

Radium silence! Oncologist's "Radium Girls"-inspired thriller

There has latterly been a growing trend in France for novels tied somehow or other into working conditions. And there would be no end to the list of fiction works set against general malaise in the corporate world.

That this new literary seam is a rich one to mine points to the growing unease surrounding our relationship to work. While these kinds of novels are increasingly crowding out bookshop shelves, detective novels on the same vein are scarcer. Yet it is precisely the strict conventions of this genre that have been chosen by Jean-Marc Cosset, an oncologist in the day job and spare-time detective novelist. His job as a radiotherapist at the Curie Institute in Paris has helped him unearth the very topic to get his literary teeth into. His second thriller is inspired by the "Radium Girls" affair, a scandal little-known on this side of the pond, but a case that launched the modern day U.S. labour movement.

In the early 1920s, women workers for the U.S. Radium Corporation – a firm producing glow-in-the-dark watches for the U.S. Army in particular – began complaining of various ailments: some were losing teeth, others had agonising jaw pain or skin necrosis. Many were diagnosed with anaemia. The women displaying these puzzling symptoms were employed in painting watch dials with a mixture of zinc and radium using a fine-tipped brush. This was precision work, so they regularly used their lips to twirl a sharp point on the brushes. The firm's chemists

designed the radioactive paint from behind lead screens, but the 70-odd women workers handled it unprotected.

The first death in 1922 passed virtually unremarked. Without the resolve of one victim, Grace Fryer, the scandal might never have come to light. With four of her co-workers, she sought out a lawyer willing to take the case to court. A trial was finally held in 1927, which ended in an agreement between the parties and the payment of modest compensation to the victims.

Jean-Marc Cosset's novel plunges the reader into early 1930s America, alternating historical fact and fiction. As with any self-respecting thriller, dead bodies are on the menu from the start. The bodies of Jeremy Goldsach, the son of the Radium Corporation's CEO, and Albina Larice, a company worker, are found in the wreckage of a sports car fifty feet below an overpass. Many more will follow. The company lawyer is found choked to death with a fistful of dollars, followed by an academic chemist whose face is covered in a strange luminous paint. Other scientists and notables in the town of Orange (New Jersey) soon suffer the same macabre fate. The one thing they have in common is the 1927 lawsuit between the U.S. Radium Corporation and what the press dubbed the "Radium Girls".

Cosset uses flashbacks to explain the links between the avenging killer's deadly trek through New Jersey and the main protagonists in the trial. The reader gradually

discovers why, despite the number of workers affected and the scientific evidence on the effects of radium on the body, the bosses of the U.S. Radium Corporation got away with it. We come across lawyers skilled in the art of witness manipulation and disinformation, journalists quick to champion buccaneering businessmen and much less than objective men of science. It is this passage from the plot that most resonates with more recent scandals, calling to mind the asbestos-cement barons cosseted away behind the walls of their Flanders country houses or luxuriating in retirement in their florid Latin American paradises.

—Denis Grégoire

Radium girl
(in French)

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