



Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical

Jacqueline Jones

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From a prize-winning historian, a new portrait of an extraordinary activist and the turbulent age in which she lived

Goddess of Anarchy recounts the formidable life of the militant writer, orator, and agitator Lucy Parsons. Born to an enslaved woman in Virginia in 1851 and raised in Texas-where she met her husband, the Haymarket "martyr" Albert Parsons-Lucy was a fearless advocate of First Amendment rights, a champion of the working classes, and one of the most prominent figures of African descent of her era. And yet, her life was riddled with contradictions-she advocated violence without apology, concocted a Hispanic-Indian identity for herself, and ignored the plight of African Americans.

Drawing on a wealth of new sources, Jacqueline Jones presents not only the exceptional life of the famous American-born anarchist but also an authoritative account of her times-from slavery through the Great Depression.

Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical Details

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From Reader Review Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical for online ebook

bklyn mike art says

excellent for feminists, anarchists, free thinkers.

Rebecca Wilson says

Lucy Parsons spent her life offending, agitating, and generally shit-stirring. We all know people like this. They are important for challenging the rest of us — encouraging us to examine our values, to do better, or to acknowledge the limits of what we find acceptable. But they are generally not kind, generous, empathetic, or even sincere believers in the causes they espouse. This book left me suspicious about how much Parsons truly believed in the cause of anarchism; it seems likely that she would have latched on to any cause that would have put her at the outer limits of the dominate group. She was courageous as hell, but also cold as ice, leaving her son to rot in a mental institution because he wanted to join the army and choosing to align with white workers while ignoring the (much worse!) plight of African American workers.

This book reads a bit too much like a dissertation to me, but it's very well researched and I learned so much about political and worker's movements from 1870-1920 in the U.S. It was a tough go, but definitely educational and worth the effort.

Victoria Law says

Jones goes into as much detail as she can dig up from historical archives & newspaper clippings, which I greatly appreciate. (One of my favorites is the 1886 newspaper headline "Poor Oliver Gathings & His Pretty Mulatto Wife Whom Albert Parsons Stole Away," as if nothing else newsworthy was going on in 1886 Texas.) She makes sure to set the political and historical context for each time period, the same way that Paula Giddings does in her 800-page biography of Ida B. Wells. (However, Jones' context is a lot shorter and more readable than Giddings'.)

A friend once said, of Manning Marable's Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention that, while extremely well-researched and well-written, seemed to knock Malcolm off the revolutionary pedestal that so many of us grew up seeing him on. (And that this was not necessarily a good thing.)

This also seems to be the case with Jones' biography of Lucy Parsons. She is much more critical of Parsons than previous (and, until now, sole) biographer Carolyn Ashbaugh Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary, often pointing out the ways in which Parsons did not get involved in direct organizing or other pressing contemporary political issues (and nearly never in issues involving Black people, even Black people in Chicago). And, of course, there's her terrible treatment of her son, whom she had confined to an insane asylum when he wanted to join the army. He spent 20 years in the asylum, often abused by guards and other people incarcerated there because of his mother's notoriety; he was often placed in solitary confinement; he died there. It's unclear (and probably unlikely) whether Lucy Parsons ever visited her son during those 20 years or if she ever regretted ruining his life. Those questions, sadly, weren't answered by any of the

historical materials that Jones was able to find and may always be a mystery.

Michael Norwitz says

Lucy Parsons was the wife of Albert Parsons, one of the men executed as a result of the Haymarket bombing (of which I knew only vaguely about prior to reading this book). She was also known as a political writer and speaker in her own right, before and after his death. The book provides a fascinating overview of some of the politics and personalities in the anarchist and socialist communities in Chicago at the turn of the last century. My only complaint about it is by focusing so much on Lucy Parson's life and personality it provides relatively little insight into her as an intellectual or historian (unless it is deliberately making the tacit claim that she was nothing more than a facile rabble-rouser).

Catherine says

Fascinating biography about a fascinating figure. The background to Parson's life also serves as a history of the labor movement and Leftist politics in the U.S., which I found interesting. The writing is terrific and Parsons emerges as a complicated individual, well worth reading about. Highly recommended!

Graham says

Jacqueline Jones skillfully educates the reader on Lucy Parsons many accomplishments in public life while simultaneously giving the reader insights as to who she was as a person out of the public eye. These two elements merge to form a very engaging read. Too often historical biographies leave out the humanizing elements of the subjects life leaving the account one dimensional, such is not the case here.

