

Strike! Mother Jones & the Colorado Coal Field War

by *Lois Ruby*

Filter Press LLC, 2012

"Strike! Mother Jones & the Colorado Coal Field War" uses Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, the woman dubbed as the Mother of the U.S. Labor Movement, as its central figure. Mother Jones's fiery temperament influences workers not only in Colorado but also across America. The reader might question whether "Strike!" is a biography or a nonfiction resource for teachers and students ages 10 and up. The book seems to lean away from a biography about Mother Jones and toward a resource for deepening one's understanding of the early 20th century labor movements in the United States.

Author Lois Ruby makes a connection with the reader by synthesizing genres and creating a book where the reader experiences the pathos of the Colorado Coal Field War of 1913-14. Ruby deftly slips between biography, primary source quotations, nonfiction information, explanations of facts, and vignettes about real people. The book does not sugarcoat information but looks at issues from the sides of workers, owners, managers, government, and Mother Jones. Interestingly, Mother Jones is not painted as the heroic Mother of the U.S. Labor Movement but as someone whose "... life exemplified the idea that the end justifies the means. In other words, she would do whatever was necessary in the fight for laborers' benefits. ... To rally the labor troops, she used every weapon in her arsenal, including fear, intimidation, insults, biblical quotes and misquotes, prayer, sentimentality, threats, lies, humiliation, false hope, and promises she often could not keep."

"Strike!" is loosely divided into four sections. The first ten chapters focus on background information about coal mining, miners, and the situation in southern Colorado near Trinidad and Walsenburg. This section provides helpful insight into the world of coal mining. Chapters 11 through 25 focus on the Colorado Coal Field War of 1913-14 when miners went on strike in September, moved out of coal camps, and set up a Tent Colony at Ludlow. These chapters culminate with the Ludlow Massacre on April 20, 1914. The final two sections of the book, chapters 26-28 and 29-34, relate the aftermath of Ludlow and provide reflection on the Coal Field War.

As a teacher, I especially like the way "Strike!" uses the endnotes and glossary. Lois Ruby's book found me asking Where did that comment or fact come from? I then would go to the endnotes and learn that the information was either from a book, an article, federal publication, or Mother Jones's autobiography. "Strike!" makes the reader want to use the endnotes. The glossary is unique in that its definitions are written with informal language. Other resources within the book are a bibliography, several timelines, a detailed table of contents, a helpful epilogue, a simple map to orient the reader, and historical photographs from the Library of Congress and Denver Public Library collections.

"Strike!" is a book title that grabs one's attention. The book's content, however, is much broader than a single strike. The book uses the life of Mother Jones to help the reader focus on the seven-month strike in southern Colorado as well as workers' situations across America. Mother Jones

was in and out of Colorado during the Coal Field War and was a strong influence during the years preceding the strike, but she was not the person who directly led the strike.

"Strike! Mother Jones & the Colorado Coal War" is a book I would recommend to teachers, especially to those teaching about Colorado at any grade level, and to students in middle and high school. It is a book not only about Colorado but also about workers' rights, collective bargaining, the United Mine Workers, and the development of labor laws in the United States.

Reviewed by Susan Andrews
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March 2014