



American Lightning: Terror, Mystery, the Birth of Hollywood & the Crime of the Century

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It was an explosion that reverberated across the country—and into the very heart of early-twentieth-century America. On the morning of October 1, 1910, the walls of the Los Angeles Times Building buckled as a thunderous detonation sent men, machinery, and mortar rocketing into the night air. When at last the wreckage had been sifted and the hospital triage units consulted, twenty-one people were declared dead and dozens more injured. But as it turned out, this was just a prelude to the devastation that was to come.

In *American Lightning*, acclaimed author Howard Blum masterfully evokes the incredible circumstances that led to the original “crime of the century”—and an aftermath more dramatic than even the crime itself.

With smoke still wafting up from the charred ruins, the city’s mayor reacts with undisguised excitement when he learns of the arrival, only that morning, of America’s greatest detective, William J. Burns, a former Secret Service man who has been likened to Sherlock Holmes. Surely Burns, already world famous for cracking unsolvable crimes and for his elaborate disguises, can run the perpetrators to ground.

Through the work of many months, snowbound stakeouts, and brilliant forensic sleuthing, the great investigator finally identifies the men he believes are responsible for so much destruction. Stunningly, Burns accuses the men—labor activists with an apparent grudge against the Los Angeles Times’s fiercely anti-union owner—of not just one heinous deed but of being part of a terror wave involving hundreds of bombings.

While preparation is laid for America’s highest profile trial ever—and the forces of labor and capital wage hand-to-hand combat in the streets—two other notable figures are swept into the drama: industry-shaping filmmaker D.W. Griffith, who perceives in these events the possibility of great art and who will go on to alchemize his observations into the landmark film *The Birth of a Nation*; and crusading lawyer Clarence Darrow, committed to lend his eloquence to the defendants, though he will be driven to thoughts of suicide before events have fully played out.

Simultaneously offering the absorbing reading experience of a can’t-put-it-down thriller and the perception-altering resonance of a story whose reverberations continue even today, *American Lightning* is a masterpiece of narrative nonfiction.

American Lightning: Terror, Mystery, the Birth of Hollywood & the Crime of the Century Details

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From Reader Review American Lightning: Terror, Mystery, the Birth of Hollywood & the Crime of the Century for online ebook

Kemper says

Fans of The Devil in the White City should like this one. It's narrative history set against the backdrop of the bombing of a conservative turn-of-the-century newspaper. Clarence Darrow and D.W. Griffith are a couple of the more famous people the book tracks through the case. Lightweight history but an entertaining read.

Anna says

I agree with the reviews on this book that likened it to The Devil in the White City Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America ; this book had the same two plot lines converging, famous characters, and a sensational murder mystery behind it, but Larson's book was more deftly written.

It was a strain trying to weave D.W. Griffith and the evolution of Hollywood in to the L.A. Times bombing for the length of the entire book; I could buy into it for the first hundred pages, but then it seemed to be reaching.

That having been said, "American Lightning" had a great background history of Hollywood in the early 20th century, and on how the San Fernando Valley evolved from desert to suburbia.

I'd recommend it as a library read or paperback purchase, but not hardback.

Sjo says

Written in quasi novel style, this is about one of the original acts of domestic terrorism in the US when the LA Times building was blown to bits in 1910 killing 21 people and injuring many more. In covering this event, Howard Blum weaves a great detective story featuring the "American Sherlock Holmes" William J Burns around the twin pillars of the rise of Hollywood and the escalation of the violence between capital and labor that gripped the early 20th century (The Soviet Union revolution would occur a decade after the bombing). The LA Times was blown up as its owner was committed anti-union. Burns arrives on the bomb scene and over time uncovers a national terrorist conspiracy led by extreme elements within labor that lands in a trial room drama featuring a philandering Clarence Darrow--who then has to face the music on jury tampering and bribery charge after the trial. My one thought after reading this book, was my amazement that I'd never heard this story before, or that a movie hasn't been made about it. It's grand in ambition and at its best when zeroing in on Burn's amazing detective work and the organized labor violence that occurred in the early 20th century...some have hammered this book as superficial and tangential in its incorporation of certain story elements. I disagree, and think readers should pick interesting elements from this to pursue in more depth with the benefit of context. No historical event lives in isolation. Historical lines run deep and across.

