



# **Room 1219: The Life of Fatty Arbuckle, the Mysterious Death of Virginia Rappe, and the Scandal That Changed Hollywood**

*Greg Merritt*

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In 1921, one of the biggest movie stars in the world was accused of killing a woman. What followed was an unprecedented avalanche of press coverage, the original “trial of the century,” and a wave of censorship that altered the course of Hollywood filmmaking.

It began on Labor Day, when comic actor Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, then at the pinnacle of his fame and fortune, hosted a party in San Francisco’s best hotel. As the party raged, he was alone in room 1219 with Virginia Rappe, a minor actress. Four days later, she died, and he was charged with her murder.

*Room 1219* tells the story of Arbuckle’s improbable rise and stunning fall—from Hollywood’s first true superstar to its first pariah. Simultaneously, it presents the crime story from the day of the “orgy” through the three trials. Relying on a careful examination of documents, the book finally reveals, after almost a century of wild speculation, what most likely occurred in room 1219. In addition, *Room 1219* covers the creation of the film industry—from the first silent experiments to a studio-based system capable of making and, ultimately, breaking a beloved superstar.

## Room 1219: The Life of Fatty Arbuckle, the Mysterious Death of Virginia Rappe, and the Scandal That Changed Hollywood Details

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## **From Reader Review Room 1219: The Life of Fatty Arbuckle, the Mysterious Death of Virginia Rappe, and the Scandal That Changed Hollywood for online ebook**

### **Raquel says**

Greg Merritt's Room 1219 is probably the best book I've read all year. It's incredibly well-organized, insightful, thoughtful, unbiased, thorough, clear and well-written. I was very interested in the Arbuckle-Rappe scandal but was worried that I would be overwhelmed with boring information about the three trials. My experience was quite the opposite. I was enthralled and found myself not wanting to let the book go.

The key to the book's success is Merritt's organization of the chapters. Each chapter alternates from the details of the scandal to biographical chapters on Arbuckle and one on Virginia Rappe. Flipping back and forth gives you a respite from being overwhelmed with too much detail. And this book has a lot of information to take in so the structure really helps. You go from the minute details of the scandal, the case and the three (yes three!) trials to the humanity of the lives and careers of Arbuckle and Rappe.

You can read my full review here: <http://www.outofthepastblog.com/2013/...>

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### **Belinda says**

I have been hoping for a coherent and somewhat balanced book on this particular topic for a very long time, and thank goodness this one was well researched and thought out. This case has interested me since I was a kid--I first came across Roscoe Arbuckle in the saddest of places--Hollywood Babylon--that book fascinated and repelled me for as long as I can remember. As a kid I could not possibly have known it's origins and falsehoods, only pictures of the movie stars that I already adored and some gore and nudity (interesting to most kids when forbidden) and the fact that any adult I knew that had a copy, kept it hidden like a dirty magazine (which it pretty much is).

I will not repeat the infamous story of Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle's supposed crimes (the story is quite easy to read up on--even truthful versions) and interestingly after all these years still contains mystery. Most folks who know old Hollywood know that Roscoe was a silent film comedy pioneer--he worked with Chaplin (and preceded Chaplin) as well as Buster Keaton (his dear friend) and one of my personal favorites, Mabel Normand. His image is still well known today, but many would have trouble putting a name to it. This is not only because he was most famous for silent film, many others including Chaplin are extremely well known despite the passage of time. Roscoe was the subject of not one but three of the most tainted and publicity filled trials ever known in the U.S.

The basic facts are that he was holding a party in San Francisco with some male friends and several females (mostly acquaintances) in a very ritzy hotel and in the course of the party, the designer and model and actress Virginia Rappe was taken ill and never recovered. She passed away several days after the party from a ruptured bladder. One of the women in the party (an acquaintance of Rappe's) accused Roscoe Arbuckle of being the cause of Rappe's illness. This lead to a trial on par with the O.J. Simpson case or the Michael Jackson cases. Tons of publicity, fans taking sides and lies and innuendo flying. The basic accusation was that Arbuckle injured Rappe either by squashing her while attempting sex or injured her by another means. She had a distended bladder and it ruptured--that much everyone seems to agree on. Arbuckle went through

3 trials--2 hung juries and finally acquittal, but he was never completely forgiven and was ostracized by most of Hollywood. As with most cases of this type, there is so much mystery and only two people knew the truth--the dead girl and Arbuckle. The author gives us a brief but well done bio of both Rappe and Arbuckle and then an in-depth look at all of the trials as well as Arbuckle's life after and how the case took on a life of its own, even many years down the line.

