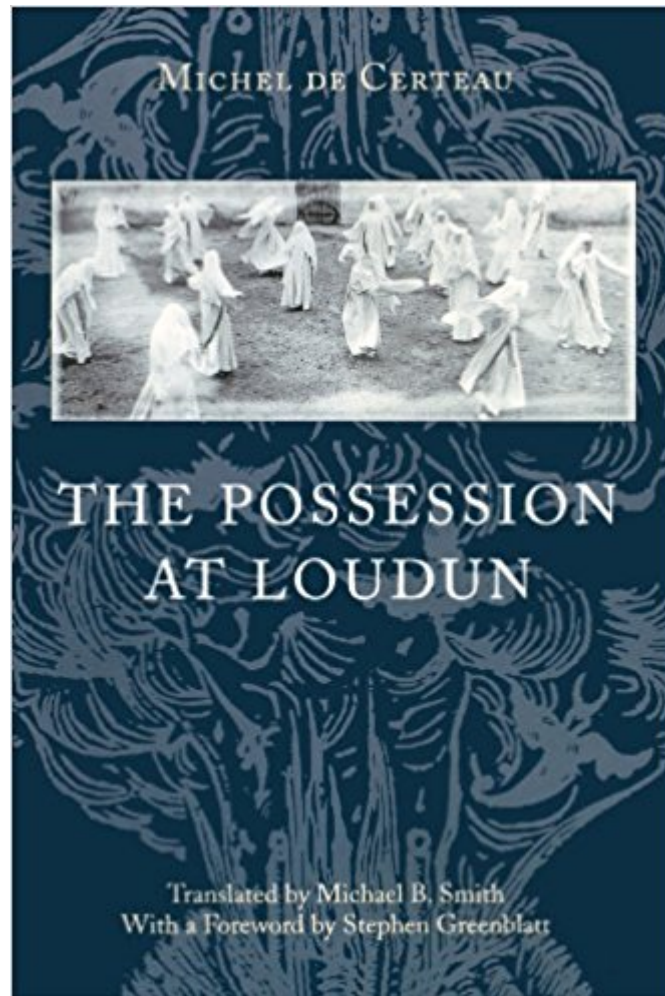




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# The Possession At Loudun



## Synopsis

It is August 18, 1634. Father Urbain Grandier, convicted of sorcery that led to the demonic possession of the Ursuline nuns of provincial Loudun in France, confesses his sins on the porch of the church of Saint-Pierre, then perishes in flames lit by his own exorcists. A dramatic tale that has inspired many artistic retellings, including a novel by Aldous Huxley and an incendiary film by Ken Russell, the story of the possession at Loudun here receives a compelling analysis from the renowned Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau. Interweaving substantial excerpts from primary historical documents with fascinating commentary, de Certeau shows how the plague of sorceries and possessions in France that climaxed in the events at Loudun both revealed the deepest fears of a society in traumatic flux and accelerated its transformation. In this tour de force of psychological history, de Certeau brings to vivid life a people torn between the decline of centralized religious authority and the rise of science and reason, wracked by violent anxiety over what or whom to believe. At the time of his death in 1986, Michel de Certeau was a director of studies at the École des hautes Études en sciences sociales, Paris. He was author of eighteen books in French, three of which have appeared in English translation as *The Practice of Everyday Life*, *The Writing of History*, and *The Mystic Fable, Volume 1*, the last of which is published by The University of Chicago Press. "Brilliant and innovative. . . . The Possession at Loudun is [de Certeau's] most accessible book and one of his most wonderful." —Stephen Greenblatt (from the Foreword)

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## Customer Reviews

In August 1634, a French priest named Urbain Grandier was convicted of sorcery and burned at the

stake. His accusers held that he had brought the devil into the Ursuline nunnery of Loudon, and had there committed acts in violation of human and divine law--to say nothing of his priestly vows. The possession at Loudon has provided the storyline for plays, novels, and films, but it has received little historical scrutiny. In this slender essay, the late Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau examines the possession in the context of the larger contemporary struggle between medieval values and the dawning Enlightenment. As he points out, during the eight years when the possession and its attendant trials and exorcisms were unfolding as a kind of morality play, Descartes published his *Discourse on Method*, and science and religion met on countless ideological battlefields. The era, he notes, was marked by plague, economic and social dislocation, and a general atmosphere of fearfulness, ideal for rituals of scapegoating and expiation. Certeau draws on several techniques of the *Annales* school of historians, examining the minutiae of the Loudon trials--including, for instance, a payment voucher to the woodcutter who provided the timber for Grandier's immolation--and remarking that the hysteria that visited the little town of Loudon points to "the strangeness of history." --Gregory McNamee

