



## **Radium Halos: A Novel about the Radium Dial Painters**

*Shelley Stout*

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## Radium Halos: A Novel about the Radium Dial Painters Shelley Stout

*Radium Halos* is historical fiction based on the true events of the Radium Dial Painters, a group of female factory workers who, in the early 1920s, contracted radiation poisoning from painting luminous watch dials with radium paint. Our narrator is Helen Waterman, a 65-year-old mental patient who worked at the factory when she was 16. She tells us her story through flashbacks, slowly revealing her past, the loved ones she's lost, and the dangerous secrets she's kept all these years. Includes a Foreword by Leonard Grossman, son of the attorney for the Radium Dial painters.

## FOREWORD

Five years before I was born, my father, Leonard J. Grossman, represented women from Ottawa, Illinois in litigation against the Radium Dial Corporation seeking not merely damages but also recognition of what had been done to them. I grew up in the shadow of the Radium Dial case, a landmark in workers' rights in this country. I was deeply proud of my father and infuriated, as he was, by the injustice inflicted on these women. I am sure this background is one reason I became a government lawyer enforcing workers' rights. So when I came across *Radium Halos* by Shelley Stout I was very excited. Sometimes fiction can speak truth in ways that the bare facts cannot. Ms. Stout has found a unique voice in which to tell the tragic story of the Radium Dial workers and at the same time to say much about life in this country. The story goes beyond the Radium Dial case and reflects much about our attitudes toward work, women, mental illness and aging. Along the way it speaks of fear and loyalty and truth itself.

Leonard Grossman September 2009

## Radium Halos: A Novel about the Radium Dial Painters Details

Date : Published October 13th 2009 by Librifiles Publishing (first published June 29th 2009)

ISBN : 9781448696222

Author : Shelley Stout

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction



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## **From Reader Review Radium Halos: A Novel about the Radium Dial Painters for online ebook**

### **Shelli says**

I really enjoyed this book. This was a subject I didn't know anything about....the fictional story around the true events that happened at The Radium Dial Company was very interesting and kept my attention. Some of the descriptions were very hard to read, but it made the story that much more heartwrenching. I came to care about these characters and felt awful for the real women who suffered through this terrible event in history. The story is told by Helen who is 65, but tells of her time as a teenager when she worked at the factory and the consequences of that decision.

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### **Em says**

I thought this book was fascinating. The fact that radium was seen as no big deal - even a cure for illness - always makes me wary of science today.

My one problem with the book is with having the story being told from the viewpoint of Helen - a mentally deficient 65 year old lady. It really limited the development of the other characters. In her eyes, everyone was either all good or all bad. I was interested in Pearl's story as she really had a terrible childhood - a mother who died of radium poisoning, a father who ran off, raised by a mentally handicapped aunt, and then sent to foster care after the uncle is killed and the aunt institutionalized. She obviously felt some sort of familial obligation toward Helen but we never got to understand Pearl's motivations.

I thought Helen's mental deficiencies, inability to have children, and itchy skin were a result of lead poisoning from when she ate paint chips as a young child but that was never verified. Radium poisoning does not cause a mental decline as some other readers have inferred from the book.

I enjoyed reading this book and love learning about pieces of history that I did not know about before. This is a story that should be told and not forgotten.

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### **Rebecca McNutt says**

The very early 20th century was much the way the digital age is today. People had all this power but didn't know how to use it or understand it properly. It was a time where science was thriving, industry in North America was booming, and there was little concern for health or environmental safety. *Radium Halos*, based on unfortunately true events, is a book about the women who worked in New Jersey putting glow-in-the-dark paint onto toys, watch dials, clocks and any number of other things. Of course, nobody warned these women the potentially lethal hazards of the stuff at the time, although the men working as chemists in the factory were instructed to wear full-on protection when handling radium. This historical fiction is told from the perspective of an elderly woman in a mental hospital, a woman who worked at the factory when she was sixteen. Seeing a great deal of friends and co-workers come and go at the time because of poisoning, she's now telling her story in a state of disarray.