There have been many attempts to rehab Arbuckle's reputation and sadly most of those have included terrible slurs against Rappe which the author is able to debunk pretty well. I applaud him for this, for while I do not believe Arbuckle committed a crime, I also don't think that Rappe deserves to be dragged through the mud for things that others did and for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was an interesting person and well known in her own right for quite sometime before this case. It's very sad that everything she did in her short life comes down to her death.

The true villains of the piece seem to be a woman known as "the avenger", Maude Delmont an attendee at the party and acquaintance of Rappe who turned the case into her own very loud and attention grabbing show. Hollywood was already coming under scrutiny for its wild ways (compared to rest of the U.S., it was pretty wild but nothing like your average citizen might dream up) and this case was a powder keg. So much that happened in each of the trials would have resulted in mistrial that anyone familiar with crime would be hollering(as I was) while reading the tragically farcical case. It is laid out with great detail and balanced with the background of Prohibition, the power of Christian and women's groups at the time and the increasing power of Hollywood and film in the U.S.

Arbuckle's life post trials is explored and the author does a step by step analysis of the evidence of all 3 trials to come up with his own conclusions (some of which I agree with) and lays the blame for the sadly repeated lies mostly at the door of Hollywood Babylon (where it belongs) and the lies about Rappe at the door of Arbuckle's first wife and some of his overzealous defenders. He does a good job of this.

I will add as my own opinion that I do not believe that as heavy as Arbuckle was, (around 266 pounds at the time of Rappe's death) even if he was to lie on top of a woman that he would be heavy enough to pop her bladder, distended or not. I suspect that a 34 year old man who had been heavy his whole life would have known how to have sex with a woman without squashing her by this point. There was no evidence that sex even occurred so I cannot really agree with this idea--I think there are many possibilities but even with all that we know now that we did not know then, it's still truly a mystery. What does seem clear is that two people had their names smeared for attending a party, drinking too much and perhaps acting a bit outlandish. In the end, neither deserved their terrible fates.

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### **Anna says**

Most people of this generation don't know who Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle is and what he was famous for. Hell, most people nowadays barely know anything about silent film and only recognize the iconic names (such as Charlie Chaplin, [maybe] Mary Pickford, etc.). What they don't realize, is that Fatty was a major comedy star pre-scandal and at one point was more famous than Chaplin! He also gave Buster Keaton, another name that lives on, a leg up into the business and they were really great friends. After his career was ruined and their roles were reversed, Buster gave him opportunities to direct and have bit parts in his movies. Overall, it was an extremely interesting book. Equal parts biography of Fatty and his rise to fame, and breakdown of the scandal and its aftermath, it definitely gives an equal representation of the defense & prosecution both. It neither sanctifies him OR crucifies him. And I won't say what conclusion the author comes to, but I pretty much agree with him. Not that we'll ever really know the truth, but I do like to speculate.

I'd recommend this for anyone interested in (not necessarily already a fan of) silent film, Hollywood scandals (of which this was the first major one), the beginnings of censorship in Hollywood, and Roscoe Arbuckle as a historical figure/movie star. Also, a truly great documentary about silent film exists. It's 13 parts, each an hour long, called *Hollywood Pioneers* and you can find it on YouTube. It's one of the last documentaries featuring interviews with actual stars/stuntmen/directors, etc. from that era and was filmed shortly before many of them died. It is downright fascinating! :D

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\*\*\***CAVEAT:** I *still* can't believe that he was tried THREE TIMES before he was finally acquitted! On such circumstantial (which is to say pretty much absolutely none) "evidence" I'm shocked he was even tried AT ALL. It's just crazy to me!

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### **Michael Ritchie says**

Interesting book on the lives of silent film star Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and model/starlet Virgina Rappe, whose fates were sealed over Labor Day weekend 1921 when Rappe was taken seriously ill at a party hosted by Arbuckle and subsequently died. Because of rumors and some loose talk from Arbuckle himself, he was arrested and charged with manslaughter. Though he was eventually acquitted, his career never recovered. The author argues that both of them had their images tarnished and presents an even-handed account of that weekend and what happened both before and after. Some overly melodramatic passages hurt the flow of the book, but otherwise this well-researched book would seem to be the final word on the event.

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### **Miranda says**

Poor Fatty Arbuckle. First, he had to become famous by naming himself Fatty - reclaiming and empowering himself with the name that bullies had given him during his dirt-poor, peripatetic childhood. Second, he tried to have a Prohibition-era good time one Labor Day and it basically ruined his life. Mondays, right?

