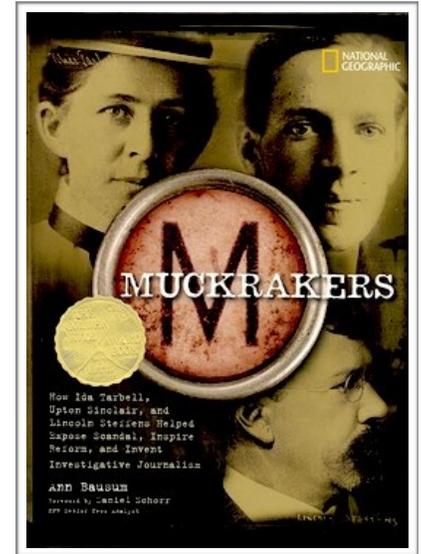

The Power of the Pen

Book Report: “*Muckrakers: How Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and Lincoln Steffens Helped Expose Scandal, Inspire Reform, and Invent Investigative Journalism*”

by [Ann Bausum](#) (2007)

[Robin Spielberg](#) – October 15, 2014



As the daughter of a history professor, [Ann Bausum](#) grew up with a love of American history and a passion for research. “Even as a kid I wrote picture books, memorized history, and organized neighborhood play productions,” Bausum recounted in a 2007 interview with [Cynthia Leitich Smith](#), New York Times Bestseller and author of the [Cynsations](#) blog for all things books. Bausum is an award-winning author who has published six titles with [National Geographic Children’s Books](#), including the

acclaimed American Library Association’s [Sibert Honor](#)-designated book “*Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement*,” which tells two stories--the story of segregated life in the 1940s and '50s, and the story of how people crossed racial and geographic divides to end the practice of segregated travel in the South.

Drawing from her devotion to the power of news writing that dates back to her childhood, Bausum’s 2007 book, “*Muckrakers: How Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and Lincoln Steffens Helped Expose Scandal, Inspire Reform, and Invent Investigative Journalism*,” follows a generation of dedicated journalists who forced responsible changes in industry and politics during the Progressive era of the early twentieth century by collaborating with monthly magazines in order to create a new kind of journalism—in-depth, serialized exposés of corporate, labor, and

political corruption. Although the journalistic exposé can certainly trace its heritage back into the nineteenth century, it was during the Progressive era that investigative reporting began to flourish. Many of these stories become instant bestsellers in book format, such as [Upton Sinclair's](#) “[The Jungle](#)”-- a classic [account](#) of corruption in the meat-packing industry and a call for socialistic government reform written in a style patterned after the era’s childhood favorite, “[The Pilgrim’s Progress](#),” a 17th century classic morality tale by [John Bunyan](#).

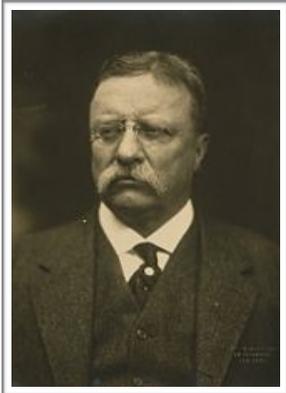


[Muckrakers](#), winner of the 2007 [Golden Kite Award](#) for Best Nonfiction Book of the Year from the [Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators](#), is the inside story of public-spirited journalism from its infancy to its evolution, with profiles of latter-day practitioners like [Woodward and Bernstein](#) and today's Internet bloggers. “I came of age reading news reports about assassinations, the Vietnam War, and Watergate,” Bausum explained. “This book examines an earlier period of in-depth reporting (from the turn of the last century) and places the tradition of investigative journalism into its historical context.” Bausum received the 2008 [Tofte/Wright Children's Literature Award from the Council for Wisconsin Writers](#) and the [Choices 2008 Award from the Cooperative Children's Book Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) for her telling of the sensational story of the birth of investigative journalism in America through [Muckrakers](#), which also received recognition as the 2008 [Orbis Pictus Awards Honor Book from the National Council of Teachers of English](#) and the 2008 [Notable Children's Book Award from the American Library Association](#).