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## **Karen says**

I have a special interest in working-class history and literature -- especially women's working-class history, so I was delighted to find *Radium Halos* (through GoodReads, even), a fictional account of the Radium Dial Painters. While novels have been written about other aspects of women's history, (The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911, for instance, is a very popular topic for literature), I had never read a fictional account of The Radium Girls. During the early part of the 20th century, a group of factory workers contacted radium poison while painting watch dials. In history, a few of the women won the right to sue their employers for their sickness. In fact, The Radium Girl case helped improve industry safety standards. In Shelley Stout's novel, an elderly woman tells her life story including her experiences as a young woman who "excelled" at painting watch dials. Stout's work is a must read for anyone who enjoys labor history and women's history.

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## **Marie (UK) says**

My rating has more to do with the fact that the book failed to tell the complete story of the radium dial painters and instead concentrated on the psychiatric illness of one radium dial painter. I am not even sure that the illness was a result of being in that job. I expected a more historical narrative of the work these people undertook and how it affected them. Despite all this it was an interesting read and I felt Helen's character was really well portrayed.

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## **Laura McDonald says**

In the 1920s the Radium Dial Company opened a factory in Illinois producing luminous paint made from radium. This paint was used to paint clock faces, safety signs, even watches for soldiers-anything that needed to glow in the dark. The primarily female workers at this factory and a similar one in New Jersey were told that the paint was harmless and were even encouraged to lick their paint brushes to sharpen them. This ingestion of the radioactive paint led to severe health problems and sometimes death of many of the workers. Five of them, known in the media as the Radium Girls, sued their former employer and won, thereby establishing several legal precedents in the U.S. regarding individual worker rights and labor safety standards.

*Radium Halos* is a fictional story based on these true events. The narrator is Helen Waterman, a 65-year-old mental patient who worked at the Radium Dial factory when she was 16. While the subject matter is intense, the tone of the novel is surprisingly light. Thanks is due to Helen who adds humor through her naive and bluntly honest outlook. Her periodic flashbacks introduce the people who have moved in and out of her life in the past 50 years. Author Shelley Stout excels in making these characters feel real, never sacrificing detail in favor of stereotypes. We feel for the characters as Helen does: we are irritated with nagging niece Pearl but understand why she's that way; we feel affection for young friend Adrienne but are anxious about some choices she's made; we defer to big sister Violet's decisions but secretly wonder if she's right after all.

Ideally for me, a novel will impart new knowledge and introduce characters I can quietly observe for a few days while reading and who stay with me for many more after that. *Radium Halos* does both. I've been introduced to some important history that I knew nothing about, and I've met a variety of colorful and

interesting characters who will no doubt stay with me for quite a while.

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### **Savannah says**

I loved this book. I was expecting more "lawsuit" stuff, and was actually glad to see that wasn't the case (a thin veneer over a political statement, however gut-wrenching and important, never makes a truly good novel). Instead, this was all about a depth of character, and the dark circumstances that united the main character in a conspiracy of silence. Yet the lawsuits and the medical situations recurred as a plotline that captivated interest.

I loved the myriad of tiny details that came across as SO unique and true that it felt like the author had just interviewed this woman named Helen. The voice and the moments were all so genuine; you were completely immersed in the moment, and grew to care for the character. You laughed with her and felt for others, and her plight, with her. I loved how I could really feel that this was an old, semi-crazy woman who believed inside of herself that she hadn't changed much from a young, normal factory worker. That's a hard tightrope for a writer to walk, and Stout did it expertly. Her tale is touching and deep, as well as very complex as it weaves back and forth between timelines. An excellent book, not just for people interested in the radium trials!

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### **Michele says**

#### **Takes a Bit**

Although it takes a bit to get used to the writing style of which the author wrote, and a while to get moving on the story, this was not a bad read. The original true story of the radium dial works by no means needs fiction thrown into it to make it a heartbreaking event in our nations history but it does bring a human element to connect with. I enjoyed this book and thank the author for bringing it to us.