This book is probably one of the most even-handed of the books on the Incident. Not that I've read others, but the book has many good references, and it was essentially just conveyed in podcast form in "You Must Remember This." The book is a decent biography of Arbuckle, with a lot of fascinating little tidbits of silent movie history. Fatty had his fingers in everybody's pie, it seems like, and I'm not talking about the custard pies he was famous for flinging around (when are those jobs coming back? I want one). He interacted and had friendships with everyone in Hollywood, ranging from his bff Buster Keaton to Charlie Chaplin to Bob Hope to Bert Lahr. He was just that guy everyone knew (possibly because of his legendary alcohol hoard).

Fatty's the missing chapter (the connective adipose tissue, if you will...sorry not sorry) of early Hollywood history: One of Merritt's major arguments is that the Incident is what allowed for censorship and the Hays code. Arbuckle's fall created Hays' career and this has led to the schizophrenically Puritanical / sexual Hollywood we all know and love/hate today.

so, (paging *I, Tonya*, here)...you came to read about the Incident. The incident! The Incident. The incident?

...oh, the *Incident*.

The sordid rumors you read in *Hollywood Babylon* aren't true. Or at least, maybe there is no truth. All we know is Arbuckle and Rappe (supposed to kinda rhyme with latte) were alone in the titular hotel room, a Gatsby-ton (that's the metric system I think) of alcohol was consumed, and then Rappe had an episode - apparently not her first - of near-unconsciousness. Famous for ripping off her clothes when drunk (hey, many of us have been there), this time was different: Rappe died a few days later, disoriented and confused, the ignominious cause a ruptured bladder. Arbuckle was tried for her death, resulting in two hung juries and an acquittal for murder and manslaughter charges.

His career never recovered. Though he remained a reliable *bon vivant*, our Roscoe/ Fatty was never particularly good at personal finance, and just as his career began to recover, he died of a heart attack after a night out.

The book drags sometimes. It's clear the entire work is centered around The Incident, with the years after tacked on as an afterthought and a lot of flourish given to the years before his fame. At times, Merritt is reaching, like when he tries to come up with what Rappe and Arbuckle talked about or bonded over at the party. At times, his caustic asides are hilarious, but other times they fall flat. In sum, he filled in with rhetoric when there wasn't evidence, and sometimes it really showed. A few careless editing errors also diminished the value of the book. So this is really a "strong" 3.5. Would recommend, hope he comes out with a revised edition someday. To go with the movie. The world's way overdue for a high-quality biopic. Just saying.

You should believe me on all this because: master's in film studies, wasted way too much of my life on an unfinished PhD in "media studies," which is different but I won't bore you with how.

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### **Ian says**

Fascinating read about the rise and fall of early Hollywood's biggest star. It probably could have been pared down a bit (how many times and in how many different ways do we need to be told that nobody knows what really happened in room 1219?), but there are so many interesting details in this story, I couldn't help but get swept away by the scandal.

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### **Cyndi says**

This was a really interesting and informative book. Not only did it clear up the "raped by a Coke bottle" legend that has been attached to Fatty for 90 years but it also described both Fatty and Virginia Rappe as human beings. I thought the court proceedings were a little drawn out but I can't believe it took 3 trials to acquit this man and I feel bad that his career was over and he was blackballed. If only we could blackball the Kardashians!

The book also gave great history about Hollywood, how movie cameras came to be, how the studios came from New York to Los Angeles and how talkies started. It also have information on Will Hays that I had not known before. It's so sad that a party got out of hand and not only ruined a wonderful comedic actor's life but changed Hollywood for good. Lindsay Lohan should be grateful Fatty paved the way for her shenanigans!

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### **Suzanne says**

A fascinating and tragic story about a man destroyed at the height of his career by the media and a poor police investigation. Merritt explores in painstaking detail the case of Fatty Arbuckle and the murder he was accused of and will be forever associated with. The thing that surprised me most was that there was really no evidence and he was finally acquitted after 3 trials. The media served as a kind of lynch mob destroying his reputation and career and fostering a view of Hollywood as immoral and corrupt.

The book also offers an interesting history on the early days of motion pictures and their evolution from vaudeville.

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### **Erin says**

4.5 Stars. Room 1219 is a highly entertaining & informative look at the very first "Trial of the Century". Before O.J. or Jodi Arias the world was obsessed with silent film comedian Fatty Arbuckle who was accused of killing actress Virginia Rappe. I learned a lot from this book, like the fact that forensics were already being used in 1921. This book also tried to separate fact from rumor. As a fan of silent films I really enjoyed the portrait of early Hollywood the author painted. I would recommend this book to non-fiction lovers & silent film lovers you won't be disappointed.

