

The Blast

Joseph Matthews

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Joseph Matthews's clamorous, complex novel *The Blast* is set in San Francisco in 1916. It contrasts the city's burgeoning capitalist prosperity with its increasing climate of social unrest.

Blue is a born San Franciscan of Sicilian and Irish heritage. He is streetwise, perceptive, and sometimes volatile. His "broadly anarchist" mindset has been shaped by personal tragedy, his contempt for racial and ethnic prejudice, and the exploitation of the working class.

Bostonian Kate, while mourning her husband's suicide, travels to San Francisco as an agent for the US Bureau of Secret Intelligence, tasked with gathering information on the city's wealthiest residents. She takes the job for personal reasons, rather than ambition or patriotism: her estranged daughter Maggie's most recent postcard was from San Francisco, and Kate hopes to find her daughter still there.

Blue and Kate move in very different circles, yet their fates are soon linked. Blue's world is one of boardinghouses, boxing rings, dance halls, and secret revolutionary meetings, while Kate's assignment places her among the cultivated luxury of the city's "elite," who distance themselves from the masses.

The Blast is penetrating as it articulates the motivations behind anarchy and protest, with violence often resulting from thwarted demands for change. Radical Emma Goldman, suffrage leader Emmeline Pankhurst, and labor organizer Thomas Mooney are part of the story, which builds with measured tension to the bombing of San Francisco's 1916 Preparedness Day Parade. Held in anticipation of America's entry into World War I, the explosions at the event resulted in significant casualties and caused a national scandal.

The Blast is a novel that's epic in sweep. It is set in bustling, diverse San Francisco, which is energized by immigrants, agitators, artists, and tycoons, all part of the "hilled city" on a "magical perch," all seeking different versions of the American Dream.

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