Paula says

A couple of years ago, "The Devil in the White City" kicked off a trend of writing history books with a narrative, almost fictional style, and "American Lightning" is clearly indebted to it. They even designed the cover with a similar aesthetic. I thought it was the same author until I checked the "Other Works" page. Devious, yes. And in this case, acceptable, because it was nearly as good.

"Lightning" follows the 'American Sherlock Homes' as he pieces together the Crime of the Century. No, not O.J. And not the Lindbergh babynapping, either. The ORIGINAL Crime of the Century took place closer to the start of the century, when a group of anarchists or possibly unionists or maybe even the owner himself blew up a non-union printing press. Meanwhile, D.W. Griffiths is busy inventing the movie business (yeah, that's right, Birth of a Nation guy) and Clarence Darrow is brought in to defend the accused. Blum ties in so many big names, it's almost like reading the People mag of the early 1900's. And it all goes down, appropriately enough, in Los Angeles.

Part of the fun for me was finding out the origins of why L.A. is such terrible city (as in, urban center) today. And if you thought our justice system is screwed up now, I highly recommend you read "Lightning." Witness intimidation, out-and-out bribery, wheeling and dealing and more weren't so much expected as they were mandatory. "Lightning" is a fun, fast-paced read that will actually make you feel like we've made progress in the last hundred years.

Robert says

Generally a very good read, but I have a couple of quibbles--No index (a horrible choice for a book of history), a couple of factual boners--the population of Los Angeles was closer to 350,000 in 1910 than to the 900,000 cited in the book, and "A Corner in Wheat" was NOT 32 frames long--that would have made it approximately 2 seconds in length--the author may have meant 32 scenes.

The idea of the book--that William J. Burns, Clarence Darrow and filmmaker D.W. Griffith, acting separately at a moment in time, forever changed the shape of America's future is a grand theme--but not fully realized. The D.W. Griffith stuff seems grafted onto the story and not organic to it. This becomes especially evident when he discusses the 1913 film "From Dusk to Dawn" in which Darrow appears and the author feebly suggests that the film, which Griffith had nothing to do with, was nevertheless "influenced" by the master filmmaker.

Very entertaining and well worth reading, "American Lightning" was a little too precious for me to give it a wholehearted endorsement.

Karla says

Anyone who's delved into the subgenre of "popular history" has probably run across a title or two that is a rambling, bloated mess with, perhaps, one irrelevant narrative thread inserted into the main premise with all the subtlety of a crowbar.

This is such a book.

Just what does "The Birth of Hollywood" have to do with anarchists bombing a newspaper office? Well,

D.W. Griffith made movies about social issues. And some of the personalities involved with the case probably watched at least one of them.

What does his perving on Mary Pickford & Lillian Gish have to do with the event at hand?

Absolutely nothing, really. But Griffith does bring the sex angle with his well-known Victorian fetish for virginal womanhood.

What does that have to with anything?

Absolutely nothing, really. (Bet you knew I was gonna say that.) Word count, maybe? No maybe about it. Most definitely.

I'm surprised Blum didn't pull a muscle making some of the stretches he did linking things to Griffith. Even though DW was the most interesting part of the book, it simply did not fit into the grand scheme and the details were things I'd heard about before ad nauseum elsewhere. Plus, Blum was lazy and repeated canards about Griffith's innovations. He did NOT do "the first close-up" in the movies. Not even close.

The writing wasn't that great, either. I was hoping the bombing plot would be interesting, but that got dull as well. It was a Frankenbook & a disappointing one at that. I'd rather read some long article about the case on Wiki or Murderpedia.