[Muckrakers](#) shows how pioneering journalists undertook research in neglected, under-reported topics, such as terrible living conditions in urban tenements, corruption in city and state politics, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions of laborers in the meatpacking industry, and brutal business practices designed to ruin small farms in order to report on the injustices they found in the swelling [Industrial Revolution](#). “This book is about the power of language. It is about a quest by news writers to uncover the truth, not just report surface facts....It

is about writers who capture the attention of a nation so that readers—even teenagers—hang on to every word. It is about words that change a nation” (Bausum, 2007, p. 13). These altruistic journalists were dubbed

“muckrakers” in 1906 when [President Theodore Roosevelt](#) popularized the use of the term by describing the so-



called dogged pursuits of investigative journalists in his [April 14th speech](#) in Washington, D.C. by borrowing the term from the morality tale “[The Pilgrim’s Progress](#).”

One of the allegorical characters in [John Bunyan’s](#) 1678 classic is the “Man with the Muck-rake,” who rejected salvation to focus on filth. In Bunyan's tale, this character is so intent on his work that, as Roosevelt put it, he "refuses to see aught that is lofty" in the world. Roosevelt stated, “the men with the muck rakes are often indispensable to

the well being of society; but only if they know when to stop raking the muck....” (Roosevelt, 1906, para. 14).

Bausum’s introduction to [Muckrakers](#) shares with readers the story of how, at age fourteen, she began reading the unfolding reports of [Woodward and Bernstein](#), two investigative reporters who “uncovered the full story behind the Watergate break-in” and who “represent a storied tradition of in-depth

research and writing.... [a practice] that came to full bloom at the beginning of the 20th century, and continues to be used today” (Bausum, 2007, p. 9-10). “While many of my peers paged through [Mad Magazine](#), I studied [The Washington Post](#),” Bausum writes. “While other teens viewed reruns of [Gilligan’s Island](#), I watched the live broadcasts of the [U.S. Senate Watergate hearings](#)” (p. 9). Bausum’s interest in politics

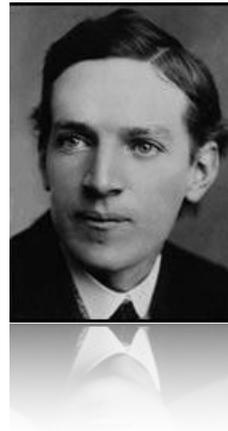


emerged during this evolving tussle between the three branches of government: Congress, the courts, and the Presidency. However, more importantly, she gained a lifelong appreciation for the news media. Bausum (2007) writes:

Journalists, as they did during Watergate, often serve as one more balancing power beyond the trio of legislative, judicial, and executive leadership. Their independence from government control gives them

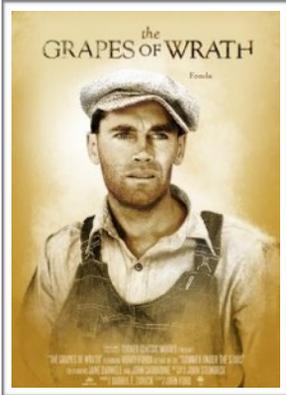
the freedom to investigate, expose, and urge reform. At their best, journalists give voice to the concerns of the nation's citizens, and they call for the correction of the nation's faults. Journalists push the country's leaders to be more honest and fair....This book is about journalists who stepped forward 100 years ago to help rebalance the nation and its governance during an earlier era of disequilibrium" (p. 10).

