



Storming Heaven

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Annadel, West Virginia, was a small town rich in coal, farms, and close-knit families, all destroyed when the coal company came in. It stole everything it hadn't bothered to buy -- land deeds, private homes, and ultimately, the souls of its men and women.

In 1921, an army of 10,000 unemployed pro-union coal miners took up arms and threatened to overthrow the governments of two West Virginia counties. They were greeted by U.S. Army airplanes, bombs, and poison gas. This book recounts the real story of what happened--and where it all went wrong.

Four people tell this powerful, deeply moving tale: Activist Mayor C. J. Marcum. Fierce, loveless union man Rondal Lloyd. Gutsy nurse Carrie Bishop, who loved Rondal. And lonely, Sicilian immigrant Rosa Angelelli, who lost four sons to the deadly mines. They all bear witness to nearly forgotten events of history, culminating in the final, tragic Battle of Blair Mountain--the first crucial battle of a war that has yet to be won.

Storming Heaven Details

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From Reader Review Storming Heaven for online ebook

Lisa H. says

This is one of my all-time favorite books. My great-grandfather, having come from Scotland where his family had been farmers, ended up in the "Scottish settlement" in eastern Ohio and found employment in the coal mines there. By the time of the coal mine war in West Virginia (early 1920s), he would have been in his 50s and I doubt he was much involved in unionization efforts, if at all. Still, this novel's depiction of the hardships of deep shaft coal mining and the early days of the United Mineworkers remind me of what he must have experienced.

Aj says

I almost never give five stars, but I want to give this one four and a half. A beautiful, wrenching tale exquisitely wrought. Reading this novel felt like the mint salve my granny prepared for sweat bee stings. One of those books that holds a mirror to the history that I understand and helps me to understand there is much more to come to know.

Lisa N says

This is a fictitious account of the 1921 WV coal strike and the Battle of Blair Mountain.

The coal operators had a system of extreme exploitation. They basically went in and stole all of the land from the citizens in the first place, claiming mineral rights and forcing them to sign their land over. The displaced landowners had few choices but to work in the mines. The coal companies provided substandard company housing. They cheated miners and forced them to make purchases in the company-owned stores. Miners actually went into debt working for the coal companies and could not break away from them. The companies hired "gun thugs" to patrol the areas. They censored miners' mail and even limited the number of visitors they could have in their homes. When union organizers came onto the scene, the coal operators degenerated to outright tyranny, brutalizing women and children, evicting them at gunpoint, blackballing miners and even committing murder.

In 1921, over 10,000 striking miners, or "rednecks" as they were called because they wore red bandanas over their necks to signify union membership, threatened to overthrow the county government. The US Army intervened, even using gas and bombs on the miners.

I am not crazy about the historical fiction genre, but this novel is very well-researched and seems to chronicle events pretty accurately (from my extra reading). Sadly, union membership plummeted for many years after this rebellion and the exploitation of miners continued. They truly were "pilgrims of sorrow."

Note, I loved "Emily's Ghost," by this author, as I am a Bronte freak.

Werner says

The Giardina novel I reviewed earlier, *The Unquiet Earth*, is actually a sequel to this one, which covers the years 1890-1922. Both books share the same problem of over-use of bad language (which cost this one a fifth star); but this book does not have several of the other objectionable elements of the second one, and the eye-opening indictment of social injustice here is even more powerful.

This is a fictionalized treatment of the hellish conditions in Appalachia's coal country, during the years when the big coal companies were literally stealing the land and establishing a system of de facto slavery in the mines, enforced by murder and the threat of murder, with the active complicity of a corrupt government. But it is not very fictionalized; many of the atrocities (and no, that isn't too strong a term) that Giardina depicts actually happened, although some of the names of people and places are changed here, and some license is taken with details. (The real names are used in the movie *Matewan*, depicting the 1920 murder of Matewan, West Virginia's mayor by coal company gun thugs in broad daylight on a public street, and the first acts of armed resistance by the citizenry --and though this site is devoted to books, not movies, I'd heartily recommend that movie as well!) And this is not simply dead history irrelevant to the present; as the sequel shows, the peonage and violence area residents have endured at the hands of the coal companies continues into the present. And we can see the same mentality of oppression and exploitation of the many for the enrichment of a few in so much of the warp and woof of economic life in our world today, with its "globalization" of sweatshops, expanding poverty and corporate greed.