I finished the book with a better understanding of both Parsons contributions to American history and who she was to friends and loved ones. I wish i could've seen her speak in the flesh after knowing virtually nothing about her before reading the book. She inspired and radicalized political luminaries throughout her life. The FBI called her more dangerous than a thousand rioters upon her death at the menacing age of 91.

If you are a history buff, interested in left politics, or love biographies you won't be disappointed. Not only will you learn about one of the more enigmatic and impactful figures in American history, you'll learn about American labor history in general.

Jeff Buddle says

In the history of American anarchy, women loom large. Most significant among these may be Emma Goldman, who -to be honest- was something of a stage hog. Not that I don't respect her, but when you read her autobio, the many bios of her, and the first-person recollections of Goldman captured in Paul Avrich's 'Anarchist Voices,' the picture that emerges is of a woman who was committed to an ideal, but also saw herself as the best possible vessel for communicating that ideal. I say this because good ol' Emma was mighty disparaging of her contemporaries: Voltarine DeCleyre and Lucy Parsons.

Strange, the latter. Lucy Parsons was the widow of Albert Parsons, one of the Haymarket Martyrs unjustly tried and hanged without evidence for a bomb thrown at a demonstration that killed policemen. Goldman cites the Haymarket affair as having radicalized her. Also, Lucy, not content to be a mere widow, became a vocal anarchist activist, speaking around the country, raising funds for workingmen, spreading the gospel of radical anarchy with an eye to overthrowing the Capitalist system. In short, Lucy paved the way...Emma merely followed in her tracks.

Lucy was and still is an enigma. She was born into slavery, but throughout her life denied her African American roots, claiming instead to be Mexican and Native American. Her husband, a Confederate veteran of the Civil War, took up the cause of the working man after demobbing. He and Lucy first embraced socialism, but soon found it too weak for their tastes and quickly embraced Anarchism under the tutelage of Johann Most.

Most was an advocate of violence, 'propaganda by the deed.' He believed that acts of terror could bring the capitalists to their knees so that the working man could assume control and dissolve the state. Albert agreed, preaching dynamite, telling workers to arm themselves, writing violent diatribes in the radical press. Strong stuff, to say the least.

All this is why, when the Haymarket case came to trial, Albert was convicted more for his ideas than any complicity in the crime. It's the injustice that fired up Emma Goldman and still can raise ire today.

'Goddess of Anarchy' captures all of this in meticulous detail. Jacqueline Jones is a formidable researcher and an able writer. She shows us how Lucy Parsons invented a history for herself and stayed true to it to the very end. We learn about the tragedies in her life: born into slavery, her lost children, the execution of her husband, at marvel at her strength. She has something of the stage hog in her too, mounting stages she was never supposed to mount, speaking her mind in a time when women didn't speak (especially women of color). Still, there is much to respect.

This is a powerful book about an American anarchist. It's important to remember that the history of America is not just Presidents and explorers, but it is also comprised of people with ideas that -whether the mainstream likes it or not- changed our country, often for the better.

loafingcactus says

Lucy Parsons was a master of self-definition and self-invention, and I got the impression that the writer bought her version of the story neither too much nor too little and thus was able to tell a truthful version of the story. Of course I have no reason to believe my impression in this matter more than anything else. The biography included considerable historical context to make it all the more interesting.

The close of the book the author tried to include some sort of moral lesson, using the most obnoxious turn of phrase for it that I have happily mostly forgotten "useful something." But setting that aside, all in all a book I would recommend.

Pat says

Can't believe I read the whole thing! Extremely interesting material, but it seemed highly repetitive in some of the descriptions of the treatment of Lucy Parsons throughout her life. Maybe that was necessary. I don't know. She seems to have been a very unusual, dynamic personality, yet I find that I don't really know her after reading this book. I would have liked to have seen some of her actual speeches included in the book instead of just quotes the author chose to make her points about Parsons' volatile rhetoric. And maybe there's just not enough primary sources to tell more about her personal life and feelings to get to know Parsons better.

The background information on the labor movement and the Communist Party involvement was intriguing--very convoluted with many players and organizations.

I would recommend it, but you might want to skim over a lot of it.

Edward Sullivan says

A fascinating, "warts and all" biography of a great American radical, a fiery voice of revolution in the labor movement and other causes.

Denise Kruse says

The masses had turned out to be consumers, not revolutionaries.

Fascinating, while long, often dry and repetitive. Lucy Barton was a wonderfully strong, opinionated, wise, passionate proponent of anarchy (including dynamite!) probably due to the facts of her birth and her observances of the inequity of capitalism. She was often misunderstood and suppressed but always a force. I did enjoy learning about her. The audio version helped me plough through all the details in this exhaustive biography. The reader mispronounces many words and has a choppy style but also a pleasant, clear voice. I came away admiring Lucy Barton herself; however, anarchy with its freedoms seems to have a major interpretation problem. Perhaps a few rules are necessary.

