



# City of Light

*Lauren Belfer*

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It is 1901 and Buffalo, New York, stands at the center of the nation's attention as a place of immense wealth and sophistication. The massive hydroelectric power development at nearby Niagara Falls and the grand Pan-American Exposition promise to bring the Great Lakes "city of light" even more repute.

Against this rich historical backdrop lives Louisa Barrett, the attractive, articulate headmistress of the Macaulay School for Girls. Protected by its powerful all-male board, "Miss Barrett" is treated as an equal by the men who control the life of the city. Lulled by her unique relationship with these titans of business, Louisa feels secure in her position, until a mysterious death at the power plant triggers a sequence of events that forces her to return to a past she has struggled to conceal, and to question everything and everyone she holds dear.

Both observer and participant, Louisa Barrett guides the reader through the culture and conflicts of a time and place where immigrant factory workers and nature conservationists protest violently against industrialists, where presidents broker politics, where wealthy "Negroes" fight for recognition and equality, and where women struggle to thrive in a system that allows them little freedom.

Wrought with remarkable depth and intelligence, **City of Light** remains a work completely of its own era, and of ours as well. A stirring literary accomplishment, Lauren Belfer's first novel marks the debut of a fresh voice for the new millennium and heralds a major publishing event.

*From the Paperback edition.*

## City of Light Details

Date : Published (first published 1999)

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Author : Lauren Belfer

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# From Reader Review City of Light for online ebook

## Justine Janora says

As a Buffalonian born in the late 1960's I loved this book. It made me feel like I was part of a thriving city on the verge of something greater. Unfortunately as most current Buffalonians know, the city hasn't yet hit those days of grandour again. But the book was very well written and the research took me on a quest. I found myself in the Ellicott Sqaure building, in front of the elevators looking at the swastikas embedded in the tiled floor. I had walked those floors many times but never noticed them until I read about it in this book. The research Lauren did in the book was awesome! I loved the book especially as a Buffalonian- I felt it was one of the greatest Buffalo Historical Fiction novels I have ever read. I bought several copies and sent them to friends and family members who have since moved away and they too loved how it took them back to days when things were looking bright for Buffalo.

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## Catherine says

I was loving this historical fiction novel at first - I felt it made Buffalo NY at the turn of the century - when it was known as "The City of Light" come alive and the author was sensitive to roles of race and gender at the timeframe (instead of glossing over that). The main character is independent and likable and I was learning history at the same time. Unfortunately, and maybe this was her trying to be true to the realities of an independent woman during that time frame, the story takes an incredulous turn into the protagonist's past and the novel goes dark from that point on.

So I have fond memories of the beginning, but a bitter aftertaste associated with the last third of an otherwise lovely book.

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## Swanbender2001 says

This is a well written historical fiction set in the late 1800's, early 1900s. The power station at Niagara Falls is being constructed and at the same time the Pan-American Exposition is occurring. President McKinley is assassinated towards the end of the book. The 'City of Light' is Buffalo where electricity is being brought into the buildings and homes to replace gas lamps and release the city of the pall of darkness the gas clouds leave hanging over it. Automobiles are a rare occurrence but will be replacing the horse drawn carriage soon. Loiusa Barrett is headmistress of Buffalo's most prestigious school, the Macaulay School for girls. She grew up with a father who was a geologist and took his daughter on his field trips, so she was accustomed to communicating as an equal with all sorts of individuals, of every class and rank and gender. She brought an attitude and foresight of women's ability to do anything and accomplish more than parlor games with her to the position she held. Her goal for her girls was to teach them to advance beyond the strictures of the time and not allow those strictures to hold their dreams in check. She expanded the curriculum to include the necessary courses to give them a well-rounded view of the world from the confines of a safe girls' school and was successful as the graduates went on to become doctors and involved in other helping professions. Her life revolved around a secret she had no idea was so well known. She had met President Cleveland in total innocence, bore a child as a result of his lecherous assignation. She was unaware that the men in power of Buffalo had earmarked her as the girl they wanted the President to dally with and when she was in need of

a secret confinement, helped 'look the other way' for her so she could secretly orchestrate it. For ten years she played the role of godmother to the child she bore, both adoptive parents unaware of her true involvement in the life of the child she brought to them. The father was the developer and builder of the Niagara Falls power station and as his dreams grew to encompass the idea of creating electricity for the people, his investors who were the men in power of Buffalo, started plotting against him and using Louisa and her secret. The events that unfold are heartbreaking, yet satisfying.

