



Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World

By Jill Jonnes

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In the final decades of the nineteenth century, three brilliant and visionary titans of America's Gilded Age—Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, and George Westinghouse—battled bitterly as each vied to create a vast and powerful electrical empire. In *Empires of Light*, historian Jill Jonnes portrays this extraordinary trio and their riveting and ruthless world of cutting-edge science, invention, intrigue, money, death, and hard-eyed Wall Street millionaires. At the heart of the story are Thomas Alva Edison, the nation's most famous and folksy inventor, creator of the incandescent light bulb and mastermind of the world's first direct current electrical light networks; the Serbian wizard of invention Nikola Tesla, elegant, highly eccentric, a dreamer who revolutionized the generation and delivery of electricity; and the charismatic George Westinghouse, Pittsburgh inventor and tough corporate entrepreneur, an industrial idealist who in the era of gaslight imagined a world powered by cheap and plentiful electricity and worked heart and soul to create it.

Edison struggled to introduce his radical new direct current (DC) technology into the hurly-burly of New York City as Tesla and Westinghouse challenged his dominance with their alternating current (AC), thus setting the stage for one of the eeriest feuds in American corporate history, the War of the Electric Currents. The battlegrounds: Wall Street, the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, Niagara Falls, and, finally, the death chamber—Jonnes takes us on the tense walk down a prison hallway and into the sunlit room where William Kemmler, convicted ax murderer, became the first man to die in the electric chair.

Empires of Light is the gripping history of electricity, the “mysterious fluid,” and how the fateful collision of Edison, Tesla, and Westinghouse left the world utterly transformed.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Jill Jonnes's compelling *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World* offers a multi-sided tale of America's turn-of-the-20th-century quest for cheap, reliable electrical power. Along the way, the book profiles key personalities in both the science and industry of electrification and dramatizes the transformation of American society that accompanied the technological revolution. As her sub-title suggests, Jonnes's focus is on the three great personalities behind the building of the electricity industry. But, as she makes clear, the electrification of America was much more than a pathbreaking scientific quest. The genius of such poet-scientists as Nikola Tesla depended on the more finely tuned business skills of George Westinghouse and the towering capital of J.P. Morgan to achieve actualization. And even Thomas Edison and Westinghouse--innovative industrial combatants in the war between AC and DC current--were victims of the far more powerful and conservative financial forces of Wall Street. Indeed, for Jonnes, the story of electricity is as much about the legions of patent attorneys and bankers who controlled the flow of industry as it is about the circulation of current. Her sophisticated portrait of Gilded Age science, business, and society brings new light to the forces that underlie technological revolutions. As she reveals, it is not so much the great public men of science who directed the destiny of America's eventual empire of light; rather, the path was solidified by those men behind the scenes who were wise enough (and perhaps ruthless enough) to impose their legal, financial, and political dominance onto the scientific innovation--a valuable message for all eras. --Patrick O'Kelley

From Publishers Weekly

Jonnes, a historian at Johns Hopkins (*We're Still Here; Hep-Cats, Narcs and Pipe Dreams*), details the rise and fall of the three visionaries who harnessed electricity, while also offering a critique of corporate greed. Her tale emphasizes the "War of the Electric Currents," in which Thomas Edison sought to defend the primacy of his direct current electrical system against George Westinghouse's higher-voltage and more broadly applicable alternating current system. Nikola Tesla, the somewhat kooky Serbian genius (and former Edison man), joined the fray on Westinghouse's side with his AC induction motor. Jonnes serves up plenty of color in an engaging and relaxed style, detailing how Edison capitalized on the "deaths by wire," or accidental electrocutions, from the AC system, sensationalized in the newspapers of the time. As she shows, Edison's "holy war" led to Westinghouse's AC being used in the first prison execution by electric chair, in 1890--which proved considerably more grisly and less humane than originally billed. For Jonnes, this history culminates neatly in a rather trite moral lesson: that corporate greed is bad. She contrasts it with the three public-minded men sketched here, who embody what Jonnes believes capitalism ought to be. Edison wanted only "the perfect workshop"; Westinghouse was interested "in helping the world" and giving his workers disability benefits; Tesla wanted to "liberate the world from drudgery." Jonnes's titans loom as monumentally as the allegorical Good Capitalists in an Ayn Rand melodrama. For those who view history as less tidy, this may strain the patience at times. 16 pages of photos not seen by PW.

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From [Booklist](#)

The study and awareness of electricity is not new, but the successful control and use of it is relatively recent. Jonnes begins by detailing the study of electrical phenomena from ancient times up through the Enlightenment. Audiences who are familiar mostly with Thomas Edison and the lightbulb will find the earlier, less-told part of the story a welcome addition to their knowledge. Naturally, Edison has his place, too, and Jonnes fills a number of pages with the accomplishments of the three major inventors (Tesla,

Westinghouse, and Edison), starting with their early research and progressing into the practical application of their work. The last part of the book deals with the slow process of bringing electricity to the rest of the country, the industrial wars between the rival electric firms, and the fates of those who played a role in the electric revolution. A very accessible and informative historical account that will be fascinating reading for a general audience as well as those with a more specialized interest. *Gavin Quinn*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Estella Powell:

The book *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World* give you a sense of feeling enjoy for your spare time. You can utilize to make your capable considerably more increase. Book can to get your best friend when you getting pressure or having big problem together with your subject. If you can make reading through a book *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World* to be your habit, you can get more advantages, like add your personal capable, increase your knowledge about a few or all subjects. You are able to know everything if you like open up and read a reserve *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World*. Kinds of book are a lot of. It means that, science e-book or encyclopedia or some others. So , how do you think about this e-book?

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Neil McNatt:

Why? Because this *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World* is an unordinary book that the inside of the publication waiting for you to snap that but latter it will distress you with the secret the item inside. Reading this book adjacent to it was fantastic author who have write the book in such wonderful way makes the content inside of easier to understand, entertaining way but still convey the meaning fully. So , it is good for you for not hesitating having this any more or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of advantages than the other book get such as help improving your expertise and your critical thinking technique. So , still want to postpone having that book? If I were being you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

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