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### **BAM The Bibliomaniac says**

True Crime Commemoration # 15

Setting: 1921 San Francisco

RTC

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### **Tracy Sherman says**

Room 1219: The Life of Fatty Arbuckle, the Mysterious Death of Virginia Rappe, and the Scandal That Changed Hollywood by Greg Merritt (a god-awful title by the way) does something that no other book on Roscoe Arbuckle has done before, it presents its subjects, both Roscoe and Virginia, as actual human beings. If most people know these names at all, and I'd lay 10 to 1 that most people do not, it has to do with scandal, misinformation, and demonization of these two unfairly maligned people.

It's a revelation to read about Roscoe Arbuckle's (he hated the sobriquet "Fatty", and the only injustice this book does him is use his famous but painful nickname in the title) loveless childhood, his struggles as he tried to enter show business, his struggles to get to the top... And his greater struggles once he found himself there. This makes his story a very modern one, because the talented rich and famous continue to struggle with the fame they work so hard to achieve.

Instead of the monster or the poor sucker that Arbuckle is usually painted as, in this book Roscoe is seen as an artist and entertainer. In fact he was one of the greatest of his era and the biggest achievement of Greg Merritt's book is the feeling of loss for what Arbuckle could've accomplished if he continued working in

motion pictures.

Of course the other great loss that Merritt captures is the story's other victim, Virginia Rappe. Virginia Rappe, the author, like the papers of the day, doesn't shy away from the fact that even her name sounds frighteningly like the phrase "Virgin Rape", here is at last portrayed as a real person. She was a talented dress designer and a vocal proponent of women's rights in the workplace and in society. This makes Virginia's death even more poignant and sad than the usual label of "Gold-digging slut" or "Pure and innocent child" she is painted with.

There are no clear villains in this book, no one for us to hang the yoke of blame on, and thereby make us feel superior, except... And this is paramount... the press and the public opinion of the day. Both Roscoe and Virginia were tried over and over again in the newspapers, the pulpit, and in social circles high and low. It is the press, than as now, hungry for scandal to fuel their sale and a desperately fickle public looking to alternatively deify and demonize their heroes and heroines that are the true scandal at the center of this story. This may seem like a sad but old and forgotten Hollywood story, but the scandal that came to ahead during the trial and Roscoe Arbuckle's subsequent blackballing by the Hollywood moguls he made millions for is not only timely but continues to be a hotly debated subject.

I won't tell you the book's conclusion about what happened in room 1219 that day long gone but I will say that the stars and supporting cast of this true story are unforgettable. And that the saddest thing about this very sad tale is that, we are doomed to repeat it with a different cast of characters over and over again.

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### **Laini says**

I really expected to like this more, but something about the style didn't appeal to me. Perhaps the author's dry tone or something. Couldn't put my finger on it.

Useful for a research tome, but probably won't be reading it again.

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### **Kelsey Hanson says**

This book gives a descent overview of the Virginia Rappe case. It's hard to tell exactly what occurred, but either way the consequences pretty much destroyed Arbuckle's career. The book covers the history of Arbuckle's early career and the aftermath of Virginia Rappe's death pretty thoroughly. I was kind of hoping that they could provide a more conclusive answer on what caused Virginia Rappe's death, but this does provide a pretty solid overview of a case that I was not familiar with.

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### **Katherine Addison says**

Merritt's book is a biography of Roscoe Arbuckle (he put up with the nickname "Fatty" for his career, but no one who knew him called him that), and of Virginia Rappe (pronounced "rappay"), insofar as Merritt was able to unearth information about her; it is also, therefore, an excellent book about silent movies and the beginnings of Hollywood. But mostly it is the terrible story of the point where Arbuckle and Rappe's lives intersected and the consequences thereof. Merritt is passionately interested in finding the truth, about Rappe as much about Arbuckle, and dispelling the myths: he raped her with a bottle; she "had it coming" because she was a slut. I don't entirely know if I agree with his conclusions, but I appreciate the care with which he lays out the shreds and shards of evidence we have around the missing central act of what happened in Room

1219.

The terrible thing about Roscoe Arbuckle is that he is a sort of Schrodinger's cat of justice. If he did attempt to rape Virginia Rappe and thus caused her death, he got away with it. He was tried three times and acquitted of manslaughter. But if he *didn't* attempt to rape her, if her death was truly the ghastly accident Merritt thinks it was, then his fate, the destruction of his career, was unjustifiably cruel. In neither case can one feel that justice was served.

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### **Ashley says**

This was a tragic just tragic story

This man had it all and he fought to have the life of a "Hollywood star"!! But a false story totally crippled not only his career but destroyed his life!!

It's sad how a fun loving man could close everything to a harlot that had clanked false accusations before

Just a sad tragic story

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