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## **Booknblues says**

Lauren Belfer immerses the reader in the turn of the century city of Buffalo. It is an exciting time where change and industrialization is worshiped. It is a time for women as well as men. Their position in society is changing. they are becoming increasingly educated and able to impact through social change. It is a time to come to America and walk the streets of gold. Immigrants from eastern Europe flock to this country and cause upheavals of their own. It is the time for the worker. Industries are targeted by labor unions and strikes are common.

In Buffalo it is a great time to make a buck. The power plant at nearby Niagara Falls is being built. Opportunities abound for new business and industry. Buffalo displays all the strife that accompanied the social change of the Progressive era. Lauren Belfer has done a tremendous amount of research about the time and place. She is able to bring this society to life in her book and takes a close look at the movers and shakers of the time. Caught in the middle of it all and desperately trying to make her way and not upset the apple cart is the narrator and heroine, headmistress Louisa Barrett.

Louisa Barrett wants to do the right thing and feels strongly that she is helping to shape a generation of young women into the profound thinkers of the future. In reality Louisa is frozen with fear of the effect of action. In many ways she is a puppet on a string.

The story is part mystery, part romance, part psychological study and part historical time piece. In it written with tons of detail about the time and place. If the reader appreciates this most likely this is a book for you. If other elements are more appealing the book may be found wanting.

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## **Karen says**

Really liked this book: a good story, compelling. Takes place in late 1890s to early 1900s, in Buffalo, NY. The backdrop is the Pan-American Exhibition and city fathers/businessmen are readying the city, as this event will draw thousands, including politicians, and getting your city noticed never hurts. But that is just the backdrop (and, no it is not a murder story as in Devil in the White City, also featuring a world's fair, and the wonder of electricity). Louisa Barrett is the headmistress of a girls' school, and as such she is part of the inner circle of Buffalo, unlike most women in town, who are married and whose primary role is wife/helpmeet. However, Louisa is still a woman, and knows she needs to keep to a certain, limited role. Louisa has a secret. All of her actions are driven by it, and thus the story moves. It is always fascinating to me to read an author's first novel, and to see how well she portrays the attitudes of the time, the status of things, social, scientific, etc.

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## Lorin Cary says

### City of Light

This is Lauren Lefler's first novel, and it's easy to see why it won so many plaudits. (I'm reading it because I was so impressed by her second novel.) Her protagonist, Louisa Barrett, is the headmistress of a school for girls in Buffalo, NY, in 1901. The city is on the verge of hosting the Pan-American Exposition (during which President McKinley is assassinated) and as the Niagra Falls hydroelectric plant expands the city will become even more prominent. In this dynamic context Louisa delicately balances her role in a society which has strict limits for women. She succeeds and is treated as an equal by the city's power brokers. Gradually we learn of secrets in her past. And in the final pages we see how various threads of her life resolve.

Woven through this tale are several subplots: a struggle between preservationists and "progress" oriented businessmen, a muckraking journalist probing the levers of power, Louisa's attractions to Tom Sinclair (director of the hydroelectric plant), how wealthy blacks "must" behave in the dominant culture, and mysterious deaths (the chief engineer at the power plant and his replacement) which may or may not be accidental. A key theme is how a core group of wealthy individuals manipulate economic and social developments in the city.

Lefler crafts her characters with great care, as they are seen through the eyes of Louisa, whether it is Tom Sinclair, the pretentious nouveau rich, the men of standing, or the minor characters.

In many ways, the city of Buffalo is also a character. Lefler's novel shows how the strategically sited city was once a powerhouse destined for greatness. At a time when Detroit (a former powerhouse itself) has just declared bankruptcy, it is a poignant reminder of how changing technologies and population movements, among other things, alter the destiny of a city and its inhabitants.

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## Sarah Mac says

Boring. Slow. Depressing. Too long. Too many infodumps. Not even Rapey Grover Cleveland could inject any zip. And let's face it -- if Rapey Grover Cleveland isn't enough to get your story moving, you need to rethink your plot cycle. :P

In short: blatant bookclub fodder that's fully aware of its Literary Aspects, thereby ruining the enjoyment of reading.

2 stars for the occasional pretty turn-of-phrase. The story itself had potential, but it was squandered by the erudite flag-waving.

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## Cheryl says

This started so well. The distinctive unmarried heroine. Life in the high society of Buffalo. An all-girls school. Electricity, when it first arrived on the scene. Then the fluff took over...

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## Joanne Moyer says

Buffalo NY in 1901 is one of the most important cities in the US, if not the world. With it's numerous ports it is a gateway for shipping to the world. It's industry and electrified streets have made it a model city for the new century and many important people have made it their home.

