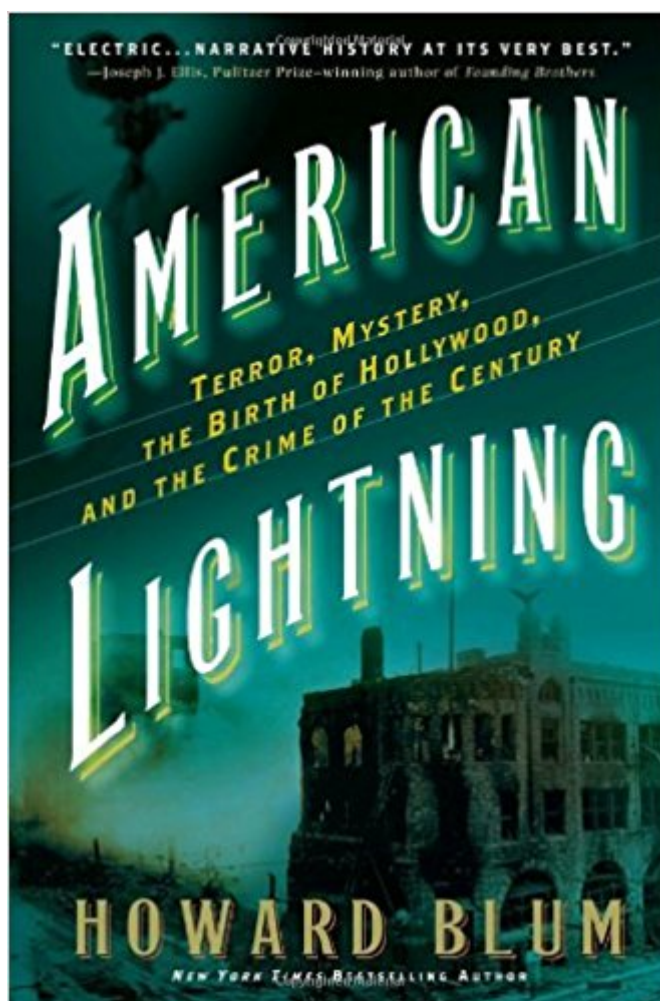


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# American Lightning: Terror, Mystery, The Birth Of Hollywood, And The Crime Of The Century



## Synopsis

It was an explosion that reverberated across the country—and into the very heart of early-twentieth-century America. On the morning of October 1, 1910, the walls of the Los Angeles Times Building buckled as a thunderous detonation sent men, machinery, and mortar rocketing into the night air. When at last the wreckage had been sifted and the hospital triage units consulted, twenty-one people were declared dead and dozens more injured. But as it turned out, this was just a prelude to the devastation that was to come. In *American Lightning*, acclaimed author Howard Blum masterfully evokes the incredible circumstances that led to the original “crime of the century” and an aftermath more dramatic than even the crime itself. With smoke still wafting up from the charred ruins, the city’s mayor reacts with undisguised excitement when he learns of the arrival, only that morning, of America’s greatest detective, William J. Burns, a former Secret Service man who has been likened to Sherlock Holmes. Surely Burns, already world famous for cracking unsolvable crimes and for his elaborate disguises, can run the perpetrators to ground. Through the work of many months, snowbound stakeouts, and brilliant forensic sleuthing, the great investigator finally identifies the men he believes are responsible for so much destruction. Stunningly, Burns accuses the men—labor activists with an apparent grudge against the Los Angeles Times’s fiercely anti-union owner—of not just one heinous deed but of being part of a terror wave involving hundreds of bombings. While preparation is laid for America’s highest profile trial ever—and the forces of labor and capital wage hand-to-hand combat in the streets—two other notable figures are swept into the drama: industry-shaping filmmaker D.W. Griffith, who perceives in these events the possibility of great art and who will go on to alchemize his observations into the landmark film *The Birth of a Nation*; and crusading lawyer Clarence Darrow, committed to lend his eloquence to the defendants, though he will be driven to thoughts of suicide before events have fully played out. Simultaneously offering the absorbing reading experience of a can’t-put-it-down thriller and the perception-altering resonance of a story whose reverberations continue even today, *American Lightning* is a masterpiece of narrative nonfiction.

