



Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets off a Struggle for the Soul of America

J. Anthony Lukas

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Hailed as "toweringly important" (Baltimore Sun), "a work of scrupulous and significant reportage" (E. L. Doctorow), and "an unforgettable historical drama" (Chicago Sun-Times), "Big Trouble" brings to life the astonishing case that ultimately engaged President Theodore Roosevelt, Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, and the politics and passions of an entire nation at century's turn.

After Idaho's former governor is blown up by a bomb at his garden gate at Christmastime 1905, America's most celebrated detective, Pinkerton James McParland, takes over the investigation. His daringly executed plan to kidnap the radical union leader "Big Bill" Haywood from Colorado to stand trial in Idaho sets the stage for a memorable courtroom confrontation between the flamboyant prosecutor, progressive senator William Borah, and the young defender of the dispossessed, Clarence Darrow.

"Big Trouble" captures the tumultuous first decade of the twentieth century, when capital and labor, particularly in the raw, acquisitive West, were pitted against each other in something close to class war.

Lukas paints a vivid portrait of a time and place in which actress Ethel Barrymore, baseball phenom Walter Johnson, and editor William Allen White jostled with railroad magnate E. H. Harriman, socialist Eugene V. Debs, gunslinger Charlie Siringo, and Operative 21, the intrepid Pinkerton agent who infiltrated Darrow's defense team. This is a grand narrative of the United States as it charged, full of hope and trepidation, into the twentieth century.

Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets off a Struggle for the Soul of America Details

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Florence says

This could have been a very simple story. A bloody murder was committed in Idaho against an ex-governor who had enemies among union miners, a suspect was rounded up, a trial took place, and there was a bit of a surprise at the end. Instead, we are treated to a full immersion in early 20th century life. There is a diversion on each page of this weighty tome. Lukas wanders off into the subject of the Western Federation of Mining and its colorful leader, "Big Bill" Haywood; the history of the Pinkertons Detective Agency and its most famous detective James McParland, a sworn enemy of miners and friend of mine owners; the American Theatre, baseball, the life of Clarence Darrow, American Socialism, immigrant life in the lower east side of New York City, the Buffalo soldiers. I could go on and on. Most of the diversions were interesting and filled in my knowledge of corruption throughout American history.

Chris Clement says

3.5

Sallie says

This book has been making the rounds of the Monroe clan for a few years, and I finally snagged it from daughter Dawn over Father's Day weekend. Interesting story made more so from the fact my great-aunt Doris Steuenberg Knowles was the granddaughter of the victim - or the guy who was killed anyway. It's a big, heavy book (750 pgs before the notes, index etc), so it'll take me a while to read it. I'll take breaks and read sections of my other currently-reading book as I go.

8/19/12 - still plugging away at this book. I'm a bit more than half way through it, with time out while we were at the lake to read some of the books on my nook. Easier to carry that than this hefty volume. It is an interesting book with lots of background information on the various interest groups involved. What a time to have lived though! I prefer today with all its problems. (does that 'its' require an apostrophe??? - gad, I never remember the rule :-)

9/25/12 - I finally made it to the actual trial! I think I have 2 more chapters and the epilogue to go, but I already know what happens to Harry Orchard since my cousin Brenda (great-granddaughter of Frank Steuenberg) told me and of the books she owns now that were her mom's about the her family and the aftermath of the murder and trial. Onward to the finish!

10/14/12 - Finished! It is a fascinating story, although I felt there were many chapters that could have been condensed from 50 pages to 10 and still gotten the information across. I debated between 3 and 4 stars - 3 1/2 would fit my feelings better. In reading about the politics of the times and the capitalists (many of the robber baron breed), I came away thinking that not much had changed in those arenas since 1905 and later. It all sounded so familiar, although we are a bit less violent than they were back then.

I'm happy I read this book, but I'll probably never read it again! 750+ pages is too much, unless it's a Harry Potter book ;-}

Terry Christensen says

The 1907 trial of Big Bill Haywood and two other leaders of the miners' union for conspiracy to assassinate a former governor of Idaho who helped mine owners suppress the unions is the central subject of Big Trouble, but this book goes WAY beyond that specific event to delve into the state of the nation at the time, particularly the taking of sides in the struggle of labor v. capital. And I do mean WAY beyond. President Teddy Roosevelt and actress Ethel Barrymore and countless others got involved at some point or another. And Lukas takes the occasion of the engagement of various characters to go into the state of their professions at the time. Acting for Barrymore; how trial lawyers functioned (Clarence Darrow for the defense, William Borah for the prosecution); the evolving state of journalism as the press converges on the trial (this was the era of the muckrakers); forestry when Gifford Pinchot comes to town; plus baseball, corporate corruption, immigration and the acceptance of various sorts of immigrants, and much, much more. Big Trouble is a brilliant and extraordinarily comprehensive book, but I could have done with more on the actual trial and the defendants and a little less of everything else. 754 pages with 200-plus pages of notes and index. Don't try reading it in bed.

