

# ***The Radium Girls: The Dark Story of America's Shining Women***

## **Session 1: Chapters 1-14**

- Why did radium cost \$120,000 per gram in the 1920s? (about \$2,200,000 in 2019 dollars)
- What injury did Marie Curie suffer from radium about 20 years before the Radium Girls began working at their jobs?
- Why did Pierre Curie say he would not want to be in a room with a kilo of pure radium?
- How do you compare and contrast the fact the men at the radium companies wore lead aprons and used tongs, versus the Radium Girls who put the pens coated with radium in their mouths and had no protection?
- What does it mean that radium has a half-life of 1,600 years?
- How did the fact that dial painters were paid three times more than the factory average impact the decision of the women to accept a job as a dial painter?
- How do you critique the fact that scientists knew people had died from radium poisoning before the dial painters were hired?
- When they were hired, what were the girls told by the manager Mr. Savoy upon inquiring 'does this stuff hurt you?'
- Why do you suppose Grace Fryer decided to start working at the United States Radium Corporation (USRC) just four days after the United States joined in World War I?
- What were the duties of the Radium Girls at their place of employment?
- Why did the companies want to hire women with small hands to do the painting work?
- Why were the Radium Girls known by the nickname the 'Ghost Girls' when they went out to the dance halls after work?
- How did radium poisoning affect Mollie Maggia?
- Knowing what we know now, did it surprise you that Radium was such a status symbol?
- What was your response to the list of products that contained Radium?
- Why do you think the companies didn't do more to prevent the practice of lip-pointing?
- What do you consider the most shocking thing you have learned from the book so far?
- What do you think of the writing style?

## **Session 2: Chapters 15-25**

- What year did people in authority have evidence that the girls were suffering from radium poisoning?
- What did the blood tests show, the tests the Drinker's performed?
- What year did specialists know about the adverse effects of radium on blood?

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- Why didn't the company begin to investigate the deaths until a male employee passed away?
  - Why do you think they didn't even do an autopsy on the women for the first three years?
  - Do you think the women's plight would have eventually garnered attention if he hadn't died?
  - Do you think the researchers studying the girls had an ethical duty to publicize the dangers they discovered in the workplace? Did they have an ethical duty to share their knowledge/skills with the girls?
- How much radium was estimated to be in Sarah's body? Do you think you could see that small amount with the naked eye?
- As news of the NJ cases made national headlines, how did the Ottawa company respond?
- What did you think upon reading that Dr Flinn wasn't a medical doctor?
- Do you interpret Martland's involvement in a cynical manner? Or do you think he is genuinely trying to help the girls and prevent this from happening again?
- Why do you think Dr. Drinker was reluctant to testify in the girls' suit against USRC?

He [Von Sochocky] now said to Grace: "The matter was not in [my] jurisdiction but Mr. Roeder's. Since the matter was under his supervision, [I] could do nothing."
- How did you feel about Von Sochocky's response when Grace confronted him about the fact that he didn't warn the girls about lip-pointing?
- Why do you think Dr. Kneff went to the USRC and offered to treat the girls and to help the company "make it go away one way or the other" in exchange for \$10,000?
- Why do you think there wasn't a more persistent effort made to get the women at Radium Dial to use the glass rods instead of the brushes, even though the company was aware of the dangers?
- What do you think of the different doctors and dentists involved in the girls' cases?

### **Session 3: Chapters 26-37**

- How would you compare and contrast the good men in the book that helped the Radium Girls such as lawyer Raymond Berry, lawyer Leonard Grossman, and doctor Harrison Martland, versus the bad men in the book who caused their illnesses?
- How did Raymond Berry use Mollie Maggia to help prove that radium was killing the girls?
- How would you compare and contrast the back-brace Grace had to wear because radium damaged her spine, versus the backbone she showed when confronted on the witness stand by the corporate lawyer?
- What did innovative doctor Harrison Martland do to help the Radium Girls?
- What do you make of the fact that one doctor examined the women and declared they had no radium poisoning and that it was all in their minds? Why did doctors accuse women of having 'hysteria'?

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- How much was the initial settlement offer?
- What were the dial painters in Ottawa, IL, told after the settlement news came out of NJ, and after they underwent testing?
- Was it immoral for the company to steal the victims' bones to cover up the truth about the dangers of radium poisoning?
- Why do you think there was less interest, particularly media interest, in Ella Cruse's case in Ottawa?

And so Raymond Berry, legal champion, the pioneering attorney who had been the only lawyer to answer Grace's call for help, found himself forced into signing his name to the following statement: "I agree not to be connected with, directly or indirectly, any other cases against the United States Radium Corporation, nor to render assistance to any persons in any actions against said Company, nor to furnish data or information to any such persons in matters against said Company."

- Why do you think Raymond Berry signed the statement? Would you have done the same if you had been in his shoes?
- Did it surprise you that the town of Ottawa had such a split reaction to the women filing suit against Radium Dial?
- What do you think of the women's state of mind and attitudes as they are going through all of this?

And Grace Fryer was never forgotten. She is still remembered now - you are still remembering her now. As a dial-painter, she glowed gloriously from the radium powder; but as a woman, she shines through history with an even brighter glory: stronger than the bones that broke inside her body; more powerful than the radium that killed her or the company that shamelessly lied through its teeth; living longer than she ever did on earth, because she now lives on in the hearts and memories of those who know her only from her story.

- How do you feel about the above statement?

### **Session 4: Chapters 38-48**

- What high-profile event occurred in 1931-32 which shows the value of the dial painters in society?
- What did Catherine's husband do that ultimately helped bring the Ottawa girl's story to light?
- What did the testing by Radium Dial show? How long had they known?
- Who did the women choose to be their spokesperson?
- Who was the first Ottawa death confirmed as radium poisoning? Did her death certificate reflect that fact?
- How did the community react to the allegations against Radium Dial?
- What lawyer came to their rescue?

### **Session 5: Chapters 49-Author's Note**

- How did Catherine Wolfe Donohue manage to testify from her deathbed to present her case against the company? How would you describe that stunning photo in the book?
- Do you think Catherine was a compelling witness?
- What do you think of the decision of the three physicians not to tell her of the diagnosis they had reached?

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- How many times did Catherine win her case? What are your thoughts about the case being taken to the Supreme Court by Radium Dial?
- How many grams of radium were used for dials in WWII?
- How did the radium girls help save thousands of lives? What organization came out of the dial painter's case?
- Luminous Processes 1978....
- Do you think that if ANL had reported its findings for national news that Luminous Processes would have been shut down sooner?
- Why do you think some of the employees and executives of Radium Dial and USRC remained so adamant that Radium wasn't dangerous even though they had proof to the contrary?
- Did it surprise you to hear that the cleanup of the contamination of the sites was still going on in 2015?
- What was the most shocking thing you learned from the book?
- Which of the persons in the book left the biggest impression on you? Why?
- Did the book change the way you look at the world around you? In what way?