To her credit, Giardina doesn't let her message overwhelm her story, or reduce her characters to cardboard caricatures; this is a novel of flesh-and-blood people, not a dreary ideological exercise in "socialist realism." (And of course many of her oppressed characters fighting back against the system are not "reds,' as their opponents depict them, nor in many cases particularly ideological at all.) Of all of her four viewpoint characters, only the Italian immigrant Rosa fails to come alive for the reader --at least, this reader-- her few sections of the book are much shorter than those of the others, and are much more exercises in rather jumbled stream-of-consciousness perceptions (ultimately distorted by madness) than coherent narratives. But the other sections don't have that problem. I also appreciate her basically sympathetic treatment of Christianity; the rebel preacher Albion Freeman is a particularly appealing character, though I disagree with some aspects of his theology (his pacifism, and his theory of ultimate universal salvation --views which probably reflect Episcopal lay preacher Giardina's own). All in all, this is one of the best modern historicals I've read.

Megan Hillard says

Uhhhh okay I'm so confused?

Was this a true story or merely inspired by true events? Bc I thought it was the latter until that freakin afterward. I mean . . . it's talking about the characters of the book like the epilogue of *October Sky*, making me believe I'd been punk'd this whole time, then the ending signature punk'd me again. Do not like. Do not understand.

So if it's actually a true story, a lot of my criticisms are moot. I'm still gonna complain anyway, just keep that in mind. #sorrynotsorry

Alright, positives first. This was a story brimming with passion. I had to read this book for a class I'm taking on Appalachia, and we've read a couple other Giardina excerpts and man . . . man, does she feel for the plight of the miners. It's so evident in every word, every single part of this story. It really pulls you in, captures your heart. Also! Also. My girl Denise can write. Check this baby out:

Burying grounds, too, would be places to receive the Holy Ghost, places where God danced with the spirits of the departed while they awaited the great raising day.

Sigh. Wow. What evocative imagery, what excellent wordsmithery.

Now for the complains.

I'm not gonna lie: Albion and Carrie and Rosa were probably my three favorite characters in this whole freaking book. Notice who's included? Albion. Notice who's not included? Rondal. That boy . . . he made me so mad sometimes I wanted to smack him with the unabridged version of Les Miserables. And like, I get he embodies the whole ~bad boy~ thing, and I knew that he was proooooooooobably going to be end game, but also Albion!! He was such a good fella! Such a precious cinnamon roll! WHY THE NARRATIVE TREAT YOU LIKE THIS SMH.

I also feel like I didn't know the characters? Especially CJ, and several secondary characters. Like, tbh, I don't really understand what their purpose was in the story, other than to pad it out a bit. I genuinely can not tell you a thing about Marcum except that his name was Cincinnatus Jefferson and he was an activist. I mean, yeah he liked baseball, and yeah he was the mayor . . . but that didn't tell me anything about who he was as a person. Tbh, I didn't even really feel that bad when he died bc he seemed like the Stock Heroic Figure that was, of course, going to die. Similarly, there was approximate 0 nuance when it came to the portrayals of the union and the coal miners. I mean, yeah, as a general rule the unions were better than the coal miners. But like, it wasn't that simplistic and I feel like it would have served the story better if even a teensy bit of that grey area was shown amidst the black and white.

Also! Boy, I'm on a role tonight. There were a large amount of African American figures in this book, which is certainly commendable bc it kind of negates the stereotype that Appalachia = white people. But I really really really wish that ole Doc had been given a POV instead of CJ. Or maybe Rondal. I feel like that voice and perspective would have served the story much better than the two above.

Also. ALSO. Why didn't we hear from Rosa again until the dang afterward??? Whyyyyy wasn't she given closure within the narrative? Why would she be introduced and spottily thrown in only to be dropped partway? Why why why why?

