

Realizing History through Fiction:  
Historical Representation in *Storming Heaven*

Ellie James

# The West Virginia Mine Wars of 1920-21

- A year-long standoff between unionized coal miners and coal industry elite
- Strike began as push for union recognition to protect against standardized mistreatment and mine guard system
- Centralized in southern West Virginia (specifically: Mingo County and Logan County)
- Culminated in the Battle of Blair Mountain, a five-day-long skirmish between approx. 10,000 miners and militia recruited by Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin
- Ended by federal intervention, resulting in a union defeat until New Deal gains in the 1930s

# Characters of *Storming Heaven*

- **Rondal Lloyd** – coal miner and union organizer
- **C.J. Marcum** – mayor of Annadel, WV, a socialist and labor rights activist; father figure to Rondal
- **Carrie Bishop** – coal camp nurse; lover of Rondal, wife of Albion
- **Rosa Angelleli** – Italian immigrant, mother, and private employee of company owner
- **Albion Freeman** – coal camp minister and union organizer
- **Isom Justice** – best friend of Rondal and sheriff of Annadel

# Historical Fact, Fictional Characters

- Highly accurate historical framework
  - Events resembling the Matewan Massacre and assassination of Sid Hatfield, even down to minor details
  - “I didn’t make anything up, I didn’t want to be accused of exaggerating. I even left out some atrocities because I was afraid readers wouldn’t believe them” (Giardina, qtd. in Boudreau 9)
- Fictional replacements of analogous historical figures
  - Isom Justice & Albion Freeman – Sid Hatfield, martyred sheriff of Matewan
  - Carrie Bishop – Jessie Lee Maynard, wife of Sid Hatfield
  - Rondal Lloyd – Bill Blizzard, union organizer and unofficial general of the miners’ army
  - C.J. Marcum – Mayor Cabell Testerman, defender of union interests

# Representations

- **Rondal** – striking miners and local union organizers
  - Early personal experiences of exploitation and union-related violence
  - On the frontlines of organization and battle
  - Refusal to voice his story in the aftermath
- **Carrie** – the women of the coal camps and the fear of exploitation
  - Contrasting the idyllic “Homeplace” with the abused coal camps
  - Experience makes her increasingly aware of the impending exploitation of her Kentucky home
  - Suffered hardships and engaged in active resistance equally with men

# Representations

- **C.J. Marcum** – working class radicals and early victims of exploitation
  - Radicalized by the company-ordered murder of his grandfather in pursuit of family land acquisition
  - The first generation of the exploited who connects the miners' struggle with a historical foundation
- **Rosa Angelleli** – immigrants who suffered marginalization in an already exploited community
  - Isolation and racial prejudice on top of poverty
  - Even more vulnerable to exploitation due to alienation

# Establishing Continuity

- Creating (rather than trying to demonstrate) character links frees Giardina to construct a historically-based narrative of regional exploitation stretching from the past, through the present, and to the future
  - Beginning with the context of unfair land acquisition by the companies, as explained by C.J.
  - Realized in the miners' battle for fair treatment, as experienced by Rondal, Carrie, and Rosa
  - Epilogue written by Dillon Freeman, the son of Rondal and Carrie, participating in a 1980's strike against American Coal

# “The Coal Companies Still Own the Land”

- Dillon Freeman as a stand-in for Giardina, bridging a fictional narrative with the concerns of the real life it represents
- Reclaiming the lost narrative of the Battle of Blair Mountain
  - Dillon narrating his father’s silenced story
  - Giardina raising awareness of a silenced event
- Historical fiction is a means of **actualizing history** and **recontextualizing the present**, especially for those still experiencing exploitation (e.g., strip mining, anti-union corporate activity)
- “There’s not much knowledge of our Appalachian heritage... It’s important to know that people fought back. When I found out that people fought back, I thought maybe I should too” (Giardina, qtd. in Boudreau 10)



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