



# A Civil Action

By Jonathan Harr

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This true story of an epic courtroom showdown, where two of the nation's largest corporations were accused of causing the deaths of children from water contamination, was a #1 national bestseller and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Described as “a page-turner filled with greed, duplicity, heartache, and bare-knuckle legal brinksmanship by *The New York Times*, *A Civil Action* is the searing, compelling tale of a legal system gone awry—one in which greed and power fight an unending struggle against justice. Yet it is also the story of how one man can ultimately make a difference. Representing the bereaved parents, the unlikeliest of heroes emerges: a young, flamboyant Porsche-driving lawyer who hopes to win millions of dollars and ends up nearly losing everything, including his sanity. With an unstoppable narrative power reminiscent of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, *A Civil Action* is an unforgettable reading experience that will leave the reader both shocked and enlightened.

*A Civil Action* was made into a movie starring John Travolta and Robert Duvall.

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## A Civil Action By Jonathan Harr Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

In America, when somebody does you wrong, you take 'em to court. W. R. Grace and Beatrice Foods had been dumping a cancer-causing industrial solvent into the water table of Woburn, Massachusetts, for years; in 1981, the families of eight leukemia victims sued. However, *A Civil Action* demonstrates powerfully that--even with the families' hotshot lawyers and the evidence on their side--justice is elusive, particularly when it involves malfeasance by megacorporations. Much of the legal infighting can cause the eyes to glaze. But the story is saved by great characters: the flawed, flamboyant Jan Schlichtmann and his group of bulldogs for the prosecution; Jerome Facher, the enigmatic lawyer for Beatrice, who proves to be more than a match; John J. Riley, the duplicitous, porcine tannery owner; and a host of others. It's impossible not to feel the drama of this methodical book, impossible not to grieve for the parents who lost children, and impossible not to share Schlichtmann's desperation as he runs out of money. *A Civil Action* reads like one long advertisement for a few well-placed Molotov cocktails. (But that wouldn't make for a very long book, now would it?)

### From Publishers Weekly

This tale of a somewhat quixotic quest by an idealistic young lawyer concerns his efforts to secure damages from two corporate giants, Beatrice Foods and W.R. Grace, for allegedly polluting the water in Woburn, Mass., a Boston suburb, with carcinogens. Jan Schlichtmann had hoped that a victory would send a message to the boardrooms of America and felt that the cluster of leukemia victims in Woburn (the disease had claimed the lives of at least six children) guaranteed his success. But he reckoned without certain developments: first, the case went to a federal court, a less sympathetic venue for damage suits than state courts; second, the trial judge appears to have been unsympathetic to his case; third, at least one of the defense witnesses lied; four, defense attorneys evidently failed to deliver all relevant documents to Schlichtmann's team. The case against Beatrice was thrown out, and the plaintiffs accepted a settlement of \$8 million from Grace. Personally bankrupt, Schlichtmann considered himself a failure. Former New England Monthly staffer Harr has told the story expertly, although more exhaustively than most readers may wish. Author tour; movie rights to Disney.

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### From Library Journal

Harr, a former staff writer at New England Monthly, describes a case that is to the civil justice system what the O.J. Simpson case is to the criminal justice system--fascinating, compelling at times, but not representative. Beginning with stories of leukemia-stricken children from the same neighborhood in Woburn, Massachusetts, he takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride along the tortuous path of a groundwater contamination case in which there were ultimately no winners. Harr also traces how the demands of the case coupled with self-delusion and sometimes poor professional judgment bankrupted the plaintiffs' lead attorney emotionally and financially. His book is weakened considerably by its lack of analysis and failure to fit these events and individuals into a larger context. Nonetheless, the author's ability to evoke atmosphere and create suspense makes this an engrossing read. Recommended for general adult nonfiction collections.

--Susan Pierce Dyer, Alameda Cty. Law Lib., Oakland, Cal.

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**Ruth Nicholson:**

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