ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

Brilliance
Anthony McCarten
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McCarten's stylish prose propels forward a narrative of one of the most enthralling stories of modern science.

"You don't make money from improving the world, you make it from its destruction," Edison says to a young inventor. Anthony McCarten's fifth novel, *Brilliance*, is a fast-moving account of Thomas Edison's career and an obsession that ultimately ended in moral failure. Non-linear chapters map out the triumphs and missteps of the famous inventor who dedicated his life to his work at the cost of all else. This fictionalized account of the War of Currents centers on the struggle between the luminous figures of Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, and J. P. Morgan.

Thomas Edison was a Midwestern boy who grew up to become one of the world's greatest inventors. After such life-altering creations as the phonograph and the light bulb, Edison aims to light up Manhattan and the world. Backed by financier J. P. Morgan, Edison vows to prove that Nikola Tesla's idea of using AC/DC current to provide electric light to the masses is deadly. Edison is a staunch believer that DC current is the only way to make electric light safe and available to everyone. Throughout this battle, Tesla, backed by Morgan's rival George Westinghouse, becomes the hero while Edison unwittingly becomes the inventor of the electric chair.

The story opens on New Year's Eve 1899, with a near deaf fifty-three year old Edison holed away in his study while his second wife, Mina, entertains a houseful of guests feting the end of the century. The novel flits through time, detailing the important moments of his life, such as the loss of his first wife, the marriage to his second wife, and the discovery of the light bulb. Edison's eccentricities—commanding those to speak to him at eighty decibels and communicating with both of his wives through Morse code—provide surprising comedic dashes to this tale of ambition and greed.

What emerges through McCarten's exquisitely researched novel is that Edison let the corporate splendor of J. P. Morgan's banking world trump the altruistic nature of his inventions. Unwilling to admit that he was wrong about DC power being the only viable way to light towns

and cities, he colludes with a local politician to prove the AC/DC current will only lead to death. They decide to combine capital punishment and science to create a “bastard invention,” the Westinghouse electric chair. After Tesla successfully lights the town of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, before Edison and Morgan can light Manhattan, Edison rabidly attempts to disprove Tesla’s work. With the light bulb a distant invention of the past, Edison witnesses the first death by his own invention, the electric chair.

Edison’s inventions surround us. His brilliance is obvious, but the personal and professional obstacles he had to overcome are overshadowed by his myth. Readers who love the drama of history will find McCarten’s *Brilliance* utterly compelling.

Monica Carter