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### **Candy says**

I purchased this book a year ago, but it kept getting pushed to the side. I was on a flight and needed something to read and saw this on my kindle and decided it was time to read it. I don't remember much of the rest of the flights I took that day. This is a fantastically absorbing novel that pulls you into the world of the radium dial painters not only through history but through the fictional story that the author has created for us.

I'll be honest and say that I didn't really know much about the radium dial (well, I know about radium!). I knew something happened and I knew people died but not that they were ingesting this stuff! I actually learned a lot about that situation and how sad and out of control it was. I love when I enjoy a book and learn something and don't feel like I'm having information shoved down my throat. Thank you to the author for presenting information in such a matter. Good for her.

The fictional part of the story was also very well done. I will admit that I was a little confused as to why the secrecy after all these years, but having said that, it didn't detract from the story at all. I loved how it all pulled together. From what I can gather, this is the first novel by this author that I've been able to find and it's

such an amazing first effort - heck, had I not went looking, I would have sworn it was from a seasoned author. She manages to bring you into Helen's life and and into the factory and subsequent years. I felt so connected to the characters that I found myself trying to talk to a few of them, trying to make them see things MY. I'm sure my fellow passengers thought I was completely crazy.

This book is highly recommended for those that enjoy not only historical fiction, but also good general fiction. Unless you only read one genre, this is something you would probably enjoy. It goes on my must read for the year, wish I had read it sooner!

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### **Susan (aka Just My Op) says**

First, I want to say that a three-star review from me is not a negative review. It means I liked the book, but it either had flaws, in my opinion, that caused me to enjoy it less than I might have otherwise, or it was simply not to my taste. I'm the first one on goodreads to rate it at less than 4 stars, so obviously other people really liked it.

This novel is told from the perspective of Helen, who worked one summer with her sister at the Radium Dial Company when they were both just teenagers, painting clock and watch faces with radium paint so they would glow in the dark. When she tells her story, she is sixty-five, shuttled between a mental institution and the home of Pearl, her niece whom Helen helped raise, and she is still hiding the secret that she has kept for so many years. Too many of her friends have died too soon, and Helen has been asked to participate in tests because of her work at the company, a job she tried to hide because of "the secret."

The Radium Dial Company really did exist. And these painters, who were taught to "kiss" the paintbrush to make a sharp point before applying the paint, really did suffer. The main fictitious characters were interesting, and I really liked Helen. Pearl was nasty and not very understanding but had her own battles to fight. I felt a little sorry for her, too, as unlikeable as she seemed. I would have liked to know more about some of the other characters.

I liked this book and am glad I read it. But for me, it just didn't have the depth I was looking for. I wanted to know more about the historical facts behind the novel, more about the people, the company, when the danger was discovered. This book has received good reviews, so I am apparently in the minority, but there wasn't enough plot to keep me entertained. I think Ms. Stout has a very good storytelling talent and I hope to read more of her work in the future.

(Edited to fix typos, but there are probably more I missed.)

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### **Carol says**

Radium Halos: A Novel about the Radium Dial Painters by Shelly Stout made me lay aside another book that I was reading at the same time. It was a strange reading experience for me, this is a page turner but I had trouble connecting with the main characters. I wanted to know what is going to happen next!

This is a fictional story of real situation in United States. Women really did paint numbers on the faces of clocks and watches with paint that had radium in it. Later, there were lawsuits won and the company had to

pay damages.

In this book, the instructor told the trainees to actually put the brush in their mouths between their teeth to "kiss it" and get a better pointed tip for the painting. This part of this e-book is very chilling when you consider that they were practicing with poison!

They were evaluated on their skill levels and promoted from watches to clock faces if they were good enough.

The narrator, Helen was living in a mental institution at the opening of the story. She was only sixteen when she and her older sister decided to work for the Radium Dial Company. They got paid by the piece and the pay was much more than what they could ordinarily get.

Helen relates the effects of the radium exposure on herself, her sister Violet and other women who worked there. There is a side story that explains why Helen and her friends were afraid to talk to the investigators. That side story was vividly told and made sense as to why they didn't complain about their physical problems which were many. The story has flashbacks to the past which are transitioned expertly.