The city is finishing plans to open the much anticipated Pan-American Exposition at which a new hydroelectric power plant will be opened. The plant is causing much unrest in the city between power brokers supporting it and the conservationists who believe it is taking too much water from Niagara Falls. When one murder and then another mysterious death implicate any number of people involved with both the plant and the conservationists, they begin to worry not only about danger to the plant but to themselves and the secrets they are hiding.

Laura Barrett is Headmistress of Buffalo's most influential school and has many options open to her that most women of her time do not. She has remained in Buffalo because of secrets of her own, but she has no idea how many others know of them and how deeply it involves her in everything that is going on around her

Though overall I enjoyed this book in the end something just never completely clicked for me. The history was interesting -- Buffalo NY Supercity- who knew?? -- but it remains a 3.5 star read

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## Sarah says

I've read well over half of this, so feel a little silly not finishing it off. I'm somewhat less than enchanted, though, so I'm going to be a quitter. The reviews on this were really good, but I had some problems with it. The dialog felt flat to me, and the main character felt as vague, fuzzy and uninteresting as the figure on the cover. And then there's the whole Grover-Cleveland-raped-me plotline. Now, I love when real people make appearances in fiction, and I'm not one to whine about the inaccuracies that are inevitable therein. I'm not reading a history text, it's fiction. I get it. HOWEVER. To make an ex-president--even one who did have some...ahem...personal issues--into a freaking RAPIST seems a little out of line to me.

The book this reminds me most of is Caleb Carr's "The Alienist." But while it does have some of the qualities that made that a great read (panoramic view of society, a well-developed period setting, an interesting mix of genres) it lacked--for me at least--that intense, gripping quality that Carr's book had. There's something that just feels tepid about this book to me, so I'm moving along.

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## Angela says

I love this book for two reasons; it takes place where I grew up in Buffalo, NY, and because I have a particular interest in this era. The detail and historical references of the city of Buffalo take me to the time when our city was bustling with richness and possibilities while preparing for the Pan-American Exhibition. I had to take a drive through it with a new vision and appreciation for buildings that we have seen thousands of times. I have lived here my entire life and never knew the history behind the architecture and many of our well known buildings, such as the Richardson Complex. The explicit detail in what people believed and how they managed to figure out a way to extract electricity for the very first time from the thundering water of Niagara Falls was fascinating!

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### **Elyse Hayes says**

Loved this historical novel set in Buffalo at the turn of the 20th century. The author mentions real places, real buildings, etc. and weaves local history into a mystery. At the time there was a lot of wealth in the city, it was still a major port, the power plant was new, beautiful buildings were being built, they hosted the 1901 PanAmerican Exhibition, and during that, President McKinley was shot. Fascinating. Story really kept my interest all the way through. Written from the viewpoint of the a woman who is the headmistress of a girls' private school in the city (the real school, the Buffalo Seminary, still exists). Not great literature, but skillful, and simply a "good read."

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### **Shelly Sweeney says**

I simply LOVED this book! I am a Buffalo girl and it was really fun to be able to find the house I was living in on the book jacket. I learned a lot about Buffalo history in a very interesting book! I loved how the author wove the fictional story completely into a real setting with real historical facts. I really felt the characters and the story unfolding! I also enjoyed reading about the amazing architecture, as well as the building of the first power plant! Excellent job! Would recommend to anyone, especially a Buffalonian!

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### **Gerry says**

One of the only books I've read with a historical basis in American history outside of wartime, this novel opened a window to a realm of our history I had no knowledge of, and did it with such clarity and such empathetic characterization, it must be rated A+. Belfer's portrait of the male community leaders and the incredible power they wielded over even highly independent women was most enlightening, though I suspect that's one aspect of society that has changed less than I might imagine, at least in those upper reaches where real power exists.

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### **Tim says**

Meh. I really wanted to like this, but it was a struggle. First, history isn't so much inter-weaved as it is patched on. It's jarring to just have historical anecdotes thrown in like footnotes that don't know their place. Things like (not an actual example): We went to X park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1897. Ok, interesting, but not exactly a seamless addition to the narrative.

My second problem is that the whole thing was way too blunt and transparent. The narrator explains everything, holding the reader's hand throughout the story. Oh, you're doing this to be close to Grace? Right, I remember you mentioning that 10 pages ago and every single time something uncomfortable happens. Thanks for the update!

Third, I just didn't care about the characters. There just wasn't enough there to justify a 500 page book. The story could have been told in 200 pages, even with the historical asides. There were just too many words wasted on explaining the narrator's feelings about everything.

Still, it had its moments and I did enjoy learning more about Buffalo. I just wish there was a story in here

that I cared about.

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