



The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction

Linda Gordon

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In 1904, New York nuns brought forty Irish orphans to a remote Arizona mining camp, to be placed with Catholic families. The Catholic families were Mexican, as was the majority of the population. Soon the town's Anglos, furious at this "interracial" transgression, formed a vigilante squad that kidnapped the children and nearly lynched the nuns and the local priest. The Catholic Church sued to get its wards back, but all the courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, ruled in favor of the vigilantes.

The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction tells this disturbing and dramatic tale to illuminate the creation of racial boundaries along the Mexican border. Clifton/Morenci, Arizona, was a "wild West" boomtown, where the mines and smelters pulled in thousands of Mexican immigrant workers. Racial walls hardened as the mines became big business and whiteness became a marker of superiority. These already volatile race and class relations produced passions that erupted in the "orphan incident." To the Anglos of Clifton/Morenci, placing a white child with a Mexican family was tantamount to child abuse, and they saw their kidnapping as a rescue.

Women initiated both sides of this confrontation. Mexican women agreed to take in these orphans, both serving their church and asserting a maternal prerogative; Anglo women believed they had to "save" the orphans, and they organized a vigilante squad to do it. In retelling this nearly forgotten piece of American history, Linda Gordon brilliantly recreates and dissects the tangled intersection of family and racial values, in a gripping story that resonates with today's conflicts over the "best interests of the child."

The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction Details

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From Reader Review The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction for online ebook

itpdx says

This is a fascinating piece of history. In 1904 a young Catholic priest from France serving a parish in a copper mining camp in the mountains of Arizona helped the New York Foundling Hospital arrange for placements of Irish American orphans in his parish. His parish was almost exclusively Mexican. When the orphans arrived, the local Anglos decided that the white orphans should not be placed with Mexican families and kidnapped those who were already with their new families.

Gordon weaves the story of the orphans with details about copper mining, racism, vigilantism, orphanage management, company towns and many other illuminating pieces of information.

One thing I would change is putting the information about the 1903 strike that happened a little over a year before the orphans arrival earlier in the book. It was a pivotal incident that involved some of the same people. It would have made more sense to me to have had this information earlier in the book.

Judine Brey says

While this book is an interesting account of a little known historical event, I think it would have been more effective told in a different format - either from two perspectives (Arizona and New York) or chronological.

Therese says

Couldn't finish. Too long and drawn out.

Becky says

Anyone familiar with children's books has probably read one of the many stories of orphans who were sent west by train from east coast orphanages to adoptive families. Because of who recommended this book, I assumed, without reading anything about the book, that this was another of those books. I was, therefore, surprised to find that the book was historical in nature, totally meant for adults, and actually classified in the Dewey Decimal Classification system at 308.5, Ethnic and National Groups. And this is where it belongs. The book analyzes the racial nomenclature, classes, and relationships of the largely Anglo and Mexican townspeople of two Arizona copper mining towns in the early 1900's and the events surrounding the arrival of a train of orphans who were to be adopted by Catholic families, all of whom happened to be Mexican. Although the book uses the orphans' arrival as a jumping-off point, it is actually a study of what happened among the various racial groups when the children arrived. It wasn't good, and it would take far longer than I am willing to spend to try to explain it. That's what the book is for. I found that reading the book gave me more insight into Mexican-American culture than I had gained in 22 years of teaching in schools whose students were primarily minority (in Texas, that used to mean Mexican, though in the last 10-15 years, the minority population has come to include more and more students from Central and South America), and it

gave me a much clearer understanding into the politics of border security and illegal immigration in Arizona. The book was well-written by a Harvard prof and filled with footnotes. I'd recommend that anyone with even a remote interest in the politics of immigration read the book. Although focused on one location and one event at one time, it gave me insights that could be broadly applied to the current attitudes about "others" in the U.S. Read it.

Robin says

So good and then somewhat boring. I was fascinated with the Arizona history. Racism was obvious but I have to admit I have mixed feelings about the whole incident especially for that day and age. I feel so bad for the Mexican women especially since they were planning and getting excited for children, how they too must have been shocked when only white children came on the train. Such poor organization and lack of communication as to have something that big go wrong. I found the whole story bizarre and interesting. The whole delving into the mining background, I can see the necessity but it wasn't all that interesting to me.

Marsha says

This book is a hybrid easy to read and still steeped in academia. While the title suggests that the book's focus is on the Arizona Orphan Abduction, the abduction serves more as a catalyst for a look at the social, labor, race and feminist history of the mining towns of the southwest. Having picked it up to read about a dramatic moment in history, I was somewhat disappointed to be reading more of a general history. If you're looking for an interesting presentation of the social history of that time, this would be a delight.

Martha Fiorentini says

Interesting narrative about a little known chapter in the Orphan Train movement around the turn of the last century.

I liked the chapters regarding the actual incident but got bogged down in the alternate chapters regarding the history of unionizing in that area, sociological and cultural aspects of all involved.

It was informative.

Penny Fleckenstein says

Sad & so unjust & how we treat children.

Kate Shannon says

You have to read this to understand how truly appalling this situation was. Rich, white racism at its worst.

Alisa says

This is a scholarly read - incredibly thoroughly researched and documented - and it does not ever attempt to read like anything else. This episode in Arizona history built upon the groundwork for the economic, political and racial views that founded the state, established its elite classes, defined both the citizens and the non-citizens by color, religion and status, empowered women, particularly Anglo women, and drove the mining companies in the mountains in the Clifton-Morenci areas to achieve great wealth. Should we be embarrassed and feel guilty, especially through the current perspectives? Definitely. Are those same powers still exerting those impacts? Pretty much. This book will tell you about the expedition that led a Catholic agency in NYC to ship 40 Irish orphans to this small slice of AZ to be adopted by Mexican families in that area.

Steph says

A great book dealing with issues related to Catholicism and race, through the lens of the kidnapping by Anglo families of New York Irish-American orphans placed with Mexican families in Arizona.

Rachel Longstaff says

This book brings out shocking race prejudice of that place and time. A great deal of research went into the story, which is admirable, but make it hard to read through to the end.

John Ermer says

This was a great read. I enjoyed Gordon's easy to read prose, driving narrative, and description. However, I did take issue with the assumptions she makes about the historical actors. I also question some of Gordon's stylistic choices and methodology. That said, I found this to be a worthwhile read, and, while published in 1999 and about a seemingly inconsequential event from over a century ago, relevant to present political discourse.

Patricia says

A dry pedantic recitation in paragraph form of every minute detail unearthed in research about two small copper mining towns in Arizona in the early 1900s. Academic historians may enjoy this book, but I pity the students who find this title on their "Required Reading" list.

The book has been misleadingly titled. Most of the book concerns the socio-economic-political-racial environments of the towns with relatively few pages devoted to the orphans.

Food to eat while reading: You will be drowning in details, so look for something light and airy to snack on.

Gretchen says

She found an incredible story and did meticulous research, as one would expect of Linda Gordon. This book alone could have set up all the major themes of my U.S. History course first quarter (1877-1919). Unfortunately, the writing is competent but dull, the story belabored to the point of exhaustion, and I couldn't blame the students for wearying of the book when I found it tedious myself.