Nate says

SPOILER ALERT

Packed with digressions, its more of a historical encyclopedia of its era than a tight narrative, this is a very well researched tome.

The author's anti-union bias is hinted at throughout the book, but in the afterward he reveals himself, declaring the guilt of the accused (all of whom were acquitted BTW) based on correspondence between two socialist journalists a decade after the fact. One of those journalists was utterly discredited by other evidence presented within the book, so its a pretty weak hook to hang someone's historical reputation on.

Lots of bad actors back in the day. Reminds me at what bitter cost what little measure of workplace safety and dignity we have today was purchased.

Checkman says

A little background as it relates to this book. Frank Steunenberg (August 8, 1861 – December 30, 1905) was the fourth Governor of the State of Idaho, serving from 1897 until 1901. He is perhaps best known for his 1905 assassination by one-time union member ,and paid assassin, Harry Orchard, who was also an informant for the Cripple Creek Mine Owners' Association. Orchard attempted to implicate leaders of the radical Western Federation of Miners in the assassination. The labor leaders were found not guilty in two trials (Clarence Darrow defended them), but Orchard spent the rest of his life in prison.

Steunenberg was assassinated in retaliation for his actions that he took in 1899. That year miners in Northern Idaho struck, demanding higher wages. Steunenberg declared martial law and requested Federal troops to enforce it - the National Guard was in the Philippines in 1899 . He got Federal troops (black troops from the

24th Infantry Regiment) and the labor union's strike was broken. Steunenberg earned the undying enmity of the union; for not only were miners rounded up without due process, but the troops were black. Black soldiers arresting white men in a time when racism was legal and institutionalized. An unforgivable act to many in the United States in 1899. The governor became the mortal enemy of labor after that and ,eventually, the union got even.

I'm a police officer with the City of Caldwell, Idaho and I have lived and worked in Caldwell for sixteen years. When we first moved to the city we lived one block north from where the old Steunenberg residence once sat (1602 Dearborn Street). The very spot where he was killed by the bomb. So the book has more than just an academic interest for me. Amazingly there are many who have lived here their whole lives and they know nothing about Steunenberg's life or death. But I'm getting off track.

It is a huge book ,crammed with information, and took me almost three months to get through it. Not surprisingly the chapters dealing with the actual investigation, the individuals directly involved and the state of criminal justice in the United States in 1905, were the ones that were of particular interest to me. I read through those chapters almost with pausing ,which is significant, since most of the chapters average forty to fifty pages. This is not a beach book.

I found the book to be fascinating with microscopic historical details that are necessary. The book gives you an in-depth look at a specific time in the country's history. The extensive backgrounds that Lukas provides for the many characters are also essential. For not only do they help the reader to understand the involved people, but the details also help to explain why the nation was like it was in 1906. Different but similar to the United States in 2015.

Lukas did an excellent job showing this time and the many tensions that existed. And ,whether he meant to or not, Lukas also shows that we aren't so far removed from our ancestors. They too were convinced that their time was the worst and that the world was going to hell in a hand-basket. They knew it and nothing anyone said would change their minds. Somehow I find that refreshing.

If nothing else this book should dispel the myth that living in the early 1900's were simpler than contemporary times. Nonsense. The early 1900's were just as stressful for those living then as 2015 can be for us. The book Humanizes what seems to be a rather distant era. It adds color to those great old black and white photos.

Gary Dale Cearley says

This intensely alluring tome from Anthony Lukas was one of the most interesting books I have ever read - bar none.

The killing of former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg at his home and the whirlwind that surrounded his trial, the twentieth century's first "trial of the century", is a piece of American history few of us these days are familiar with. Anthony Lukas brought this tale to life with vignettes coloring the story of the era, providing an intriguing and appealing backdrop to assassination and its aftermath. Though the research was

meticulous the book was laid to paper artfully and masterfully. One came to know intimately both the victim, former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg, and the murderer, Harry Orchard, as well as the others accused in plotting the murder from Colorado; union leaders Charles Moyer, Bill Haywood and George Pettibone.

Anthony Lukas provides not only the happenings of the case but also gives us the Zeitgeist of our nation in the early 1900's. James McParland of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, Clarence Darrow, Samuel Gompers and many other movers and shakers play their important roles in the case. The width and breadth of the tale left me fascinated. No sides taken and no punches pulled, one was also left with the feeling that the unionists were every bit as bad a lot as the very capitalist slave drivers they fought against.

