

Family dynasty in out of this furnace

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



A world filled with uncertainty and when has it ever been otherwise? There is one thing of which you can be sure: You can never have enough books. So one Saturday afternoon soon after I moved to Austin I went trolling for answers in the history and travel sections of a second-hand bookstore, where I found myself staring at two stacks of books slumped against a bin.

They were worn, discarded copies of *Out of This Furnace*, a three-generation family saga about immigrants from Eastern Europe and the steel mill towns outside Pittsburgh. The novel by Thomas Bell begins with George Kracha, a hapless young man who in the 1880s leaves his home in the easternmost corner of the Austro-Hungarian empire. He arrives penniless in New York, having frittered away his meager savings in an unsuccessful attempt to seduce an attractive dark-haired, dark-eyed young married woman on the boat to the United States, and walks from Manhattan to the rail yards of Pennsylvania, where a job awaits him. The next generation tries to do the right thing; Kracha's daughter marries a man who is so earnest, so hardworking that his name, *Dobrejcek* means "good man." But they are plagued by the bad luck that comes from back-breaking work in the mills and ghastly industrial accidents. Because the author was something of an optimist, as well as a champion of labor rights, the third generation is the story of a triumphant unionization campaign, along with all the ambiguities that come from acculturation. As he slyly observes in an author's note, *Out of This Furnace* was a thinly disguised version of his family's own history: "This book is a novel, fiction, and allowing for the obvious exception the proper names used in it do not refer to actual persons who may bear the same or

similar names. With that said, this much more may be: I have been as true to the events, the people and the place as lay within my power.”

When it was first published in 1941, it was heralded as a novel of “ the new immigration,” or as one critic described it, a portrait of “ the America of the newcomer for those who sometimes forget that at one time they too were newcomers.” But by 1950 it was out of print and might have faded away forever had it not been rescued many years later by a professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University. Dave Demarest tracked down Bells survivors and wrote an Afterword for a new edition, which was published in 1976. Since then it has sold more than 150, 000 copies. The novel was once listed among the top 10 fictional works published by university presses (Long Days Journey Into Night, Eugene ONeills family saga, was ranked number one.) It appears on countless reading lists in universities throughout the country; a professor of urban geography at the University of Liverpool not only teaches the book, twice he has brought his students to walk through deserted industrial landscapes and stand at the grave of a man named Mike Belejcak, the father of Thomas Bell and the model for the fictional Mike Dobrejcek. And thats where things start to get interestingat least as far as Im concerned.