Dkeslin says

Starting with a bomb that was set in the Los Angeles Times building, this nonfiction thriller leads to a veiled plot across the whole united states involving labor unions and leads to a trial involving Clarence Darrow and weaving the web to include D. W. Griffith and the birth of Hollywood moviemaking. A rapid page turner that reads like a great fiction detective novel.

Tony says

AMERICAN LIGHTNING. (2008). Howard Blum. ***.

Mr. Blum has quite a list of history books under his belt. Most of them, according to other reviews, were written in the popular narrative style – kind of like a newspaper would use, though I can't say for sure what newspaper – and all have sold well. This book was an Edgar Award winner for Best Non-Fiction. Its subject is the destruction of the 'Times' newspaper building in Los Angeles, with the attendant death of 21 people. I was not aware of the story behind this event, but was provided a useful background by the author. The early 1900s were a time of conflict between labor and business. The conflict reached epic proportions when both sides became more aggressive and members of each group began to die when action by the other side was taken. Into this maelstrom, three men stood out in their attempts to ameliorate the hatreds of one group for the other: William Burns, D. W. Griffith, and Clarence Darrow. Burns as a detective and the founder of the Burns detective agency. Griffith was an innovative film maker and became famous through his films, especially "Birth of a Nation." Darrow was a well-known lawyer who later became famous by his participation in the landmark "Monkey Trial." It is the story of these times and these men that is the subject of this book.

Beth Cato says

This book is excellent when focused on the central mystery of the horrible 1911 explosion of the Los Angeles Times building that left 21 people dead, the war between unions and capitalists, and the topsy-turvy court case that followed. Much of the book follows the efforts--outright unconstitutional at times--of the "American Sherlock Holmes," William J. Burns as he pursues justice.

Where the book falters in a major way, though, is in how it markets itself: Terror, Mystery, & the Birth of Hollywood. The narrative wanders to follow D.W. Griffith and how he changed the way films were made through new techniques and marketable stars like Mary Pickford. It simply does not fit with the main plot. This is especially frustrating for me because I picked it up for the Hollywood angle, and while I was fascinated by the real life detective work and court case, I can't help but feel like I was terribly mislead. Judging by other reviews, I am certainly not the only one to feel this way.

Barney says

Ohhhhhh man! If the current folks complaining about President Obama being a Socialist could read this book! Not only does Eugene Debs make an appearance...but so does Big Bill Haywood! Awesome! The text focuses on the Oct 1, 1910 destruction of the LA Times building. It seems that the building was blown up using dynamite, killing 21 people. This is one of those events that I had no idea about.

The text is a story of three people: William Burns, Clarence Darrow and D.W. Griffith. Burns was the operator of the most dreaded private detection agency this side of the Pinkertons in 1910. Darrow was by this point a famous attorney in his 50s. Griffith was a movie director who could not keep his dick in his pants. In a slightly more important note, he invented the close up. Yes, this is a "real crime" story. But, it is fascinating.

Los Angeles, much like the rest of the country in 1910, was beset by the age old battle of capitalists vs. labor. When the Times building went up in smoke the question became who was guilty, not why they did it. This is the first thing the reader notices. In 1910, growing up in poverty or earning \$5 for a 65 hour week was not considered reasons for committing a crime.

Both sides looked at the trial as something that was to be played outside the courtroom. Bloom lays wasted the idea that the OJ or Chuck Manson case changed the way criminals are judged in this country. I could not help but think of Casey Anthony while I read this book. Media convicted her years ago; they then labeled the verdict "surprising". In this country, we try people every day via polls and other assorted bull shit. This did not start in the 1980s. Bloom convincingly argues that it begins in the first decade of the 20th century.

In some ways, the crime itself is secondary to the politics surrounding it, which was Darrow's biggest problem with the case. Darrow was reluctant to take the case because of the energy he expended in a corruption case in San Francisco five years before. If people currently think that Fox News and MSNBC are

partisan, the media companies are ball-less wienies compared to outfits like the LA Times or NY Times in the early 1900s. Bloom's portrait of both sides is even handed.