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In 1911, Iron Workers Union leaders James and Joseph McNamara plea-bargained in exchange for prison sentences instead of death after bombing the offices of the Los Angeles Times—killing 21 people and wounding many more. The bombing had been part of a bungled assault on some 100 American cities. After the McNamaras went to jail, Clarence Darrow, their defense attorney, wound up indicted for attempting to bribe the jury, but won acquittal after a defense staged by the brilliant Earl Rogers. The McNamaras were investigated by William J. Burns—near legendary former Secret Service agent and proprietor of a detective agency. Surprisingly, Burns's collaborator in the investigation was silent film director D.W. Griffith. This tangled and fascinating tale is the stuff of novels, and Vanity Fair contributing editor Blum (*The Brigade*) tells it with a novelist's flair. In an approach reminiscent of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Blum paints his characters in all their grandeur and tragedy, making them—and their era—come alive. Blum's prose is tight, his speculations unfailingly sound and his research extensive—all adding up to an absorbing and masterful true crime narrative. (Sept.)

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Most critics were eager to learn more about this neglected event in American history and were glad to have Blum as their teacher. They were most impressed by the first half of the book, which covers the attacks and investigation and which was several times compared to a Hollywood thriller or an episode of the television show *24*. Reviewers were less thrilled by the second part of the book, where Blum introduces Darrow and Griffith into the story. Several felt that these great American personalities were presented superficially, perhaps because Blum attempted too great a scope in the book. But on the whole, critics found *American Lightning* to be a satisfying work of narrative history. Copyright 2008 Bookmarks Publishing LLC

fascinating well researched book. You'll read about a part of history of film and corporate glutony that most of us have never known (I certainly didn't). I never knew much about DW Griffith and his influences....or of his relationship to Mary Pickford. Clarence Darrow is revealed as much more than a major trial lawyer. One never thinks of his love affairs. The intertwining of Hollywood film and labor and the blowing up of the Los Angeles Times, was all new to me. This is a very good, informative read about the not too distant past. I definitely recommend it to anyone interested in the history of Hollywood film, the manipulation of the our laws and the start of the labor unions on both coasts of America.

Having been born at Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital I always enjoy the history of my home town. The characters in American Lightning are all familiar names, the street names are mostly the same, and although the locations have either new names and functions or have been completely razed their essence remains. As a child I heard my parents converse with a neighbor who was a detective in the LAPD (he was in the minority, a good cop). We lived in the San Fernando Valley and didn't feel the corruption as directly as those "over the hills". I was most interested in learning the role of the Owens River water issues and the development of the Valley, all I remember is that as a kid I loved to walk barefoot in that soft sandy soil. So, not only did I leave American Lightning with a better understanding of the politics and press, the development of my home spot, but also of the early movie industry, which my father was involved with, plus a walk down memory lane under the walnut, magnolia and lemon trees in the Valley.

Genuinely interesting book about the bombing of a LA newspaper during the upheavals between unions and industry. I learned a lot about what went on and found myself looking forward to reading it every day. I honestly could have done without the addition of Griffith's story. While the "Birth of Hollywood" angle is interesting, it didn't add anything to the true story that was being told about the bombing, the manhunt, and the ensuing trial. And just a nit pick- Continuously calling the bombing the "Crime of the Century" got on my nerves. Evey time I've heard that term is was always referring the the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, so it felt like the author was trying to make the bombing bigger in our minds. It was huge in it's own right, and didn't need to borrow the name already in our consciousness. However, all in all a good read

Really liked this. I actually didn't even know about the bombing at all until I picked this up. Very

engaging piece of history. The era itself is addressed explicitly, of course, but implicit in the text is the fact that there are some parallels between what was happening then and what's happening now.

Howard Blum has an amazing ability to weave events into a cohesive framework that can be entertaining but for some it could be a little confusing. How he combined the early biographical history of DW Griffith and the cast of characters surrounding the 1910 bombing of a LA newspaper to create a very decent book I didn't think was possible especially since both really didn't have similar interests except that they were on this earth at the same time. But in spite of this *American Lightning* gets a thumbs up from me.

A riveting examination of home grown terrorism in labor/management conflict in the early 20th century, and the hunt mounted by America's most renowned private detective to find and convict the perpetrators of a mass murder bombing. People who worry about "creeping socialism" in present day America can benefit from an understanding of the extremes to which some early left wing labor activists went in pursuing their dream of class equality. This popular history reads like a fast paced novel.

Rarely has an author pulled off a non fiction book that is deeply researched, accurate, and beautifully written, showing the intersections of a true terrorist plot, politics, and cultural history with such success. It's an exciting page turner. I enjoyed it so much, that I bought this copy for my High School grandson, a history buff, who enjoyed it as much as I did.

A great history book that reads like a crime novel. The author does a very good job conveying the skills of Billy Burns (America's Sherlock Holmes) and Clarence Darrow. He weaves DW Griffith into the book as well, but that topic seems a little forced. The subject matter is labor against capital in the early 1900's and the bombing of the LA Time building....a huge story of the time. You will learn a ton, and be entertained as well!

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