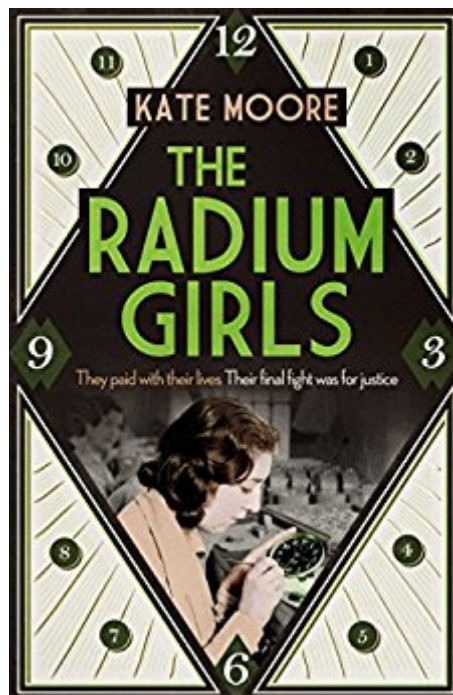




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# The Radium Girls: They Paid With Their Lives. Their Final Fight Was For Justice.



## Synopsis

Ordinary women in 1920s America. All they wanted was the chance to shine. Be careful what you wish for. “The first thing we asked was, ‘Does this stuff hurt you?’ And they said, ‘No.’ The company said that it wasn’t dangerous, that we didn’t need to be afraid.” 1917. As a war raged across the world, young American women flocked to work, painting watches, clocks and military dials with a special luminous substance made from radium. It was a fun job, lucrative and glamorous – the girls themselves shone brightly in the dark, covered head to toe in the dust from the paint. They were the radium girls. As the years passed, the women began to suffer from mysterious and crippling illnesses. The very thing that had made them feel alive – their work – was in fact slowly killing them: they had been poisoned by the radium paint. Yet their employers denied all responsibility. And so, in the face of unimaginable suffering – in the face of death – these courageous women refused to accept their fate quietly, and instead became determined to fight for justice. Drawing on previously unpublished sources – including diaries, letters and court transcripts, as well as original interviews with the women’s relatives – The Radium Girls is an intimate narrative account of an unforgettable true story. It is the powerful tale of a group of ordinary women from the Roaring Twenties, who themselves learned how to roar.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the early twentieth century one of the best jobs young girls and women in America could have involved something exciting and brand new: radium. Sparkling, glowing, and beautiful, radium was also, according to the companies that employed these young women, completely harmless. A century later the truth about radium and its assorted isotopes is all too well known. In *The Radium Girls* Kate Moore tells the story of these young women, seemingly so fortunate, who were poisoned by the jobs they felt so lucky to have. Radium was widely heralded as a wondrous new substance after it was first isolated by the Curies. It appeared to have an infinite number of uses, one of the first of which was to make the numbers on clocks and watches easier to see. Workers were needed to coat the dials with radium paint, and the best and most efficient workers were women and girls, some as young as 14 or 15. The work was pleasant and sociable: the women sat around tables painting, moistening the thin brushes in their mouths before they dipped them into the paint, chatting, eating, and drinking while they worked, sometimes taking extra paint home with them to practice with, sometimes painting their teeth, faces, hair, and clothing to make them sparkly. When they left the studio their clothing would be covered with radium dust, and would glow ghost-like in the night. The pay was good and the work was easy, but then some of the women started having strange pains in their mouths and bones. Their teeth would loosen and fall out and their jaws, legs, and ankles would develop permanent aches or even crumble. After some of the women died and more became ill the companies making large profits on radium rushed to dismiss any hint that the work was unsafe. Victims and their families sought relief and assistance, but found they were responsible for their own mounting medical bills. The federal, state, and local governments all disavowed any responsibility. Eventually publicity stemming from lawsuits filed by some of the victims (using their own scanty resources) focused enough attention on the problem that governments felt compelled to set safety standards and regulations. *The Radium Girls* is a horrifying read. The careless ways in which radium was handled, the indifference of the radium using industries and the governments involved to the safety of the women painters (in contrast to the men who worked to produce the radium, who were protected by lead shields), and the pain and suffering of the women themselves are appalling. The safety regulations and restrictions which were finally put into place hardly seem adequate, and the Epilogue and Postscript giving details of the women's later lives, as well as an account of another industry that made careless use of radium as late as the 1970s, are especially harrowing. This is a well written, meticulously research and documented,

account of tragedies that never should have been. The radium girls' lives can't be returned to them, but thanks to Kate Moore we can remember, and learn, from their pain.

This is one these books that will stay with you long after you finished reading it. The suffering, the indifference, the greed, the lies, the audacity... 90 years later it is still easy to imagine it happening over and over again.

Apparently there have been some other books written about these young women at the turn of the 20th century, who were exposed through their place of work to radium. This of course, is an element that we know now to be dangerous to work with. Actually, it became soon apparent to Marie Curie and her husband that radium was dangerous. They would carry rocks around in their pockets that contained radium, and soon their fingers would start to change colors because of constant exposure. But during the early 1900's companies realized they could use radium to make things like dials and watches shine at night (in the dark), and during night time forays into battle, especially during World War I and II, this ability was invaluable for ships, for planes, for many different uses when people needed to see things at night. It became obvious much later on, during the 20's and 30's that companies knew the radium was dangerous...but they neglected to warn any of their workers of this danger. Most of their workers were female, and though some of the behavior of these companies was because they didn't value the lives of their workers because they were female, some of it was simply because companies in general didn't care about anything but their profits. Other books have illustrated this in talking about miners, and other groups who were misled (including asbestos workers) as to the danger of various chemicals and things used in workplace situations. I really enjoyed this story of Moore's. She really did substantial research into the lives of these women, their homelife, their sweethearts, how they handle their illnesses and pain. These were definitely good women who survived incredible horrors put on them by uncaring companies, and who stood up for what was right. The only things I found a little disconcerting is the amount of emotion that Moore put into the writing of this book. In some ways, her writing was more like a conversation with opinions inserted by her, rather than a more formal writing method. I'm more used to formal books about problems like these, as I read a lot about infectious diseases...and her writing threw me a little. The other complaint, is I expected a bit more about the development of protections for workers than the author actually gave. Because the book said on the outside that it would go into the history of laws and protections for workers, I expected more than the author actually provided. I would have like more legal information for all this...how far it's come since then. But otherwise, a

very good read, especially as concerns unknown and new chemicals that we are constantly bombarded with, and the need to be careful in your exposure to them until we know how dangerous they are. This includes pharmaceuticals!

If you tend not to want to believe that we are often led to believe something is good for us because there is money in it for someone else then this is a very good read. At the turn of the century and into the 1920s and beyond, radium was hailed as a super product. Marie Curie won a Nobel Prize for her work with it (and later died from her exposure to it). Young women who were tired of being paid pennies for their fulltime work were welcomed into watch factories where they could carefully paint the faces on popular watches and military watches and dials with radium. They were, of course, told it was good for them. I have given you the guts of the beginning but I will not spoil the middle or end. It's an interesting and thought-provoking read on many levels, never boring, and a tribute to the tenacity and courage of women.

One of the best books I have read in a long time! Telling the story of the Radium Girls from the standpoint of the girls/women who were victimized by corporate greed and their battle for their rights was wonderful. Kate Moore brought these brave women to light in a brilliant manner. I had trouble putting this book down and highly recommend it.

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