

A Fever in the Heartland



About the Author

Timothy P. Egan (born November 8, 1954) is an American author and graduate of the University of Washington who currently lives in Seattle. Egan has written ten books.

A lifelong journalist, Mr. Egan has also worked as a national correspondent and opinion columnist for the New York Times, roaming the West. As a Times correspondent, he shared a Pulitzer Prize in 2001 with a team of reporters for its series, "How Race is Lived in America."

About the Book: (from Goodreads)

A historical thriller by the Pulitzer and National Book Award-winning author that tells the riveting story of the Klan's rise to power in the 1920s, the cunning con man who drove that rise, and the woman who stopped them.

The Roaring Twenties--the Jazz Age--has been characterized as a time of Gatsby frivolity. But it was also the height of the uniquely American hate group, the Ku Klux Klan. Their domain was not the old Confederacy, but the Heartland and the West. They hated Blacks, Jews, Catholics and immigrants in equal measure, and took radical steps to keep these people from the American promise. And the man who set in motion their takeover of great swaths of America was a charismatic charlatan named D.C. Stephenson.

Stephenson was a magnetic presence whose life story changed with every telling. Within two years of his arrival in Indiana, he'd become the Grand Dragon of the state and the architect of the strategy that brought the group out of the shadows – their message endorsed from the pulpits of local churches, spread at family picnics and town celebrations. Judges, prosecutors, ministers, governors and senators across the country all proudly proclaimed their membership. But at the peak of his influence, it was a seemingly powerless woman – Madge Oberholtzer – who would reveal his secret cruelties, and whose deathbed testimony finally brought the Klan to their knees.

A FEVER IN THE HEARTLAND marries a propulsive drama to a powerful and page-turning reckoning with one of the darkest threads in American history.

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Discussion Questions

1. The book opens by situating us in the “uniquely American state” of Indiana. What do you think made Indiana in the 1920s “uniquely American”? Why do you think it became particularly fertile ground for the Ku Klux Klan to take root?
2. What role did disinformation serve as a tactic for the Ku Klux Klan to wrest and maintain power? How did media suppression come into play?
3. Why do you think the Ku Klux Klan fought for prohibition and championed Christianity and moral purity, even as Stephenson and its leadership acted in complete disregard of these causes?
4. The Ku Klux Klan carried out their reign of hate under the pretense of defending “pure Americanism.” On the opposing end, the Irish American lawyer Patrick O’Donnell said that the fight against the Klan was “an American fight.” What do you think it means to stand up for American values? Does patriotism differ now from what it meant in the 1920s?
5. What do you think it was about Madge Oberholtzer’s story that resonated so strongly with the Indiana public? After all the crimes that Stephenson had committed, why was it Madge’s testimony that was finally able to take him down?
6. Do you think Madge got the justice she deserved? What about Stephenson’s other targets and victims?
7. Throughout the book, we hear several theories accounting for Stephenson’s and the Ku Klux Klan’s rise. What do you think best accounts for the Klan’s popularity? Can you think of other factors that contributed to Stephenson’s and the Klan’s rise?
8. Consider the institutions that are typically thought to function as guardrails of democracy. How did institutions like the press, the justice system, the police, and the church all fail Indiana? And why?
9. What surprised you most while reading this book?