Muckrakers chronicles the work of three journalists—[Lincoln Steffens](#), [Ida Tarbell](#), and [Upton Sinclair](#), as they respectively took on municipal and corporate corruption with stories such as "[The Shame of the Cities](#)," "[The History of the Standard Oil Company](#)," and "[The Jungle](#)." The book also highlights [S.S. McClure](#), the editor who gave his writers the freedom of a salary and the instruction to "get out, go anywhere, everywhere....See what is going on in the cities and states, find out what we ought to be reporting" (p.16), as well as [McClure's Magazine](#), which provided the forum for these journalist's efforts.



The book follows the journalists in loose chronological order, overlapping their stories when needed, in order to "study a clouded picture, until the full view comes into focus" (Bausum, 2007, p. 13). Bausum also examines the problematic relationship between President Theodore Roosevelt and the journalists he eventually disparaged as "muckraking" radical activists, even though they shared similar reform agendas. She also presents convincing case studies to show that the [Fourth Estate](#) has often been driving the forceful push for political reformations for centuries.

The penultimate chapter shows the muckrakers' direct influence in the years immediately following their original publications. This information neatly ties together their personal stories and shows why the muckrakers are remembered today. Bausum offers a clear, economically presented overview of critical dissensions in the



rapidly urbanizing nation and concludes with a chapter on the cyclical reemergence of investigative journalism, following the muckrakers' legacy forward through the final decades of the 20th century with [Margaret Sanger's](#) birth control distribution articles, John Steinbeck's "[The Grapes of Wrath](#)," [George Seldes'](#) cigarette crusade, [Edward R. Murrow's](#) "[televisions' finest hour](#)" (a hard-hitting examination of reports filed about [Senator Joseph McCarthy's](#) search for communist sympathizers), [Rachel Carson's](#) "[Silent](#)

[Spring](#)," [Ralph Nader's](#) 1965 exposé [Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-in Dangers of the American Automobile](#),

Seymour Hersh's [1969 coverage](#) of the My Lai massacre, [Neil Sheehan's](#) reveal of the documents later known as

the [Pentagon Papers](#), [Watergate](#), and the examination of such topics as

the Roman Catholic Church's [cover-up of child molestation](#). Bausum

ends with a discussion of [Eric Schlosser's](#) "[Fast Food Nation—The Dark Side](#)

[of the All-American Meal](#)," [Seymour Hersh's](#) warning in the [Chain of](#)

[Command—The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib](#), and [Dana Priest](#) and [Anne](#)

[Hull's](#) [examination of Walter Reed scandals](#) of the twenty-first century,

tying in today's journalists and their attempt to balance their triumphs with failures to gather evidence, to keep readers or their editors happy, and to elicit the change for which they hoped.

Supported by well-captioned black and white illustrations and sepia-toned photos, [Muckrakers](#) is a clearly written, very readable, and informative introduction to American "muckraking" journalism. The volume itself is exceptionally attractive, with well-chosen, large archival photographs, tidy layouts, generous leading, a font



that typifies lettering from a typewriter, chapter and page numbers represented by typewriter keys, and sidebars of quotations from journalists.

Just as interesting as the main body of the text is the back matter of the text, including the very thorough “Time Line of Muckraking” complete with 12 illustrated baseball-card-like inserts displaying biographical information on accomplished journalists and significant muckrakers. The index and resource guide provides lists of recommended books, movies, and Internet sites, a bibliography, and a description of Bausum’s travel and research for the book. The [*Muckrakers*](#) section on Bausum’s website provides [extra resources](#) such as a detailed account of her photography research, a five part classroom exercise using the [Prints and Photographs Reading Room from the Library of Congress](#), Pronunciation and Origins of the term “Muckraker,” Related Links and Resources, and an Author Program entitled “*Muckraking! A How-To View of Investigative Journalism.*”

[*Muckrakers*](#) would be a critical addition to historical study in classrooms of all education levels, inspiring people to cherish age-old values such as truth and public accountability. However, many of Bausum’s undertones suggest a bias towards large overreaching government, socialistic reform policies, and her affinity for “hope and change.” Still, Bausum has provided budding journalists and social activists an inspiring account of the good works done by these dedicated reporters.