Big Trouble is the kind of book that makes you want to be an historian yourself. It was full of dramatic scenes taken off the pages of the story of the American West. This is a story that I would have been proud to have written myself and I am glad that I spent the time to read it. Though I am left with the feeling that this must have been his magnum opus, I have now vowed to read the author's other works.

Michael Mulvihill says

Possibly the most engrossing history I have read. It does read like a novel, but with the occasional brief detour to explain who the "Buffalo Soldiers" were, at they appear in the tale as the first black soldiers to guard white men, the mine strikers who are at the base of this story. The great labor leaders of the robber baron era are essentially kidnapped by agents of the state of Idaho to try for the murder of a past governor who put down the miners' strike. The cast includes legal and political luminaries, sports and entertainment celebrities, villainous private eyes- the Pinkertons, indians, mormons, soldiers.....

Though seven hundred plus pages, it will not sit at the bedside for even a week.

Terry says

The 1907 trial of Big Bill Haywood and two other leaders of the miners' union for conspiracy to assassinate a former governor of Idaho who helped mine owners suppress the unions is the central subject of Big Trouble, but this book goes WAY beyond that specific event to delve into the state of the nation at the time, particularly the taking of sides in the struggle of labor v. capital. And I do mean WAY beyond. President Teddy Roosevelt and actress Ethel Barrymore and countless others got involved at some point or another. And Lukas takes the occasion of the engagement of various characters to go into the state of their professions at the time. Acting for Barrymore; how trial lawyers functioned (Clarence Darrow for the defense, William Borah for the prosecution); the evolving state of journalism as the press converges on the trial (this was the era of the muckrakers); forestry when Gifford Pinchot comes to town; plus baseball, corporate corruption, immigration and the acceptance of various sorts of immigrants, and much, much more. Big Trouble is a brilliant and extraordinarily comprehensive book, but I could have done with more on the actual trial and the defendants and a little less of everything else. 754 pages with 200-plus pages of notes and index. Don't try reading it in bed.

Erik Graff says

For contemporary (broadly defined) history I will usually prefer a professional journalist to an academic historian. They often write better, presumably because, unlike academics, they have to be able to sell copy to publishers and readers.

Lukas' *Big Trouble* is a good example of an excellent piece of history composed by a journalist. Not only does he tell the story of a particular trial which highlighted class-struggle in early 20th century America, but he also fleshes it out with apt descriptions of small town life in the west, of baseball's authentic popular roots, of US labor history and of the lives of such principals as Clarence Darrow and Big Bill Haywood, President of the Western Federation of Miners and one of the founders of the I.W.W. So doing, he makes the time and the place of his account real to the reader, as real as a good novel.

Chris Miller says

An interesting take on the people and events surrounding the murder of a former governor of Idaho by union bosses alleged to be upset with his actions in a labor dispute eight years earlier. Suffice to say, some of the characters covered are Clarence Darrow, William Borah, Teddy Roosevelt, Hearst, Pulitzer, Ethel Barrymore, Walter Johnson, Gov. Gooding, William Allen White, and of course, James McParland. If this seems like a lot, Lukas skillfully weaves these and others together around the course of the *fin de siècle*, in a comprehensive and interesting way. It is a long book, but well worth the effort. Chapter 1 almost reads like the first chapter of a James Michener book. The Pinkertons, Molly Maguires, Socialists, Anarchists, cowboys, lumbermen, sheepmen are all drawn together in a wild ride from the 1860s to 1912. It is too fragmented for a text, but for supplementary information and to get the feel of the times it is a great read.

David Quinn says

Lukas was a gifted writer and his talents are on full display in *Big Trouble*. For the writing alone I can't rate this book below four stars. But I can't rate it any higher because, for me, the material was too sprawling. Virtually every individual or notable place or event received a three or four page diversionary history. When it worked I loved the richness of the story and when it didn't I couldn't wait for the author to get back to the main point. Sometimes I checked out mentally and either went back to re-read a passage or I accepted the inevitable confusion awaiting me.

Much of the material relates to the history of the lead characters of the book; the northwestern U.S. (mainly Idaho) and its leading inhabitants in the last and first decades of the 19th & 20th centuries, respectively; the mineworkers and mine owners of the northwest; labor unions; the press; the Socialist party; and sundry people and histories of the time.

I would recommend this book with reservations. Idahoans and fans of late 19th century history seem to be a wheelhouse audience. I read the paperback but Kindle would have been a better choice for the dictionary I should have regularly consulted but didn't have handy. It might be best appreciated as an audible book on a long ride through the (north)western U.S. (a really long ride, it's a big book).

