

The Jungle, by Upton Sinclair

***** out of five stars

A Cautionary Tale of Unfettered Capitalism

Jurgis Rudkis was a young Lithuanian with a dream of betterment - a dream better met in America than where he lived. At the start of the 20th century, he and a group of similarly hopeful Lithuanians made their pilgrimage to the beating heart of capitalism, only to find the heel of its boot. After navigating their way to Chicago's meat packing district, the families endure extreme hardship and the brutal underside rather than uplifting promise of capitalism.

The Jungle draws comparison to other tales of hardship – for example Faulkner's *The Grapes of Wrath* – but Sinclair offers a twist. Rather than a study of characters caught up in an epic event such as the Depression-era Dust Bowl, Sinclair uses his characters' hardship to critique the setting itself. More specifically, the characters are a vehicle to highlight the uneven and immoral impacts of capitalism, and to deliver a lesson in left-leaning (socialist?) economics and politics.

Sinclair advances his theme in four stages. First, in the largest section, he chronicles the dehumanizing work in Chicago's meat packing district and the revolting methods the plant owners use to pass off inedible meat to unwitting consumers. If it's not enough to make readers question the balance of power between labor and capital, it will certainly make them rethink what they eat.

The second, shorter stage shows Jurgis via a scrape with the law up against the broader industrial/political/media complex. It's not so much that the law is stacked against Jurgis; the justice is perfunctory and with the barest standards of due process. Rather, it is the systemic intertwining political and industrial connections of others accused and acquitted, and of those meting out justice that rankles Sinclair. "Government existed under the form of a democracy. The officials who ruled it, and got all the graft, had to be elected first; and so there were two rival sets of grafters, known as political parties, and the one got the office which bought the most votes."

The third stage - an interlude, really - follows Jurgis as a hobo after turning his back on Chicago, capitalism, and the social contract. He lives by his wits when a chance encounter permits him inside a meat packing industrialist's mansion. The unneeded, undeserved and unproductive wealth stands in stark contrast to laborers' deprivation and drives home Sinclair's message about unfettered capitalism. Jurgis' life as a hobo, outside the capital/labor struggle, harkens back to an idyllic (Edenic, not Hobbesian) time before capitalism, and foreshadows the possibility of another path ... but not before Jurgis takes a turn working within the power structure, which proves less punishing than as a laborer but equally unfruitful.

The fourth stage reconciles the plot elements of the first three stages and presents a socialist alternative. “In America everyone had laughed at the mere idea of Socialism then — in America all men were free. As if political liberty made wage slavery any the more tolerable!” The Hobbesian bargain had metastasized under the natural power imbalances of capitalism, just as Marx had warned a few decades earlier, and the promise of socialism offered Jurgis a third path. He need not choose between the perpetually antagonistic labor and capital, but rather from a third option, in which one could select a job and receive remuneration based upon his or her contribution (labor hours and skill), all of which would advance broader societal goals. Government (rather than the oppressive capitalists) would establish the value of labor contributions. Sinclair envisioned a workers’ movement which would gently rule, and progress would be guided by ‘an invisible hobo hand’.

Written after both Adam Smith’s and Marx’s theorizing but before the Russian Revolution, history has since shown the weakness of Sinclair’s concluding sermon, and even the labor theory of value that Sinclair touts was being supplanted when the book was written. Still, *The Jungle* is a seminal and cautionary tale of the power struggle between capital and labor. It applies equally well to the disposability of labor in today’s era of globalization and automation, and perhaps to intellectual capital in the coming era of Artificial Intelligence.

Sinclair’s plot is straightforward — simply a vehicle to critique the capitalist system — and offers none of the rollicking twists in Dickens’ working-class novels. Nor does it feature the robust character development of other authors. What it does offer is one of the first literary indictments of unfettered capitalism, and for this it should be read by all with an interest in politics and economics.