What is most compelling is Billy Burns, the private detective who is charged with solving the crime. At one point, he is asked while doing a search "Do we not have rights?" Burns replied "Not in this case you do not." It is here that Bloom's narrative is both the most compelling and most frustrating. The actions of both sides (bribing witnesses, bullying, kidnapping witnesses) is carried on with not one jot of thought for civil liberties. In fact, civil liberties seem an anathema to the capitalists. Bloom does not explore this as much as I would like, but the reader can swing his/her own way on that matter. What does matter is this is a story that deserves to be told, and Bloom does tell it very well.

Jan says

I honestly cannot believe that this book doesn't have a higher rating on here. This is one of the best non-fiction books that I have read in a very long time.

Ostensibly about the 1910 bombing of the LA Times building (which killed 21 people), it plays out more like a "whodunit." Blum interweaves the story of three famous men - William J. Burns, "America's Sherlock Holmes," the private detective hired to catch the bomber; Clarence Darrow, the "peoples' lawyer" who was hired to defend the men accused of the bombing; and D.W. Griffith, the famous director who basically turned LA into the movie capital of the world. In all honestly, I still don't really know what Griffith had to do with this story, but reading about him was so interesting that I didn't really care what the point of including him was.

There is just so much to love about this book. It was all fascinating to me. I enjoyed reading about the underhanded, capitalist shenanigans of Otis, the owner of the Times. I enjoyed reading about the labor vs. capital "civil war" that was raging across the nation at the time (and the echoes of which have begun to rage in our country again, 100 years later). I really, really enjoyed reading about the detective work that Burns and his men did to capture the bombers, and about the nationwide conspiracy of bombings that they discovered. Usually books like this get boring when it comes to the trial, but this one didn't: yellow journalism, misleading PR campaigns, attempts to buy off witnesses and jurors. Seriously, what is not to love about this book?

I found it astonishingly readable and accessible. I finished it in a mere 3 days, which is pretty good for a 300+ page non-fiction book. I really would recommend this book to anyone, but if you have a particular interest in America of the 1890s-1930s like I do, I think you'd love it just as much as I did.

William Thomas says

I couldn't remember for the life of me what this book reminded me of. A magic trick maybe? All sleight of hand and prestige, but a closer look has us realizing we can see all the wires and the false bottoms and right up its sleeve. But more than that, it was more like a con. Like that old folk tale about the travelers who trick a town into giving them food?

Stone Soup. That's what this book is. I didn't realize it at first, but as it wore on, it became clear that this piece was more of a contrivance than anything else. It has little flavor and no meat. It's a pot of water with a few stones in it and tricks the reader into giving it more credit than it deserves.

The main reason that this book seems to have dazzled some readers? Howard Blum is an extremely capable writer. Stylistically, at least. The narrative feels comfortably conversational, and he's able to weave a somewhat interesting web of intrigue with some very tenuous connections. Yes, tenuous. The fact that Blum tries his damndest to place DW Griffith at the heart of this narrative tells us that he really didn't have a story he could sell until he could link it very loosely to the "birth of Hollywood". Because who wants to read a history book with substance over scandal? may be the only one.

What bothered me most about the book is the fact that you can clearly tell Blum wholly understands that his "birth of Hollywood" schtick is just that. He doesn't even bother to connect the threads in 99% of the book (which I actually have to credit him for because at least he doesn't flat out lie to us). Instead of makiing this an intellectually sound piece of reporting or even a fantastic history book on labor struggles, he instead tries to make it seem as if this is the beginning of the end for print media and the start of a war between movie studios and newspapers. It absolutely blows my mind as to why this became an embroiled murder Sherlockian murder mystery as opposed to a substantial tome about labor practices, labor policies and the history of Los Angeles at the turn of the century.

While Blum can write, he often falters in descriptive narration and it makes most of his characterization awkward. It feels forced. Again, like he's trying to put meat on the bones and beef up a story that could have been a great 10,000 word essay instead.

