

Preface

This book is a work of fiction, a novel based on the long and remarkable life of the iconoclastic Mother Jones. During her time — the most ruthless period of America’s Industrial Revolution — capitalists often referred to her as “the most dangerous woman in America.” Likewise, in our time, this novel could become the “most dangerous *book* in America.” The parallels between “then” and “now” are both frightening and powerful. The lessons are vital to our present and to our future.

I first became acquainted with Mother Jones in 1976 when I was chosen to co-author the book *West Virginia USA*. The other co-author, then Associated Press feature writer Strat Douthat, was given the assignment to write the chapter titled, “Fussin’ and Feudin’.”

Not only did that chapter touch upon the famous feud between the Hatfields and McCoys, it told of a tiny old Irish woman who was, in her day, alternately referred to with reverence or hate as Mother Jones.

Strat’s chapter told only of a small part of her work in West Virginia, but her story was much bigger than that. Across the country, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Mary Harris Jones faced threats and jail terms, bullets and bombs to defend the American worker — men, women and children — against the greed of robber barons and, more broadly, to defend the promises of democracy from unrestrained capitalism.

She battled injustice and economic servitude from New York and Washington, D.C., across the Midwest to Colorado, up to the Pacific Northwest, and down Mexico way.

Her fight began during the latter years of the Civil War and ended upon her death in 1930 at the height of the Great Depression — an epic of more than 65 years.

She was the counterpoint to the icons of the American Industrial Revolution — Ford, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan, Vanderbilt and others. These men still stand tall in the history of the United States and the minds of most of its informed citizens, but the significance of Mother Jones is fading fast. Over the past few years, my casual mentions of this writing project largely brought looks of puzzlement. Apologetically my listeners mostly admitted they weren't sure if they'd ever heard of Mother Jones.

Many fine historians have written tens of thousands of pages on the facts of her life and legacy, but unfortunately these tomes are not in the mainstream of popular books. In the fashion of Mother Jones, I wanted to bring back her message, not just to the few — the historians or history buffs or political wonks among us — but to the most of us, and so I have chosen the historical novel as my framework.

I have also chosen to use *first person* and *present tense* as much as possible to retell this story in the context of today. In first person, Mother Jones tells the story and in present tense she guides you as if you are there with her as the thought-provoking episodes unfold to finally meet up with the here and now.

Telling the story through Mother Jones required me to get inside her skin, climb inside her body, see through her eyes, think through her mind, feel through her heart. The result has been a personal epiphany that has enlightened me, if not turned me around. I want to share with you a little bit of the impact the telling has had on *me* before you run the risk of having something like that happen to *you* as you experience the life of Mother Jones.



In 1979, three years after the publication of *West Virginia USA*, I was elected to the West Virginia State Senate. I was a registered Independent until I surprised myself, and especially others, by becoming a political candidate.

As a journalist, I had thought it was important to be neither Democrat nor Republican and that's the way I behaved as editor and co-publisher of *The Preston County News*, located in the little mountain town of Terra Alta, West Virginia, not far from the Maryland border.

Suddenly I was in the State Senate. Since, as a candidate, I had re-registered in the Democratic column, organized labor also expected me to be in their column. I refused to swear my allegiance to either labor or business, and that didn't set well with the United Mine Workers of America or the AFL-CIO. Since I wasn't "for" them, they assumed I must be "against" them. And so they put me in their bad guy column.

Business didn't know what to think.

I was okay with that. I liked being nobody's man except my constituents'. It was a difficult path, but I managed and I made my way up in the ranks of the Senate hierarchy without owing my soul to any special interest group.

As I look back on it now, I probably looked at organized labor as some kind of mindless cult and, frankly, I didn't really know much about why there *was* such a thing as organized labor, even though my father was a coal miner and the union had been of benefit to my childhood.

Now, 34 years later, after all the research I've done on the life of Mother Jones; after helping her tell her complete story again in a different way, having experienced with her the natural conflict and history; after gaining a better understanding of the nature of the differences between the motivations and behaviors of business and labor; and between the goals and objectives of capitalism and democracy ... well, I can only say that Mother Jones and I think alike.

I didn't mean for this to happen. When I started writing, I intended only to retell the story of Mother Jones in a more

complete and readable way. As it turns out, Mother Jones has retold her story in a more up-to-date and meaningful way.

I'll be surprised if you come to the end of the book without a new perspective on the past and the present. I sincerely hope so.

Jerry Ash

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