So this is book worth reading but I don't feel like I would reread it due to the lack of connection to the characters.

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### **Karla says**

What a great idea for a story, so original and I loved Helen's voice throughout the novel. Really is an interesting look into young women doing factory work in the 1920's. Sure made me ill reading how they were taken advantage of and not honestly informed of what they were using and it's dangers. Sad to hear they never really won much from their plight. Since I work production on a larger scale I feel like I really learned and became more informed of the background of this issue in factories and feel grateful of the women who blazed this trail before me for a safer work environment. Production rights to be informed of all poisons and their use are labeled clearly in the work place today and hopefully a tragedy like this never occurs ever again. Heartbreaking to discover what these young women and their families in the prime of there life went through.

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### **Shari Larsen says**

This story is historical fiction based on true events, of the girls who worked at the Radium Dial Company during the late 1900's and 1920's, who contracted radiation poisoning from painting luminous watch and clock dials with paint containing radium. They were not told at the time that anything about the job was dangerous. In fact, they were encouraged to "kiss" the brush after dipping it into the paint to make a nice point on it in order to paint the numbers, and were told the paint was "harmless". It wasn't unusual either for

girls to sneak some paint home and paint their lips and teeth "just for fun" to make them glow in the dark.

A group of women decided to sue the company after many of them begin contracting cancer (especially of the bones and jaw) and dying from the effects of ingesting the paint; their case was a landmark case in the history of workers rights.

In this book, we hear the fictionalized story of Helen; a 65 year old mental patient looking back on her life; she and her sister worked at the company when they were 16 and 18 years old. She remembers the painful deaths of her sister and other coworkers, and how at first, working at the Radium Dial Company was seen as a prestigious job, which paid much more than other factory work at the time.

This was a great story, and I really liked the character of Helen; she was authentic and I felt like I was reading about a real person, someone you wanted to root for. I wish though that the author went into more detail about the long term health effects of the radium on the workers, and how the factory came to be shut down.

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### **Darcia Helle says**

This book is fiction based on the true story of the Radium Dial Painters. These were young women who worked in a factory, painting clock and watch dials with radium paint. Most of these women died tragic deaths, after suffering long illnesses from radium poisoning.

Shelley Stout held me captive with this story. She doesn't weigh us down with the facts and lawsuit details. That is better done in a nonfiction book. With Radium Halos, Stout gives us Helen Waterman, a woman who once worked in the Radium Dial factory and is now suffering with mild mental illness. She tells us her tale through memories, while struggling through each new day.

Helen's story encompasses and goes beyond life at that factory. Her character is vivid and incredibly real. Stout steps completely out of the way and allows Helen's voice to carry the story. And she does so brilliantly.

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### **Tara Chevreton says**

While reading this novel, I was reminded of that popular teen book and movie, "I Know What You Did Last Summer." Tho not a bad book, it wasn't what I was expecting, a novel about factory life in the 1920s and the hazards and effects of working with radium. Instead, the novel is really about a group of teenagers that commit a crime one summer and vow to never tell about it. They just all happen to work at the Radium Dial Company.

The book did go into some of the health hazards and side effects of working with Radium, but offered very little information about the company itself. I enjoyed the 1920s parts with the girls working in the factory and wish the novel had stuck to that. The 1960s parts were full of people and plots that did not interest me whatsoever. I found the heroine's family members terribly unlikeable and didn't care less about their drug use



or relationships. There was also a lot of bitterness in the family and the cause for it was never truly revealed.

I felt the story got sidetracked here and there as well. Helen, the narrator, goes on and on at times about a clock she scratched with a hay hook and her nurses and her blind roommate and medications and quite frankly, I thought the lady was nuts. I also didn't care for her narrative style. It came across as ignorant and maybe people from North Carolina in the 1920s really spoke this way, but on paper it gets very annoying. I grew tired of "me and so and so, hadn't never, we was..."

In conclusion, I won't be reading this again, but despite its flaws, I did learn a few things from it so three stars.

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