

27

The Jungle

UPTON SINCLAIR ★ NEW YORK:

DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY, 1906

Dominic A. Pacyga

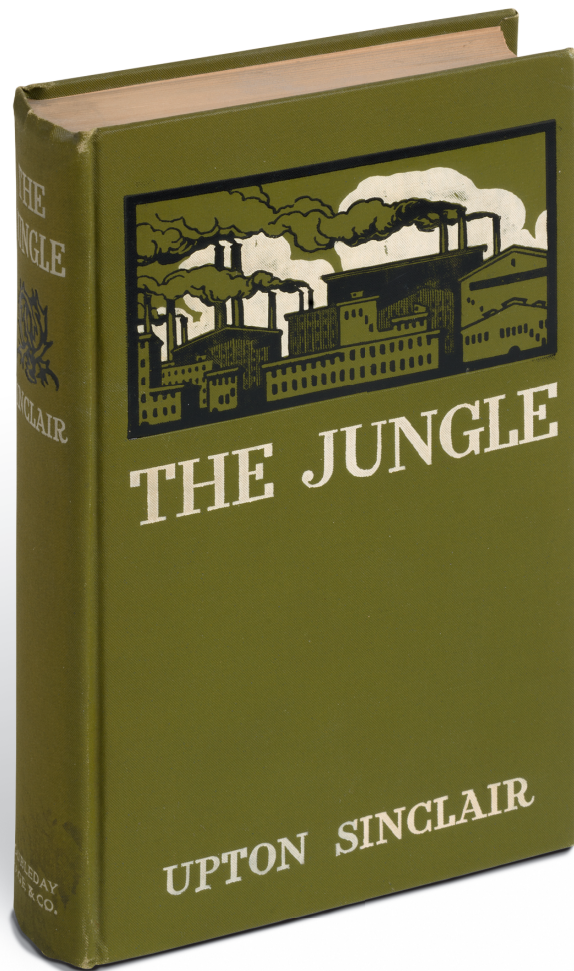
FACING Upton Sinclair's portrayal in *The Jungle* of the extreme hardships and exploitation of immigrants working in Chicago's stockyards resulted from the seven weeks he lived near the stockyards. While the novel did not achieve his goal—to ameliorate the workers' plight—its raw descriptions of unsanitary practices (an inspection of pig carcasses, ca. 1890, is seen here) prompted Congress to pass the Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drug Acts.

In 1906 a young socialist, Upton Beall Sinclair Jr. (1878–1968), published *The Jungle*. It became an instant best seller, shocked the nation, and prompted a federal investigation into Chicago's giant meat industry. *The Jungle* has been in print ever since its first publication and is one of the most important novels in American history, significant more for its historical impact than for its literary or artistic merit. Sinclair intended to expose the terrible working conditions for laborers in American industries in general, but instead he triggered a crusade for better sanitary conditions within the meatpacking industry. The author famously said, “I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident hit it in the stomach.”¹

Originally published in the socialist magazine *Appeal to Reason*,² *The Jungle* portrays the struggles of a Lithuanian immigrant, Jurgis Rudkus, and his family to make a life in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood. While the novel paints a portrait of incredible hardships for the Rudkuses, its descriptions of the squalid working environment in Chicago's packinghouses are what immediately caught the public's attention.

For some time, the federal government had been investigating Chicago's meatpackers for monopolistic practices, and rumors had also long circulated about diseased meat being prepared under the worst possible conditions. Although the public was already prepared to accept Sinclair's portrayal of this industry, several publishers turned down the manuscript before he approached Frank Doubleday. Doubleday and his partner, Walter H. Page, assigned promotion of the book to Isaac Marcossou, who devised a campaign based on his experiences in the newspaper business. Marcossou told Page, “If the revelations in this book are true we should have guardians appointed for us if we do not publish it. It will be either a sensational success or a magnificent failure. In either case it is well worth trying.” He then traveled to Chicago to verify Sinclair's accusations and returned stating that the situation was even worse than what Sinclair had described.³ The public-relations genius sent President Theodore Roosevelt a copy of the book, which resulted in Sinclair's being invited to the White House for lunch. Overnight, the young socialist became famous.⁴

Roosevelt soon launched a federal investigation of meatpacking that resulted in one of the most important reforms of the Progressive Era. The president had long wanted to increase federal regulation of the industry, which had been rumored to have sold bad meat to the armed forces during the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898. Roosevelt and Indiana senator Albert J. Beveridge supported the passage of the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906. It and the Pure Food and Drug Act, signed into law on the same day, proved to be landmarks for the administration. Roosevelt later told his



friend William Allen White, a newspaperman and politician, that Sinclair had been of service to him, but that he was basically untruthful and three-fourths of the things he said concerning Chicago's packinghouses were lies.⁵

The publication of *The Jungle* caused a national uproar. The celebrated novelist Jack London praised the book, calling it the “Uncle Tom’s Cabin of wage slavery,” but in the end the federal government and the large meatpackers used it to tighten regulations at the expense of smaller, independent packers who could not meet the stricter standards that had resulted from the public’s agitation. While Sinclair failed in his attempt to champion the cause of labor in the United States, he did forever change the way the government regulated the meat industry.⁶