So, yeah. Again, altogether the positives outweigh the negatives, hence the 3 stars. Giardina spins a good yarn, and all things considered, this for-school book could have been much much much worse. As it stood, though, I enjoyed reading this, though I did (obviously) have some issues.

Also, did y'all know that the term "redneck" has its roots in the sunburn on the back of a farmer's neck but! also came to be used as a term for socialist union supports who showed their support by a red bandana on their neck? What a divide between definitions, you guys. A chasm, even.

STORMING HEAVEN stormed onto my syllabus but did not quite contain heaven.

Donna Hopper says

My grandmother told me that the coal company stole our family's land, but she wasn't sure how it was done. I found out how in the first few pages of *Storming Heaven*. This book speaks to me through my DNA. My family lived through this shameful time in American History. Like the characters in Ms. Giardina's *Storming Heaven*, my folks became slaves to the company - living in company houses, working in hellish conditions, always owing the company store, unable to feed the children a healthy diet, and living in the filth of the coal fields. Before the companies invaded, the mountain people were poor but free. This book tells the story of the loss of rights and dignity of the mountain people and immigrants who became in essence less than slaves to the coal company. I say less than slaves because slaves of the old South were expensive and valuable. The mountain people and immigrants were easily replaced by others willing to go into the black holes. They were all expendable and Ms. Giardina draws us into their hopelessness with her dynamic characters. This (conveniently) forgotten part of American history should be included in every high school and college American History course. *Storming Heaven* should be required reading in those classes. We owe it to those who lived through these horrors and gave their lives to give us the workers' rights we have today. Without exception - *Storming Heaven* is my favorite book.

Jenny says

Just finished reading this for the second time and teaching it to my freshman comp class. It is the common book this year at the college where I teach. I loved it when I read it 10 years ago for an Appalachian literature class, and loved it probably more this time. The story is told from four different points of view, all of which mesh into a lovely tapestry. The book's themes are just as important as ever - the bloody history of the coming of the coal industry into Appalachia is still as hushed-up as it ever was. Those events are eerily similar to the current controversy over mountaintop removal mining, which devastates people's land and heritage much like the Broad Form Deed did in the early 1900s. This book sheds a painfully bright light on the events that led to the degradation of the Appalachian people and mountains that still continues today.

Plus, it's an engrossing read - my 17 and 18 year old freshmen loved it!

Brett says

Moving book about labor struggles in the West Virginia coal mines. A reminder of exactly how brutal the history of oppression of working people in the US is. Mine owners and the federal government did not mind killing as many workers and/or organizers as necessary to ensure that the economic balance of power remains with exploiters rather than workers.

Mountain accents aside, a pretty easy read. Though ideologically appealing to me, not a lot of interior life to many of the characters. I think the ideal audience for this book is probably young adults.

Margaret says

I expected to hate this book. But it shook me up. It was good.

I want to be Carrie Bishop

Page 119 -

"How come you aint married?" he asked.
"I just aint found the right man," I answered, shamed to tell him that I feared no one would want me, that in my three years of school no one had come courting.
"You look to me like you're too independent," he said. "You wouldnt take to a man bossing you around."
The way he said it did not sound like a reproach.

Page 161 -

"Why'd you leave that feller tonight?"
"He didn't need me there. I tried to tell him how much I love him. But he wont hear it. He cant let himself be loved."
"You're just like him," Albion said. He pulled my hand down, held the lantern closer. "You want to love your own way. You're scairt of something else."

Page 297 - "She never did beg me not to go. It was then I knew what I had in her. She'd throw out no snares to trip me and slow me, to keep me from giving everything up to what was coming. It takes a hell of a woman to be like that."

Wendy says

This is a powerful book by an author who knows in her bones about the suffering and conflicts that have been such a deep part of the history of West Virginia. But it is much more than a regional story - especially now, as struggles over carbon, fossil fuels, and extremes of wealth and poverty play out on a global scale with the stakes increasingly high.

I started thinking more about coal after hearing miners testifying on behalf of polluting power plants at an EPA hearing late last year. My own great-grandfather was a coal miner in Western Pennsylvania, recruited from Eastern Europe a hundred years ago, and I began to wonder whether those of us living in cities and pressing for action on climate change really have more in common with miners than we might think. This book - and the latest spate of stories about coal ash spills and polluted creeks - are vivid reminders that most of us are really on the same side.