Eminent French Jesuit intellectual and historian de Certeau (1925-86) documents with scholarly detail the events surrounding the alleged diabolic possession of 17 nuns in an Ursuline convent during the early 1630s in the provincial French town of Loudun. A cause célèbre for years afterward, the matter touched Cardinal Richelieu and the monarchy and has been the subject of drama, opera, and the writings of Aldous Huxley, among others. Affairs culminated in the execution of accused priest-sorcerer Urbain Grandier, followed by a triumphant tour by the convent's mother superior. Politics, both ecclesiastical and civil, permeate the many official sources quoted, as unexplained phenomena and exorcisms vie with local self-interests and hysteria in a major theatrical spectacle of the time. This translation of the original French text (1970) makes the author's brilliant work accessible to English-speaking readers. De Certeau's analyses are not an easy read, as he dissects mystical, psychoanalytical, and sociological elements of events. For specialized collections. DAnna M. Donnelly, St. John's Univ. Lib., Jamaica, NY Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

It was a pristine used copy of *The Possession of Loudun* that arrived in a timely fashion. Although one of Michel de Certeau's debut works (1970) this English translation appeared to Anglophone readers well after his seminal work (*Practice of Everyday Life*) had been assimilated & the legendary author himself deceased. This writing is of a different tenor. In it the author shows why he

enjoyed such an avid following: his deft ability to interweave macabre historical oddities into a revealing x-ray of an alien time & psychic space. The circumstances surrounding the sorcery trials of Loudun (culminating in 1634) makes for riveting reading in their own right...but de Certeau trumps the peculiar events chronicled with astonishing (Jesuit-inspired) analyses of Cardinal Richelieu's early modern France. Highest recommendation.

This book is very complicated. If you're looking for a simple, straightforward account of the possessions at Loudun, read Huxley's book. If, on the other hand, you're interested in Michel de Certeau, this is definitely the place to start (as Stephen Greenblatt says in his foreword). De Certeau was one of the greatest historians of his generation, but many of his books are simply inaccessible; *The Practice of Everyday Life* makes graduate students all over the world weep. This book is accessible and tells you most of what you really need to know about how de Certeau works. First, look at the way he breaks down a straightforward narrative structure. He notes that the traditional mode of reporting is aligned with an empirical sense of data, but that in this case, that mode of data-reportage is very much one faction's bailiwick--that of the doctors and the jurists, who are working for the King. So he recognizes that he can't quite buy that mode, and has to step outside. This is something Harry Harootunian has talked about too, but de Certeau did it better. Next, examine the way he talks about the layers upon layers of "possession," of the colonization or imperialism expressed toward the nuns' bodies and voices, their language and discourse, the whole truth of "what really happened." These things are exactly the problem in the Loudun case, and de Certeau tries to leave them as complex as they were while making them comprehensible. Some might think this is playing with words and metaphors, but it's not: it's the most elegant take on this kind of approach you'll ever likely see. Finally, look at his intersections of original texts and commentary. The original was given as texts "presented by" de Certeau, which gets at the heart of the matter. He contextualizes all those texts, but not just in the sense of where they happened in history but also where, in the most complex sense, they existed or were produced or had meaning in history. This is de Certeau at his best. Read this first, and think about everyday life. Think about spectacle: think about how, as he says, although there was weeping and wailing about the possessions and exorcisms, this didn't prevent the serving of snacks to the visitors. Put it all together and you have an actual historical moment in its total context. Nobody ever pulls this off like he did. Read it, think about it, do it, and try again. Then re-read it. And do it over. This is what great history really is, at base, if we are willing to discard outdated preconceptions and dubious assumptions. Not an easy read, but this is the best there is.

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