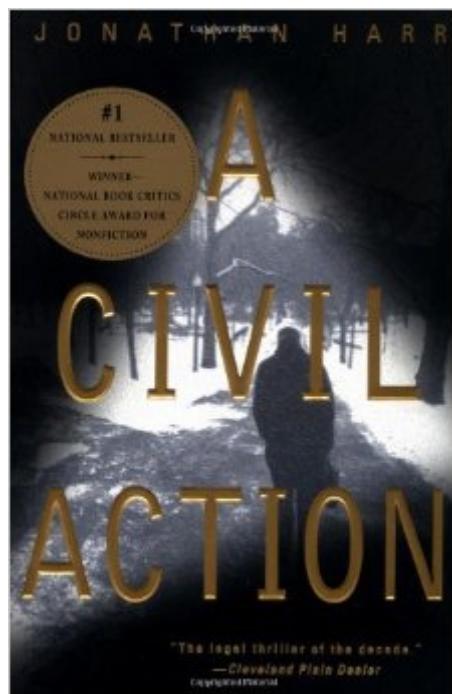


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A Civil Action



Synopsis

"The legal thriller of the decade." --Cleveland Plain Dealer Now a Major Motion Picture! In this true story of an epic courtroom showdown, two of the nation's largest corporations stand accused of causing the deaths of children. Representing the bereaved parents, the unlikeliest of heroes emerges: a young, flamboyant Porsche-driving lawyer who hopes to win millions of dollars and ends up nearly losing everything, including his sanity. A searing, compelling tale of a legal system gone awry--one in which greed and power fight an unending struggle against justice--A Civil Action is also the story of how one determined man can ultimately make a difference. With an unstoppable narrative power, it is an unforgettable reading experience.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is a depressing lesson in the ways that our judicial system don't work. An adversarial system of justice, by its very nature, leads not to an inquiry into the truth but instead to a polarized system where each side is fighting for its own side and disinterested in the merits of its opposition. While this book was, in many ways, a real downer, it was also a fascinating chronicle of litigation. I was immediately drawn in by the families' tragedies, Schlichtmann's flawed but good-hearted optimism, and the interaction between the lawyers and the judge. As Schlichtmann swirled deeper into debt, I found it impossible not to feel a growing sense of desparation along with him. The ending is bitterly disappointing, but in many ways the families eventually got what they wanted with subsequent EPA actions and criminal prosecutions. My husband and I are both attorneys. Last year, he was involved in a case in which the outcome was simply criminal. I felt I

could relate in a deeper sense to the drama in *A Civil Action* after experiencing such a travesty of justice firsthand. We have to work within the confines of the flawed legal system that exists now, but we must accept that it is far from perfect. Judges and juries--as humans--get things wrong all the time. This book, in gripping prose, demonstrates this basic fact of life in all too vivid of detail.

Harr's nonfiction tale of the Woburn case was an engaging way to explore legal strategy and some of the laws of civil procedure. My purpose for reading it was to learn about legal strategy from actual examples that went beyond substantive arguments about the facts of the case. This book did not disappoint. Perhaps the most brutal fact about legal strategy was the importance of money - namely, to fund the expensive discovery stage (i.e., when evidence is gathered) of the lawsuit. While I did find myself rooting for the plaintiff's attorney, the protagonist of the story, Jan Schlichtmann, I was impressed with Harr's ability to portray the defense counsel in a humane light. The fact that Harr does not lionize Schlichtmann nor demonize his legal opponents (Facher, Cheeseman, Keating) demonstrates why Harr was the recipient of an award for outstanding investigative reporting. In addition to offering a non-romanticized view of an emotionally wrenching situation, Harr succeeds in telling a spellbinding tale. And it is the hard-to-put-down element of this book that, I believe, won it the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1995. It is not a short story (500pgs), but the book held my interest and the painstaking narrative of legal details was packaged in as appetizing form as possible. Harr does not read like Grisham. If you want Grisham's fast-moving plot then stick with Grisham. If you're interested in taking a look at the brutal details and legal chess moves that occur in litigation, then you may enjoy Harr. Lastly, I disagree with reviewers who accused Harr of failing to flesh out his characters. Since the book is nonfiction Harr cannot take the sort of omniscient perspective available to a Grisham, but he does a fine job of getting inside the character's heads nonetheless.

WR Grace hailed TIAA-CREF, the academic world's largest private pension fund and a majority shareholder in Grace. On the board were also Alan Fiers of the CIA and Zbignew Brezinski, former NSA chief as well as Peter Lynch of Fidelity Investments. Jan Schlichtmann has lost most if not all of any proceeds from this case to Cadle Co. after the Boston Trade Bank failed. Grace is/was a company very politically connected who hired former government officials, such as from EPA or OSHA, etc. Many more families than just the ones in this case were affected, including families from the Woburn/Burlington side.

I remember living in Woburn during the times when the earliest signs of epidemic emerged. We lived in a poor area in one of the worse parts of Woburn before moving around. I was a handicapped child, newly emerged from a long hospital stay and had to take weekly trips into Boston for checkups and treatments. I remember people throwing rocks through our windows, paint on the back door, and nights of terror where we lived. I was bounced into state child care and suddenly just after this book came out, my life became a living hell. I lost most everything, was treated hostilely by the local medical community, had my medical records disappeared and became a target of attacks of the sort of viciousness i remember living in the subsidized housing in Woburn. I remembered having to appear in court as a young child and when i went back to the Woburn court 25 years later, could see nothing of the records concerning my court appearance, with no reason ever given. Some town personnel records from my early years in Woburn had been destroyed and 'friends' i had known for up to 20 yrs with ongoing ties to Woburn turned on me in derision. It was like i suddenly became a target of hate for being a handicapped boy who may have been one of the earliest cases in Woburn and never known it. I began wondering if there were other kids out there like me from those days early in the epidemic who had experienced similar abuse. As more and more acts of hate were thrown at me i wondered how anyone could hold an infant responsible for what went on in Woburn. I suddenly became unemployable in Massachusetts and my life prior to the introduction of this book has been destroyed in almost every respect.

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