Patricia says

I read a review once in which the reviewer talked about the fact that her bookseller knows what she likes to read: novels about labor issues. She had read this book, *Storming Heaven*, years ago and loved it so much that she had continued to search out novels on the same subject. So that prompted me to get it and read it. Well. It was OK, but it had, in my eyes, a number of problems. It is set in the coal mines of West Virginia in

the early 1900's and a major part of the plot is the effort to unionize the mines. The author didn't incorporate enough background information into the story to make me feel as though I really knew what was going on in the main battle between mine owners and strikers. The characters were also not very well developed and the way narrator changed constantly--a different character for each chapter--didn't help me feel connected to any one of them. I am very interested in the early history of unions in this country; I would have been far happier if I had just read a non-fiction book on the subject.

Chrissie says

4 stars

I enjoyed this book very, very much. It is a love story and it is a book of historical fiction that closely follows the growth of the unions at the coal mines in southwestern West Virginia. The events culminate in 1920 with the Battle of Blair Mountain when the United States Army fought 10,000 unemployed pro-union miners with airplanes, bombs and poison gas. Here is a link detailing this: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Blair_Mountain I advise that you read it after reading the book. What is marvelous about the book is that the conflict is understood by following the characters' experiences. You are there with them; this isn't the same as reading a page at Wikipedia. And as I first said there is a wonderful love story. In fact two love stories, both of which are totally convincing and realistically portrayed. Aren't you surprised? I never read love stories, but that is because they rarely deliver as this one does.

In addition the writing is tremendous. The dialog is written with a Southern dialect. You are there in the South. Occasionally I found this difficult to understand, but the feeling it created was worth any added effort needed to follow the conversations. The story is told by four: an activist, a union man, a nurse and a Sicilian immigrant. The Sicilian woman's chapters were few and short. They demand attention; she cannot speak English properly. Again, the effect was perfect. Originally I thought her entries could have been skipped, but they were in fact absolutely necessary to include the immigrant miners' experiences too. The flagrant brutality of the coal operators is shocking. The miners' lives, with all its horrors, are movingly portrayed with depth and clarity.

This book will be highly appreciated by all those who love a love story and want to learn a bit of history at the same time. Excellent writing. You are there, down in the South in the 20s.

There is a sequel to this book: *Unquiet Earth*

Can a sequel be this good? I am hesitant to try it. This was just so very good; I don't want anything to lessen its impact.

Suzanne says

Storming Heaven is a work of historical fiction depicting the formation of the coal miner's union in early 20th century West Virginia. Giardina presents each chapter with the perspective of various characters, including a coal miner, a union activist, a nurse and an immigrant. Because of the style of narrative, the language of these people really comes across and it does take a while to read the Appalachian dialect comfortably.

That said, it was a very moving novel. It's a hard look back at a time when workers were treated as little more than slaves, held captive by the powerful companies they worked for. Local law enforcement, rather than helping these poor men and their families, were recruited by the coal companies to serve their crooked interests.

Hope comes in the form of union organizers, but the coal companies are determined to fight back, using guerrilla tactics. Giardina portrays the culmination of her story in the Battle of Blair Mountain, a true story of the 1921 West Virginia coal strike, and it's bloody outcome. Excellent book!

Rachel Willis says

A fascinating, fictional, account of the Battle of Blair Mountain. It led me down many rabbit holes researching the background. Excellent novel about an infamous time in US history. My only real criticism is the inclusion of chapters from Rosa's POV. They are unnecessary to the story and even weigh it down as they feel so out of place. It's disappointing, really, as the voice of an immigrant would be welcome.

Rita Reese says

I went back and forth about 4-5 stars--the history in this book is incredible, and the narrative is really solid. It didn't have the complexity of character of books that really knock me out, like *Property* by Valerie Martin or *By Blood* by Ullman, but that doesn't even seem like a relevant criticism. I wish I'd read this book years ago and I wish everyone would read it now, particularly in states like Wisconsin where unions are being attacked and vilified. I can't believe this hasn't been made into a movie.
