

"Radium Girls" Film Discussion

Based on true events, sisters Bessie and Jo Cavallo paint dial watches at the American Radium factory in New Jersey. When Jo's health starts to decline, Bessie starts to question if radium is safe and discovers a veil of corporate lies. (2020 American drama film, available on multiple platforms, 102 minutes)

This film can be compared to the book *The Radium Girls: The Dark Story of America's Shining Women* by Kate Moore, or it can be viewed/discussed on its own.

Q1: What kinds of products were shown to contain radium? What did Jo Cavallo win for the most dials painted in a month?

Q2: What technique did the women use to paint the dials? Were there any warnings?

Q3: What did you think about the company doctor (Dr. Flint) examining the girls? Were you later shocked to learn that Dr. Flint was not a medical doctor?

Q4: The girls held a party at the radium studio. How did they decorate themselves?

Q5: Who is Ms. Wiley? How did she help the girls? In the movie, the person who helps the girls (Ms. Wiley) is a woman. Why did the movie choose a woman in this role? (In the book, the girls had lawyers Raymond Berry and Jay Cook.)

Q6: What does the story of Radium Girls tell us about life in the United States in the 1920s? The filmmakers make brief reference to almost every historical event at that time:

- The death of Italian actor Rudolph Valentino (1926)
- Construction of Mount Rushmore (~1923-1941)
- Tulsa Race Massacre (1921)
- Executions of Italian immigrant anarchists Nikola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1927), who were controversially convicted of murdering a guard and paymaster in a 1920 armed robbery
- Excavation of King Tutankhamun's tomb (1922)
- The Red Scare (1917-1920)
- The emergence of the labor movement
- Women's suffrage

Q7: What illnesses/symptoms did the girls have? What illness did the "doctors" say the girls had? Mary, Bessie and Jo's sister, had previously died – what did she supposedly died of?

Q8: How did Mary help the girls' case?

Q9: What did you think of Bessie bursting into the dial-painters studio, yelling at the girls to put down their brushes? Did the girls listen?

Q10: What was American Radium's initial offer for the Cavallo sisters?

Q11: A brick was thrown through the window of the Cavallo girls' home. Why?

Q12: Mr. Leech is very sick, yet he testifies in court. Does he hurt or help the girls' case? Did he tell the truth?

Q13: What was the Drinker report? How did Dr. Drinker's testimony help the girls' case?

Q14: How much did the girls win in their case?

Q15: For those of you who read the book (*The Radium Girls* by Kate Moore), what did you think about the movie compared to the book?

Q16: What were your main take-aways from the movie?

Q17: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?