All in all, there may not be many other books written on the Times bombing, but that may be for good reason. ALthough Blum can bill it as the 'crime of the century', as any good newspaper man would, it really doesn't stack up against other domestic terror attacks or other heinous crimes that have happened in the 90 years that follow this one very petty crime.

Grade: D

Beth says

This book follows three influential men from the early 1900's who helped shape and change American culture. I really enjoyed reading about the "crime of the century" and Burn's search to uncover the suspects. I didn't care for D.W. as much because he didn't really respect women. And Darrow was an interesting character as well.

I kept thinking the book was going to end and yet the story continued. I see that the author was trying to show the impact each person had, but I guess my true curiosity ended with the verdict.

The history was well told in a way that interested me and wasn't dry. Despite the never-ending end, I enjoyed the book.

Diane says

While this book promises to shed light on the birth of Hollywood and a crime of the century, it fails in quite significant ways. The author weaves three narratives together: the detective work of Billy Burns to solve a bombing in Los Angeles, the efforts of Clarence Darrow to defend the bombers, and the nascent film work of D.W. Griffith. But the attempt to link these three fails because Griffith had precious little to do with the other men, and nothing to do with the bombing or its aftermath. His early film work is grafted onto the other two narratives in an unconvincing and pointless gesture. And while Darrow was hired to defend the bombers, the case never went to trial. The bombers pleaded out. So there was no courtroom drama that justifies giving Darrow such high profile attention in the narrative.

A stronger element is the focus on Burns and his efforts to solve the crime. Here the story moves with some energy. Had the book focused on Burns as the main character, and followed that line of development, it might have made a better overall book. But it seems the author felt there was not enough there for such a book, and chose to pad the account with extraneous details about Griffith and Darrow.

Another significant problem is that none of the sources for historical information are cited. Blum explains in an afterward that he is a reporter, and therefore feels he is exempt from footnoting. But frankly, the account seems to play fast and loose with conversations, and supposed internal thoughts and motivations of characters. And Blum errs with some basic facts. For example, it was not "Frank Dixon" who wrote "The Clansmen," it was Thomas Dixon, Jr. Blum also indulges in some sweeping claims about the the transformational effect of the LA bombing without offering any proof. And most glaringly, Blum makes no effort to tell the story of organized labor, the struggles that led up to the bombing campaign, and why that became a strategy in the fight. There is simply no attention paid to the labor movement or the condition of the working class at all, except when it comes to the defense of the bombers. And yet, understanding what led up to these extreme tactics is key.

What the reader is left with is narratives that don't deliver, dubious use of primary sources, and big holes in the historical account. This book is not worth the time.

Shelly says

I was looking for a light, quick, entertaining read that I didn't have to think too much about so I picked up this book b/c I thought how can I lose with a true-crime novel about unionist leaders accused of blowing up the L.A. Times building b/c they didn't like the press they were getting, a detective known as the "American Sherlock Holmes", D.W. Griffith, and a very young city of Los Angeles? I like History, I like crime stories, it's a win-win. Wong-Wong.

Although the story did have it's moments my main issue was that there wasn't nearly enough meat there for a full-lengthed novel. The Author was a journalist (for Vanity Fair), and it shows. His style is choppy and hardened, and the story is presented in sort of a "just the facts, maam" way. When Blum does editorialize, he doesn't back up anything he is saying with historical facts, or examples. For instance he wraps the story up into neat little packages concerning the detective, the defense attorney, and D.W. Griffith (the latter with only a loose connection to the case) and says stuff like, "America could now move forward," and "America's

equilibrium had been restored." I wanted to know why the entire nation was at a stand still over a trial involving the bombing of a newspaper building. I'm not saying it wasn't, I mean, I remember where I was when OJ's Ford Bronco was on the run, but he doesn't give us any insight as to the effect this case had on the outside world. Certainly not to the point where the wheels of America had ceased spinning until a resolution came about.

All in all I was disappointed because, as I said, all the components for a great story were there. Sadly, I hate to say, Blum failed in execution.

I still think it would make a great movie, depending on who would be assigned to write the screenplay.
