



Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919

Nell Irvin Painter

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Winner of the Letitia Brown Memorial Publication Prize.

Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919 Details

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From Reader Review Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919 for online ebook

Mick says

The more history I read, the more I'm convinced we were robbed by our own consent.

Ryan says

Great account of a tumultuous period in American history. It's amazing how so many of the same issues are alive today. Nell Irvin Painter does a commendable job keeping the pace quick while including very interesting character sketches, anecdotes, and down and dirty economic scholarship. Highly recommended for anyone looking to know more about this time period.

Evans says

It can be a bit of a tedious read at times, but this book covers a very fascinating time in American History. It was just as good the second time since I was reading for pleasure, not for school. Painter is a very talented writer.

Scott says

The period of American history between 1877 and 1919 is often misunderstood as a boring time when nothing really happened. This is not indirectly brought about through excessively complex and abstract economic theory about money supply, sometimes bland political theater, and the gravity of the Civil War/Reconstruction and World War One have upon our national consciousness. Plus, how much of this period weighs upon the lives of us today? This last point is often brought up by students, and my answer to that is both: "a helluva lot!" and "does that really matter?" A diverse nation of people struggling with massive political, technological, and economic changes is not unworthy of study, and the various purposes of history to both instruct us about what it means to be a human being and guide us in times when our innate thoughts do little in that regard hold true here.

I would highly recommend this work to anyone interested in this period of history and to anyone who is interested in history in general. A fascinating look at how politics, economic theory, racial theory, technological change, diversity, political and economic self-determination, empowerment, cultural definitions, definition of citizenship, and the effects and causes of major military conflicts affect people in their own time and place is hardly simple to compress into a readable book, but it reads fluidly and has a argumentative force to dispel any confusion that this this period could ever be "boring". For my students in high school, it may not be effective as a textbook, but could easily be more compelling than any simplification provided by their standard text.

Ben says

Conceives of a...long-so-called-progressive-era from 1877-1919 around three fulcrum points, the mass strike waves of: 1877, 1886, 1919. Americans were attempting to determine the correct vision for society, between those emphasizing shared prosperity (and with it hierarchy) and those emphasizing democracy (and accepting the reality of conflict, based on race, class, gender, etc.)

Gerry Connolly says

Standing at Armageddon is Nell Irvin Painter's history of the Progressive movement from 1877 through 1919. Dry prose dims a dynamic and violent period in which average Americans seek labor protections, suffrage, civil rights and consumer laws. Echoes of all too familiar struggles today. Frick and Carnegie would recognize the Koch bros out of any crowd

Rachel says

Nell Irvin Painter successfully provides a "Grassroots" history of the progressive era--emphasizing the efforts of labor and labor organizers to fight economic injustices in the Gilded Age that ultimately contributed to the rise of the Progressive movement. Along the way, she ably covers issues related to women's rights and African American rights, and to a lesser extent immigrants and Native Americans. This interpretation of the era of 1877-1920 focuses on economic, and especially class, history, and covers most of the important issues and events of the era, including national and international politics.

I used in for a history course covering the era of 1877-1920 and found it to be a useful companion to most of my lectures, because I tend to cover intellectual and cultural history more thoroughly. Students in the class seemed to like the book, but found its coverage of the history of the American west, gender and sexuality, and religion and culture a bit thin. I would use it to teach the course again, but feel I would need to assign supplemental readings on those topics not covered as thoroughly by Painter.

Adam says

A solid introductory text to American history after Reconstruction and through the First World War. A broadly neglected field of American history, this does a nice job of contextualizing that period's social turmoil by linking postwar racial tensions to the burgeoning class and gender problems that exploded into the public sphere around the same time. As importantly, Painter writes with fire and just the right dose of venom. The chapters are a breeze to read and chock-full of tidbits (perhaps too many, but easily skimmable) and the message crystal clear. Serious scholars will lament that this is more a collection of (now older) secondary citations (including someone like Howard Zinn) rather than a rigid combing through of original sources, but it accomplishes its aim rather admirably.

Alex says

An interesting overview into the events that shaped modern America.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 4.125* of five

The USA has a long history of upheaval and change. The Progressive Era, one that we 21st-century beneficiaries tend to forget existed, was the cradle of such social justice as FDR was able to jam down the gullets of the horrible, nasty conservatives that have always dominated American politics and continue to do even today, to our lasting shame.

The Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian democracy died about 1840. Industrialization, in those early years, went on in a brutal, hideously cruel way (much as the conservatives have enabled to go on in China, Indonesia, etc, with their "unfettered flow of capital to benefit the masses" bullhockey). The 1880s came as a crisis point: Would untrammelled capitalism be allowed to kill millions without so much as a peep from those suffering from its ravages, or would the laborers whose efforts *made* all that money finally demand some of it for themselves?

The Bloody 80s began. The highly minimal social democracy that the conservatives can be forced to endure had its genesis then, and survives...battered, diminished, mocked and reviled by the jeering apes in their never-enough-profit packs...thanks to the blood and sacrifice of those forgotten ancestors.

