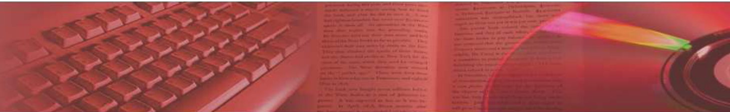
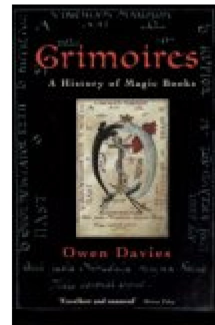


Owen Davies. *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 384 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-959004-9.



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The Magic Words

Owen Davies begins his latest history of the uncanny by quoting Richard Kieckhefer's observation that " 'a book of magic is also a magical book' " (p. 2).[1] A history of grimoires, therefore, must not only recount the contents and ideas found in self-proclaimed spell books, but also uncover how those books were used. Such a problem, however, is one Davies has met in previous works on ghost stories and witchcraft–which also exist both as theories and tools.

Grimoires represents the broadest chronology Davies has yet attempted. Magical books date back almost to the invention of writing; this volume stretches from Moses and the Hebrew Bible to Anton LaVey and *The Satanic Bible* (1969). Practically, however, the story begins with medieval efforts to appropriate and interpret ancient magic, through the fifteenth-century rise of hermeticism, and into the democratizing effect of the printing press. Davies makes much of the expanded reach print gave to grimoires, and hence most of this account deals with the early modern and modern use of printed magical books by esoteric gentlemen and treasure-seeking rabble alike. Even if, as Davies argues, print did not eliminate handwritten grimoires, the print revolution created more grimoires and more stories about grimoires–the intellectual back and forth and anecdotal evidence that provide the two evidentiary supports of this study.

Rather like a magus himself, Davies weaves telling details from grimoires throughout his narrative, vignettes of magic or advice that convey a sense of the work and the context under consideration. Medieval Christian grimoires often used Hebrew characters in the belief that Hebrew letters had magical properties, and if authors did not know how to write Hebrew, they simply made up letters that looked close enough. Icelandic rune books featured curses that inflicted ceaseless farting on victims. Nineteenth-century American oneiromancy manuals advised those who dreamed of ants to bet on the numbers two, seven, and forty-one.

Davies handles the vast scope of the book well, moving chronologically by chapter and geographically within each era. Britain (and its grimoires) do not figure prominently in the text, perhaps because England seems to have preferred astrological texts to practical spell books. Nevertheless, Davies weaves several English thinkers (Reginald Scot in particular) into the broader debates on magic. Indeed, the scope of Davies's work suggests that it is in the Americas where the grimoire tradition thrived in the twentieth century. Chicago–the home of William Delaurence's publishing empire–was the center of grimoire publishing and esoteric practice in the modern age. Kardecism–one of Brazil's enduring religious traditions–derived from grimoire hermeticism coupled with Spiritualist teachings. Mexico provided a home for Spanish grimoires during the interwar years, which in turn transformed the local healing traditions of *curandismo* (folk healing). The number of examples and stories from the former colonies of Europe (rather than Europe itself) underscores Davies's contention that whereas the history of the grimoire in the modern West has often focused

on "the esoteric philosophies, personal relations, and internal tensions" of a small number of Western occultists, "certain products of the Revival reached far beyond the parlors of Paris and London" (p. 185).

None of these stories are, in themselves, new discoveries; indeed, almost the entire book is synthetic, as any broad study must be. Certainly as regards Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Davies has debts (which he acknowledges) to Ronald Hutton and Alex Owen. But most readers will search in vain for any extended historiographical quibbling, except for a well-argued aside on the sensitive topic of the grimoire tradition and life of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith Jr. *Grimoires* is not necessarily written for the layperson, but neither is Davies writing for academics alone. The book could well form the foundation for an upper-level collegiate class on grimoires and magic. Rather than posit transhistorical theories about "the" nature of magical books, Davies seems content with extensive documentation–but documentation is not explanation.

And yet, if showing the number and influence of magical books in Western history is Davies's objective, then in showing volume, he makes an implicit argument: fully two-thirds of his world history of grimoires involves books published *after* the onset of the Enlightenment. The rise of printing, the spread of literacy, and the rediscovery of ancient Near Eastern cultures led to the creation (and re-creation) of many more grimoires in the years since 1700 than had ever before existed. Davies's nineteenth-century predecessor, Arthur Edward Waite–who wrote an extended history of magic books in addition to designing tarot cards–noted the "remarkable bibliographic fact that such texts were issued, and on so great a scale, in the last decade of the nineteenth century" (p. 181).[2] Seen from the perspective of the grimoire, magic is a thoroughly modern phenomenon–not a survival or a retention.

This latter point represents an important piece of the argument for those who study magic, witchcraft, and esoterica; unlike many other subfields, historians of the supernatural often need to demonstrate the ubiquity and extent of their subject matter to convince colleagues and committees of the validity of their work. Several works in the last decade (some of them by Davies) have shown that magical, mystical, and esoteric thought *thrived* in the modern age, yet an older sociological predilection still persists that treats magic and miracle as exclusively premodern ideas that existed only as holdovers in the twentieth century. If *Grimoires* is correct, however, the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries provided the ideal environment for magical thinking. Magic is very modern. Other books have made a similar point, but it is a point worth hearing more than once, particularly when written with Davies's élan.

Note

[1]. Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 4.

[2]. Arthur Edward Waite, *Shadows of Life and Thought* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1938), 137.

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