Radium Girls

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Six young women face the fatal consequences of radium exposure in the graphic novel *Radium Girls*.

In 1918, radium is used to enhance all kinds of products because of its glow-in-the-dark effect. But the dangers of this radioactivity are not yet understood by the public. In New Jersey, six spirited, adventuresome women, including three sisters, work at a watch factory, painting numbers on dials with radium-based paint. They take on the habit of moistening their brushes with their lips, thus ingesting small but significant quantities of radium. In jest, they are called “Ghost Girls” for the green glow that exudes from their skin. Their sense of solidarity serves them well when, over time, the inevitable effects of radiation poisoning appear.

Highlighting the misplaced priorities of businesses, the story follows as some authority figures in the women’s company give them mild warnings, while others contradict those messages with assurances of their safety. The vital personal relationships among the women make their tragedy, and their difficult fight for justice, resonate on an intimate, emotional level.

The penciled art uses a limited color palette that’s dominated by purple and green, the latter often used to emphasize the radioactive radium. The illustrations are stylish, befitting the women’s era: they depict the hazards of prohibition and enforced morality, as well as cultural highlights like the achievement of women’s suffrage.

Though inspired by a tragedy, *Radium Girls* is a compelling, inspiring, and radiant historical novel.

PETER DABBENE (May / June 2022)

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