Corvus says

I want to think on this before reviewing. I don't know how to talk about the book without talking about how it changed my perception of Parson's for the worse. If this book is accurate- and it seems well researched and written- Parson's has become my least favorite anarchist woman that I've learned the history of. From her refusal to identify with and include Black people in movements to her hypocritical maligning of many feminist anarchist principles. At the same time, she paved part of the way for some white women anarchists and survived hell on Earth many times over. I will likely write a longer, better review when I think more on it.

Sarah Jaffe says

Lots of interesting information, less thrilled with the author's often obvious disdain for Parsons' politics.

Michelle Lancaster says

BIOGRAPHY/HISTORY

Jacqueline Jones

Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical

Basic Books

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Lucy Parsons. Slave, freedwoman, student, wife, mother, writer, editor, internationally renowned orator, socialist, communist, anarchist, cipher. From her birth to a slave in antebellum Virginia in 1851, to her education and formative years in Reconstruction-era Waco, Texas, where she married Albert Parsons, an Anglo man who would later be hanged in connection with the bombing of Haymarket Square, to swiftly industrializing Chicago in the Gilded Age, until her death in 1942, Parsons fought for the laboring masses, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly in a nation dizzy with change, a nation sometimes exalted by rapid innovation, oftentimes staggering beneath it. From the 1880s until the day she died, Parsons “held fast to the ideal of a nonhierarchical society emerging from trade unions, a society without wages and without coercive government of any kind.” Even if this result could be achieved only by dynamite.

Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical is the latest work of biographical history from Jacqueline Jones, professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, MacArthur Fellow, two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, and winner of the Bancroft Prize. *Goddess of Anarchy* is a dramatic and entertaining account of a difficult, complicated, and flawed but significant life almost lost to history, as are those of untold numbers of impactful women.

Goddess of Anarchy recounts much of the history of the labor struggle in the United States as told through the prism of Lucy Parsons’s singular, startling life. The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was the catalyst for a receptive Parsons to devote her life to “the labor question” and convince her that the two-party system of Republicans and Democrats would always fail the great unwashed in order to remain in power at all costs. Believing the ballot a failure, Parsons advocated bullets.

Parsons’s contemporaries included Mother Jones, Emma Goldman, Eugene V. Debs, Samuel Gompers, and Jane Addams, with all of whom she feuded. Many of her peers thought she harmed the cause by denigrating voting and unions. When Progressivism arrived, Parsons decried charity as “hush money to hide the blushes of the labor robbers.” She thought the New Deal and FDR co-opted the movement.

Though she lived in the public eye for almost seven decades, Parsons went to great pains to veil her African origins and personal life. Parsons “expressed a deep commitment to informed debate and disquisition,” Jones writes, but in the next breath would invoke “the virtues of explosive devices.” As she states in her introduction, Jones intends a “more nuanced approach by integrating Parsons’s secret private life with her high-profile public persona.” I don’t think integration was achieved, and I doubt it possible to reconcile the

contradictions of a person exceedingly talented at compartmentalization.

The most pressing issues of Parsons's lifetime remain so in ours, a circumstance which is either wholly depressing or indicates there is truly nothing new under the sun, or both. The two-party system failed to work for the poor; technology displaced workers; the middle class eroded; money and influence corrupted elections and public policy; a "new iteration of the KKK indicated that the more the pace of technological innovation accelerated, the more likely it became that a significant portion of the white laboring classes would seek refuge in a narrow tribalism."

Jones's writing has a vitality to it as she explores Parsons's many contradictions, offers psychological insights, and tartly makes her points. Jones is a master of the concise introductory paragraph and the concluding paragraph that simultaneously foreshadows and whets the appetite for the next chapter. Goddess of Anarchy is an education and a bravura performance from a stylish wordsmith.

Originally published in Lone Star Literary Life.

Janet says

This is a difficult book for me to review because on one hand it was very informative of the times Lucy Parsons lived in but, it didn't give me any insight into Lucy as a person. I think I might be more to blame because I didn't really take my time to read the synopsis thoroughly. I feel like I didn't learn anything about besides everything that was surface level. I have no idea what she was thinking or could really feel like a real person to me. That isn't the authors fault because there isn't really enough personal evidence to bring her to life. I did enjoy learning about the causes she fought for and the hostility of that time but again what I feel a little disappointed. I would still recommend this for anyone wanting to learn a little bit about the anarchists of the late 1800s who were fighting for the rights of workers.