Painter's book is a careful, complete, and even-handed narrative of what happened and why during this important turning point in the formation of the country we all love. It made me long to live a long enough life to see the tide of history come back in, washing away the institutionalized greed and stupidity that exemplify Congress and the many state governments. The book is a history...but in the right hands, teachers, it could become a call to arms....

Michael Auger says

A thorough examination of the Progressive era of The United States, and the various social movements that cropped up.

Jim says

Nell Painter's award winning book Standing at Armageddon is a wide-ranging and ambitious attempt to synthesize the political, economic, cultural and social changes of the late 1800s to post World War I America. The book is a story of conflict. While her focus on everyday against is evident, it provides a valuable counterpoint to a tradition that concentrated on the great man of history. The same names are included but placed into more of a socioeconomic context. Throughout the text, Painter uses a brisk writing style, anecdotes and vignettes to highlight the injustices she sees towards the ordinary, the working class, and the disadvantaged caused by the dramatic changes during this pivotal time in the nation's history. From industry to the labor, big bank financiers to family farmers, urban America to rural America, the heart of the conflict was between hierarchical social order and the disorder of true democracy.

The stakes in this conflict included the very heart of The United States, the ideal of equity, and in this telling

it was very nearly lost. Fear coupled with the desire for prosperity affected all sides but only one side had any real power. The labor movement's actions and reactions to sweeping changes in technology, migration from agrarian and rural areas to the cities, emigration, and a series of economic crisis's became a threat to the establishment. More so, Painter states that in times of crisis organized labor had the potential of being an existential threat to the nation. The threat grew through the waves of labor strikes in 1877, 1886, and 1919 exploding into violence and terrorism.

Money was a powerful influencer on both sides of the labor conflict. Deflation, depression, and monetary policy following the Civil War caused lower prices and economic chaos, which led to lower wages for the average worker and a concern on. For the middle-class and wealthy, monetary policy exasperated their fears. Politicians fought over populist versus conservative policy. One example Painter is the populist leader Jeremiah "Sockless Joe" Simpson who began his career in politics as a greenback supporter.

Describing the national economy after the Civil War, Painter noted that the federal government had issued paper bonds, called greenbacks, to finance the war through millions of dollars of debt. They also chartered private national banks that issued paper fiat currency. This set up a conflict between those that wanted to keep metallic currency and those, like Sockless Joe, who argued to keep paper currency on behalf of the working, or producing, class struggling under significant deflation.

Wealthy bankers, on the other hand, who held the bulk of the government war bonds, did not want to lose the value of their investment.

Complicating the issue, there was a post-war increase in the production of domestic silver right at the time European countries moved to a gold standard. This reduced the demand and led to a fall in the value of silver. Since greenbacks were redeemable in silver, the depreciated value of the bonds led conservatives in Congress to press for and finally succeed in having the bonds repaid in gold. This was denounced as the rich taking care of themselves at the expense of the producing class. The issue remained at the forefront of populist rhetoric and national politics for decades.

That producing class, and here the author shows showing a Marxist influence but, in context, it is probably the best explanatory term, although there was a large diversity in race, religion, and background. The one unifying theme was their economic status. Industrialists like Andrew Carnegie, whose plants produced a quarter of the country's steel. Painter describes the harsh and dangerous working conditions and the "bloody struggle" between union workers and the company that had to be resolved with military intervention.

Carnegie had been sympathetic towards workers and supportive of unions until the contract between the union and the Homestead steel mill expired. With profit on the line, he allowed his partner a free hand to eliminate the union. An employee lock out, enforced by a 3-mile long 8-foot high fence, and a hired Pinkerton security force soon became a near war zone until the governor sent in 8,000 militia to restore peace. Strike leaders were arrested and languished in jail while non-union workers restored productivity at the mill. The government's reaction to this and subsequent strikes was to back the companies against the workers while legislation restricted their ability to strike further restricting freedom to support business profitability and protect social hierarchy.

The conflict grew in intensity. Attorney General A. Michael Palmer survived a suicide bombing of his home in June 1919. In addition to terrorism, blamed on Bolshevik activists but easily and quickly expanded to include striking workers, social unrest was tearing the country apart. Whites and African-American's were killing each other indiscriminately in Chicago. There were massive strikes by steelworkers, coal miners, and police. Race riots, mob violence, and lynching took place in cities across the country and on both coasts. Economic equality, expressed through labor strikes, became synonymous with anarchy and a desire to destroy the country. Palmer, who believed that increased democracy with its resulting industrial and social chaos was too high of a price for America to pay, led a brutal crackdown on labor and social dissidents. Conservatives from the middle-class and wealthy class were afraid of the chaos and wanted stability, even if it came at the price of less freedom and democracy.

Painter's book is an excellent survey of the rough and chaotic history surrounding the turn of the 20th Century. Skipping from major themes in economics, politics, and social life, she narrates the complexity of change from the late 1800s to 1920 as the country balanced on the edge of the democratic ideals of equality and freedom and the stability of hierarchical social order. Although, by the end of the period, the pendulum had swung away from freedom the reader is left with hope for the future.

Corey says

Read this in college. Actually an interesting read for I think is a very dull era in US History: The Industrial Revolution.

