



The Octopus: A California Story

Frank Norris

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Based on an actual, bloody dispute between wheat farmers and the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1880, "The Octopus" is Frank Norris' story of the waning days of the frontier West. Based on an actual incident, "The Octopus" is set in the San Joaquin Valley of central California towards the end of the 19th century -- not long before it was written. It concerns a dispute between the Pacific & Southwestern Railroad (in historical reality, the Southern Pacific) which owns the land it runs through and the tenant wheat ranchers who farm it. This is a turn-of-the-century epic of California wheat farmers struggling against the rapacity of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, which will stop at nothing to extend its domination. The company controls the local paper, the land, the legislature and, when the farmers organize to protect themselves, even manages to control their representative on the state rate-fixing commission. An exemplary work of its time, "The Octopus" uses the perpetual production of wheat as a metaphor for the continuous cycle of the good of the earth prevailing over the evil of men, while examining the integrity and resolve of men faced with financial ruin. An unremitting tale of greed and betrayal, it was originally intended as one-third of Norris' never-completed "Epic of the Wheat" trilogy.

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