you're getting, you're waiting to be a wife and a mother. [00:05:00] Um,and that was a really lonely and difficult place to be, I'm sure, as a young woman in the colonial era. So that sort of, in the Salem Witch Trials case, they had these shared stories that they would, go back and forth and participate in.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** And they sort of whipped each other into a frenzy building on each other's stories until it did leak out into the real world and had really large implications for their society, with adults as well. So it wasn't just limited to the children. And that's how the shared storytelling of the Slender Man in this little group led to those real life consequences. I think those girls probably were feeling their power. Yes, I think so.

**Sarah Jack:** And like the Salem Witch trial afflictions, that was full of emotion. Did the shared delusion of Anissa and Morgan, I wonder how, it, it seems like there [00:06:00] was like this void of emotion.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Yeah. And some, some of that could be their particular individual mental states and mental health struggles. Morgan might just have a very flat affect generally. I think part of it is also what they were doing was so involved in this other being, you know, doing things for this other being or through this other being. They could kind of lay blame for this other being. And I think they probably knew they were doing something wrong,depending on the mental illness factor, but they knew that killing was wrong. She said, I'm sorry. Yes.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Um, but the girls in the witch trials, I think initially they probably didn't understand what they were doing was wrong. Eventually, things escalated to such an extent that it was like, oh, people are dying. This is getting serious. But I think [00:07:00] they were, they had the fantasy, they thought they were in the right, they thought they were doing what was right in a way. I think.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** They put a baby in prison pretty early. They did. I think by that point they were probably figuring it out. But initially, and again, they have childlike motivations too. They don't wanna get in trouble, so they have to start blaming other people. And then eventually they're whipping each other into a frenzy of this is really happening.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** And then, they have to keep the ruse going, because again, they could get in trouble. Like it's a very childlike thing, but has these really drastic implications in the lives of so many people. And that's what happened in the Slender Man stabbing, as well.

**Josh Hutchinson:** You can see how the girls in the Salem Witch Trials and it seems like these two girls, it, the Slender Man case, like they're really influenced by what adults are saying, also, because adults [00:08:00] invented Slender Man and adults in Salem were saying, Hey, the devil's all around you. He's walking around these woods right now trying to get people, so you know, they're on heightened alert, believing what the adults say, and then the adults are reinforcing them and saying, okay, good job accusing that person.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Why don't you accuse another? We're gonna have that person arrested. We're validating your accusation. So it.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Exactly. If your mom's telling you the devil's real and you don't have a lot of outside experience in the world to tell you that it's not real, you're gonna believe that it's real. And if your mom is telling you, I don't want you looking at that Slender Man stuff anymore, it's not right, then part of you, as a child, might think, well, maybe there is some, like, why is my mom afraid of him If he's not real? Why doesn't she want me looking at this? You know it, and yeah, it is eventually, like they are [00:09:00] two stories told by adults to children, and the children take it and really run with it for different reasons, but it's interesting that they're, the young women and feeling, I think probably both of them did feel powerless. I think, any 12-year-old girl kind of feels powerless in a way of the changes going on around her with her friend groups, with her microcosm of society, with her body, things that we were, you're not understanding how you're feeling from moment to moment. Sometimes you feel powerless. So you can either take action,in the Salem Witch Trials case, or you couldbe a proxy to another being and not have to make these decisions for yourself.

**Sarah Jack:** I was just thinking one of my favorite, one of my favorite, it's more than a character, 'cause she was a real person, but Abigail Hobbs, she had the most wildconfession [00:10:00] abouther contract with the devil, and I was just thinking, man, how would have Abigail Hobbs, what would've she had to say about Slender Man? What actions would she have taken with Slender Man?

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Yeah. Yeah. Do you think any of those, I mean obviously those are all coerced confessions to one degree or another in witch trials. Do you think people get into and do you think any of those people got into a place where they were just like, ended up in the delusion with everybody else, or is it always a case of please stop hitting me? I saw. I'll tell you whatever you wanna know. I wrote in the book.