Jack says

One of the very few history books that I call "a page-turner", this is a uniquely readable survey of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Nell Irvin Painter discusses those periods with a focus on class, gender, and race, without sacrificing coverage of the "traditional" issues (party politics, U.S. foreign policy, economics, etc.). Highly recommended for general readers and students alike.

Charles Kingsley says

A very interesting book that explores some different narratives of American history you won't find so well explicated in other books.

Leif Kurth says

Reading *Standing at Armageddon* in 2017 is like reading a current events magazine using historical figures in place of their modern counterparts. The progressive movement of the latter part of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th is strikingly similar in many ways to the history from 1980 - 2017. The political economy, social setting, rise of "Americanism", i.e. jingoism and other forms of extreme patriotism, and political divides, coalitions of convenience, and policy fights over taxes, foreign affairs, 'race', sex, and class, are reminiscent of everything we've witnessed in the past 40 years. It is little wonder that people so often say, mistakenly of course, that "history repeats itself". It is not repetition by any stretch of one's imagination, but the parallels between the periods is enough to make *that* phrase almost believable.

Furthermore, Nell Irvin Painter's use of detail, to add context and clarity, is most impressive as it enjoins the reader to better understand the lived existence of the working wo/men upon whom this country, and all nations, are ultimately built. Her telling of the story from multiple perspectives achieves a balance rarely seen in the writing of history. We can understand why politics is so complicated, even if we don't understand the reason people believe/ behave in the manner they do.

To understand the present, one needs to study the past. Painter has given us one piece in that puzzle, what we do with this knowledge is up to us.

Jessi says

A great resource for learning progressive-era history. It provided me with a sense of just how powerful social and political unrest was in the post-reconstruction era. Painter points out that Americans in the 1890's dealt with the damaging effects of recessions, a widening gap between socioeconomic classes, and the challenges

of establishing reform. The parallels between the period covered in the book and that of today is striking, and perhaps, somewhat ironic.

N.W. Martin says

Reading this for my America from 1877 to 1929 class. So far it is okay, though Mrs. Painter's bias prompted me to cross-read this with a Mark Summers survey. In the first two chapters, she has downplayed the role of technology (actually she is overly negative toward any project that 'exploited' the workers) and glorifies the Union and Worker strikes post-reconstruction. I have a nagging feeling that her worldview is being pushed onto her facts, and for that reason alone I've rated the book so low. If she took a route like Mark Summers (who presents a Gilded Age of great innovation and human achievement as well as a time of social upheaval with little preference of one over the other), then I would rate her work higher, alas her Marxist influences (god forbid she's gone way beyond the typical Annales-ist -- she is a social historian, like John Hope Franklin -- approach to history) convolute her argument (as of the end of chapter two).

In short, do not be scared to pick this book up and learn, but beware of the constant drag of political bias, and thus take her main argument with a grain of salt. She will present facts that are absolutely interesting and her narrative is absolutely engaging, but she will stretch the truth in a Freudian-like way.

Matt says

Really interesting, particularly the rise of the labor movements, workers safety and health movements, William Jennings Bryan, McKinley. The book is fairly academic, it is concerned with movements of people rather than individual human conditions. Ms. Painter's discussion of racism and racial suppression was fascinating, particularly voters rights.

The constantly-shifting positions of republicans and democrats (and Teddy Roosevelt) from the end of reconstruction to the end of WW1 was interesting. You can see the roots of today's modern parties in that era. I really didn't know much about McKinley; however, based upon his policies, he really seems to be the first modern republican president. He was an important president. The same with Bryan; he seems to be the first modern democrat.

The debate between silver vs. gold standard was interesting, I really didn't know much about why free silver was an issue until this book explained it to me. The silver vs. gold discussion, the role of big banks and money trusts led to the creation of the Federal Reserve and our current monetary model right now.

The institutional disenfranchisement of African Americans was summarized to some detail detail such that I understand it better, especially denial of voting rights. Authors have wrote volumes on this subject. It is possibly the most important problem, then and now, considering the depth of the subject of institutional racism against the African American population and desire to return to antebellum.

I would like to have understood a few topics better, including reconstruction and its end, the roots of the panics of 1893 and 1907 and the supreme court decisions during the era. However, if the author would have gone into these topics in detail, the book might be very long, very academic and very dry. And it gives me opportunity for further reading. The author provides a list of suggested reading at the end.

The author seemed to lose interest in certain facets of the progressive movement, other than Mother Jones,

she seemed to be less interested in women's movements and the early roots of the progressive movement. In these cases, she merely name drops and moves on. Very little discussion on child labor regulation. There was no discussion on the state of public education.

The author's bias shows through; however it did not impact my enjoyment of the book. William Jennings Bryan figures large, and the author's interest in the progressive movement shows as does her admiration for Bryan. Also the author spends time on Roosevelt and his transition to a progressive, then almost laments his return to the main-stream republican party.

A great history about the time of our history when we began defining (or attempting to define) what "America" means.

Brandy says

Read this for a grad class.

Easily the most readable book on the time period that I've encountered. Probably the first time I've ever felt like I had a grasp on some of these issues (not least of all the silver debate). This book is a keeper.