I'm a much bigger fan of Lukas's grand epic *Common Ground*. The writing was outstanding, as it is in *Big*

Trouble, and the story is more tightly bound. Lukas was living in the era of the book and interviewed its subjects over long periods so there was no speculation about the events depicted (as there was in *Big Trouble*) and his personal interjections seemed stronger. Perhaps *Common Ground* was more appealing to me because I'm familiar with the names and places described, even if I was too young to remember the events, but in any event, I would recommend *Common Ground* to a wider audience.

Jim Leffert says

After he finished writing *Big Trouble*, J. Anthony Lukas grew despondent and committed suicide. Although Lukas may have felt that he failed in his ambition for this book. I, for one, am grateful for the work that he left behind. This is a long, sprawling book about a part of American history that most people know very little about—the near civil war that raged in the Western United States in the 1890's and early 1900's that pitted miners against mine owners and their allies in government.

At that time, our country was far from a perfect union, and the collision of these forces as mining companies embarked on large-scale exploitation of the West's natural resources, mobilizing masses of laborers, led to violence and insurrection. Pivotal events in the book include the assassination of Idaho governor Frank Steuenberg by a mysterious gunman and the ensuing trial of a union official who was his alleged assailant, the rebellion of Coeur D'Alene silver miners, and an explosion in Colorado.

The book, which was extensively researched by Lukas, is this and much more. We get the inside story of how detective agencies operated on behalf of the miners and government officials. We learn about how jury manipulation was practiced in 1905 in Idaho. An entire chapter is devoted to professional baseball in the Western states, while another chapter illuminates for us the traveling entertainment circuit that served the growing and newly respectable cities of this region, focusing on a particular appearance by the young Ethel Barrymore.

This is history from the ground up as well as the bird's eye view. It's a wonderful immersion experience that also reminds us that class warfare (with the emphasis on warfare) is part of the American Story.

Pamela_b_lawrencemsn.com says

Wow. The amount of work it takes to produce one of these tomes is unbelievable - reading countless old newspaper articles, court transcripts, letters, papers, books, etc. I loved every word of it. The story is about the dreadful assassination of the former governor of Idaho, by a bomb under his front gate, triggered by its opening, right after Christmas 1905. The perpetrator, apprehended. quickly, fingered three officials of a mining union who were then prosecuted in 1907. In telling the story, the author has written a comprehensive tale of American labor struggles but also of multiple other aspects of American life, such as the blatant corruption and cronyism pervading the political system, founding of the National Forests, the chokehold of theatrical producers, the evolution of news services, the newfound notion that journalism should report facts and not opinions, the development of muckraking and yellow journalism, the Socialist movement, and the fears that class warfare was a real possibility. The Russian revolution of 1917 had not yet happened, however there was an uprising in Russia in 1905 that rattled wealthy Americans (I'm now reading a book about the same time period in Russia, leading up the 1917 revolution, and am enjoying the juxtaposition). Each time a new notable is introduced, the author writes about that notable and developments in their industry. There

were a surprising number of notables who became involved - the President was involved extensively, Clarence Darrow for the defense of the union officials charged with conspiracy, James McParland of the Pinkerton Detective Agency who arranged for these officials to be kidnapped in Colorado to be brought to Idaho for trial, Supreme Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ethel Barrymore (she was in a touring show in Boise), Gifford Pinchot (the national forester), Walter Johnson (renowned pitcher), Eugene Debs, Samuel Gompers. The bulk of the book is about the dreadful treatment of miners, and the power of the mine owners. In spite of frequent public assertions that the mine owners did not pay for the prosecution of the union officials by Idaho's governor and Senator, in fact the mine owners poured thousands of dollars for the Cadillac of prosecutions. The stellar defense team was funded by unions, but part of their thunder was stolen by Pinkerton operatives infiltrating the defense team. The fact that Pinkerton operatives had infiltrated so many labor organizations and that the perpetrator was apprehended so quickly led some to believe that in fact the Pinkertons had arranged the assassination in order to discredit unions. During the trial, the Senator who was also serving as the prosecutor was indicted for fraud in sales of federal timber land. Well worth the time to read.

Riley Haas says

"Let's get one thing out of the way: it's too long. I'm not sure all the tangents are necessary, though they do help paint a clearer picture of the times (in the whole US, not merely in Idaho). Despite this length, Lukas somehow manages to make it tense. You keep reading through the diversions because you have to know what happens. Even though the chapter heading gives it away, I was still dying to know the verdict. I mean dying. Whenever I read something tense like that I have to cover the lower part of the page so I don't cheat and I had to here. I can't remember doing that with another non-fiction book, at least recently. And yet, through all this, he appears to be the picture of objectivity. Which makes the ending so brilliant, as he leaves it open to the reader but at the same time manages to suggest a very likely scenario without for a moment seeming to take sides. A pretty incredible book."