**Sarah Jack:** Well, I don't, I mean, Josh, what do you think about Abigail and Slender Man?

**Josh Hutchinson:** Well, I think Abigail Hobbs, she confessed, I think, because she wanted to, she's like an outlier. She's a 15-year-old girl who's like the wild child of Topsfield, Massachusetts. She [00:11:00] like, has a lot of squabbles with her stepmom and she like tells, she's has the habit of telling people, before the witch trials, like, oh, I know the devil. He'll come if I call him. Things like that that you shouldn't be saying at any time in 17th century Massachusetts. But I think that she was like, yeah, I know the devil, what of it? And she felt she had a certain cachet because of it. By the way, I know you have, the trial of George Jacobs up on your wall there.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** We do. Yeah. So we have, so my parents had, my dad's an English teacher, and growing up we had the famous portrait of Nathaniel Hawthorne over our fireplace from, he, we got at the House of Seven Gables. He was a, you know, my dad was a big fan, and so when we moved in here, he gave it to us and we were like, this kind of I really like these paintings and we, I think it's just, I don't know. I like we, we've themed this dining [00:12:00] room around Salem, Massachusetts. We have the Witch House on one wall. We have, Hawthorne there, and we have, I just, I always think this and its companion piece actually, the two, those two big witch trials paintings, there's such, and again, it's the witch-hunt, the witch trials that I'm most familiar with and most people are, but it is one of my particular interests and I think something about the, the reminder of what we can do to each other when we're not civil, when we don't talk, when we don't try to understand each other. And these are things that I really value is like civil discourse, empathy, trying to understand each other. That's really important to me. So that's why I I like the reminders of in a weird way, it reminds me of, my own like moral hierarchy, I guess. And the importance of critical thinking. Yes, critical thinking, very important, now maybe more than ever, but certainly then too.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Yeah, definitely. When you're confronted with some of these ideas like [00:13:00] that your neighbor is a witch, you should stop and think for a minute on that. Likecould there be another explanation to why my butter soured, or why my pudding split down the middle? Which are things that happened in witch trials.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Josh, I, you say that, but she looked through the window right when the, right when I took the sip of the sour milk. So I, if you were here, I think you would agree with it. But, they were in such a reduced experience of the world, like children. they, All they had was their religion. All they knew, most of them was the local area, their neighbors, their hometown. Some of them had been in, in nearby states and had gone through traumas withIndian wars and things like that. But all they knew was their very, comparatively to nowadays they didn't have the internet, right, but, their smaller realities, their very insulated communities. And [00:14:00] in the Slender Man stabbing it is like a very insulated situation. There is this connectivity to the internet and stuff, but the access ends up just making them more, more obsessed with this one thing and feeding into it on each other. And they don't have the life experience of an adult. They haven't traveled, they haven't met a lot of people. So it's easier to believe certain things when you don't have the experience not to.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Also, when you're forming a personality, when you're a adolescent and a teenager even, I would say this applies through college and for some people through their twenties, you are looking for things to build that personality around and sometimes you can become obsessive about something, just because there's not, you haven't figured out what else you're really about yet. You're trying to find the thing. And I think it's harder for some people than for others, but they must have been talking a lot about Slender Man because when Payton heard the reasoning behind the stabbing, she [00:15:00] was just like, that makes sense.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** The real question here, and I think we're probably like-minded of this, but like,does that make them monsters? Is it this monstrous act, this, planning this monstrous act? Can 12 year olds be monsters? Are they capable of that? Are children capable of that? Their brain isn't fully developed. Maybe they're not totally understanding everything they're doing, but can you still be a monster as a child?

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** What about the mental health factor? And then this applies to many people we've talked about, many criminals and stuff, and not to say anything about mental illness, there, there are factors in a lot of crimes where that is a contribution. Can you be fully a monster if you're not fully in charge of your mind?

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Many of us would probably, I hope, say that only a monster could coldly stab their best friend and leave them for dead, but can these girls really be defined as [00:16:00] that?

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** It was a monstrous action. But can you define them as monsters?

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Yeah, I don't think so. I think, it reminds me, going back again to Salem, because I love it so much, even though it was awful. Yeah, exactly.

**Josh Hutchinson:** People like to blame the girls for, you know, for the accusations that they made, but there were, Ann Putnam Jr. was 12 years old, Abigail Williams, 11 years old. How much responsibility could they possibly bear, if you were gonna try them for say, false accusations or something? How much responsibility can they actually bear because of where they are in their mental development?

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** Exactly, and the adults are the ones giving them the power. If the adults weren't listening to them, the adults weren't making the arrests, it wasn't the girls who were doing the hangings or whatever. It was the adults that [00:17:00] gave them the power. So at, at the end of the day, they were the ones that kind of helped it happen.

**Ain't it Scary with Sean and Carrie:** What makes a monster? If those defined by society at large really are monstrous, if it's their actions that define that. And oftentimes, urban legends really explore these, you know, where like fictional and real monsters sort of coexist. And that's pretty appropriate for the time of year, I think.