

## Muckraking and *The Jungle*

"There is filth on the floor, and it must be scraped up with the muck rake; and there are times and places where this service is the most needed of all the services that can be performed."<sup>1</sup>

With these words, President Theodore Roosevelt, speaking to the House of Representatives in 1906, described the role of journalists and novelists whose works focused on the need for reform in politics, business, and society. Among these works is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, a novel famous for its graphic descriptions of unsanitary procedures in Chicago's meat industry, as well as for its sympathetic presentation of poverty experienced by immigrants.

Near the beginning of the novel, we read of the hope, the optimistic belief in the "American Dream," that characterized the immigrants, including *The Jungle's* main character, Jurgis Rudkus. Like many other immigrants, Jurgis expected that scraping together money for passage would be the biggest obstacle to a new life in the "land of freedom." Once in America, he would, of course, get a good job, marry, establish a family, and live the life of ease he thought all Americans enjoyed. Disillusionment came quickly when rascally agents, both on the ship and in New York, were quick to exploit him and his fellow Lithuanians as they sought jobs and lodging in their new country.

Jurgis and his "family" travel to Chicago, where they try to earn a share in "the good life" through various jobs in the city's famous meat industry. Sinclair bombards the reader with passages critical of the meat-packers. He targets graft and corruption:

" . . . one evening the old man came home in a great state of excitement, with the tale that he had been approached by a man in one of the corridors of the pickle rooms of Durham's, and asked what he would pay to get a job. He had not known what to make of this at first; but the man had gone on with the matter-of-fact frankness to say that he could get him a job, provided that he were willing to pay one-third of his wages for it. . . . It was simply some boss who proposed to add a little to his income. After Jurgis had been there awhile he would know that the plants were simply honeycombed with rottenness of that sort—the bosses grafted off the men, and they grafted off each other; and some day the superintendent would find out about the boss, and then he would graft off the boss" (58-59).

The Chicago political machine also used the new immigrants:

" . . . when election day came, the packing houses posted a notice that men who desired to vote might remain away until nine that morning, and the same night watchman took Jurgis and the rest of his flock into the back room of a saloon, and showed each of them where and how to mark a ballot, and then gave each two dollars, and took them to the polling place, where there was a policeman on duty especially to see that they got through all right. Jurgis felt quite proud of this good luck till he got home and met Jonas, who had taken the leader aside and whispered to him, offering to vote three times for four dollars, which offer had been accepted" (92).

<sup>1</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, "The Man with the Muck Rake," *Selected American Speeches on Basic Issues (1850-1950)*, ed. Carl G. Brandt and Edward M. Shafer, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 279.

Buying a house brought more abuses for unwary immigrants.

" . . . as to the house they had bought, it was not new at all, as they had supposed; it was about fifteen years old, and there was nothing new upon it but the paint, which was so bad that it needed to be put on new every year or two . . . Cheap as the houses were, they were sold with the idea that the people who bought them would not be able to pay for them. When they failed—if it were only by a single month—they would lose the house and all that they had paid on it, and then the company would sell it over again" (65).

Sinclair's grim account of conditions and practices in the meat-packing plants caused many readers to become vegetarians.

Jonas had told them how the meat that was taken out of pickle would often be found sour, and how they would rub it up with soda to take away the smell, and sell it to be eaten on free-lunch counters; also of all the miracles of chemistry which they performed, giving to any sort of meat, fresh or salted, whole or chopped, any color and any flavor and any odor they chose. In the pickling of hams they had an ingenious apparatus, by which they saved time and increased the capacity of the plant—a machine consisting of a hollow needle attached to a pump; by plunging this needle into the meat and working with his foot, a man could fill a ham with pickle in a few seconds. And yet, in spite of this, there would be hams found spoiled, some of them with an odor so bad that a man could hardly bear to be in the room with them. To pump into these the packers had a second and much stronger pickle which destroyed the odor—a process known to the workers as "giving them thirty per cent." Also, after the hams had been smoked, there would be found some that had gone to the bad. Formerly these had been sold as "Number Three Grade," but later on some ingenious person had hit upon a new device, and now they would extract the bone, about which the bad part generally lay, and insert in the hole a white-hot iron. After this invention there was no longer Number One, Two, and Three Grade—there was only Number One Grade. The packers were always originating such schemes—they had what they called "boneless hams," which were all the odds and ends of pork stuffed into casings; and "California hams," which were the shoulders, with big knuckle joints, and nearly all the meat cut out; and fancy "skinned hams," which were made of the oldest hogs, whose skins were so heavy and coarse that no one would buy them—that is, until they had been cooked and chopped fine and labeled "head cheese!"

It was only when the whole ham was spoiled that it came into the department of Elzbieta. Cut up by the two-thousand-revolutions-a-minute flyers, and mixed with half a ton of other meat, no odor that ever was in a ham could make any difference. There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white—it would be dosed with borax and glycerine, and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption. There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out

a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit. There was no place for men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage. There were the butt-ends of smoked meat, and the scraps of corned beef, and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plants, that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there. Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it only paid to do once in a long time, and among these was the cleaning out of the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and oil nails and stale water—and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public's breakfast. Some of it they would make into "smoked" sausage—but as the smoking took time, and was therefore expensive, they would call upon their chemistry department, and preserve it with borax and color it with gelatine to make it brown. All of their sausage came out of the same bowl, but when they came to wrap it they would stamp some of it "special," and for this they would charge two cents more a pound (133-35).

Work began at an early age for children of the poor:

" . . . and so was decided the place in the universe of little Stanislovas, and his destiny till the end of his days. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, it was fated that he should stand upon a certain square of floor from seven in the morning till half-past five, making never a motion and thinking never a thought, save for the setting of lard cans. In summer the stench of the warm lard would be nauseating, and in winter the cans would all but freeze to his naked little fingers in the unheated cellar. Half the year it would be dark as night when he went in to work, and dark as night again when he came out, and so he would never know what the sun looked like on weekdays. And for this, at the end of the week, he would carry home three dollars to his family, being his pay at the rate of five cents per hour—just about the proper share of the total earnings of the million and three-quarters of children who are now engaged in earning their livings in the United States" (71-72).

Layoffs that accompanied downturns in business threatened even the survival of their victims:

"For another ten days he roamed the streets and alleys of the huge city, sick and hungry, begging for any work. He tried in stores and offices, in restaurants and hotels, along the docks and in the railroad yards, in warehouses and mills and factories where they made products that went to every corner of the world. There were often one or two chances—but there were always a hundred men for every chance, and his turn would not come. At night he crept into sheds and cellars and doorways—until there came a spell of belated winter weather, with a raging gale, and the thermometer five degrees below zero at sundown and falling all night. Then Jurgis fought like a wild beast to get into the big Harrison Street police station, and slept down in a corridor, crowded with two other men upon a single step" (202).

*The Jungle* appeared in serial form in 1905 and in book form in 1906. Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, and federal laws regarding meat inspection followed. The novel, then, is an example of a literary work helping to change history. All excerpts are from the 1981 Bantam Books edition of *The Jungle*.

