

1. What information was included with the real estate files that confused Erin?

1. What was it about the case that made Erin connect with it so strongly?

1. What qualifies someone to do a job? Does society have any particular responsibility to single women raising a family?
2. In the film, PG&E headquarters in San Francisco makes decisions affecting company operations in Hinkley, California, more than 300 miles away. How might the organization of such a company breed a lack of concern for people—both employees of the company and customers?
3. Cite a specific moment in the film that inspired you. Why can the actions of single individuals be important?
4. Why would a company intentionally pollute? Why does this continue to happen today?

1. Was the settlement figure enough in the end? Do you think a value can be set for a human life?
2. Notice how preconceived notions based upon appearance and behavior affect the characters’ attitudes and actions toward one another. Is this interpretation valid? How have you seen prejudices and preconceived ideas about people influence behavior?

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**Poisoned town condemns its movie-heroine lawyer**

**Julia Roberts' portrayal of a human rights crusader could be a long way from the truth**

Ed Helmore – *The Guardian*

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The Julia Roberts film Erin Brockovich may be a hit both here and in America, but for many residents of the dusty town of Hinkley, on the edge of California's Mojave Desert, the record-breaking settlement of their legal case against a powerful public utility has not ultimately proved as rosy as the movie depicts.

The film, which opened in Britain last week, is about a brash single mother who starts a job as a law clerk and goes on to win $333 million for more than 600 of Hinkley's residents who were being poisoned by chromium 6 leaking from a gas transmission plant owned by Pacific Gas & Electric. The film suggests that the victims were satisfied with the outcome.

Not so. Many now say the film misrepresents what happened and the true story is far less than the populist victory shown on screen.

'The movie is mostly lies,' says Carol Smith, one of those depicted in the film. 'I wish the truth would come out, because a lot of us are upset. I understand that the movie is going to make Erin Brockovich and the attorneys out to be heroes. But where's our money?'

Since the case never went to trial and was settled behind closed doors before a panel of arbitrators, neither transcripts of the proceeds nor records of how the settlement was disbursed have ever been made available to the public, or even the victims themselves.

A number of beneficiaries to the settlement are now preparing to sue their lawyers, including Brockovich's firm, Masry & Vititoe. They are complaining that their awards were smaller than they deserved, that their lawyers kept their money for six months after the settlement was made without paying the interest, and that there was little or no apparent logic behind the varying amounts of money that they received.

Moreover, they say some of their lawyers took some of the judges in the case on a Mediterranean luxury cruise, a potential conflict of interest. Many residents who suffer from the debilitating effects of chromium poisoning, ranging from nosebleeds to cancer, are unable to reconcile the enormous pay-out with the paltry cheques they received.

Under their agreement with Ed Masry (who is played in the film by Albert Finney) and two other law firms, the lawyers received 40 per cent of the settlement, or $133m. That should have left $196m for the victims, or roughly $300,000 each. But many have received $100,000 or less, and neither PG&E nor the lawyers will release records of their accounting. Carol Smith's husband, who had 17 tumors removed from his throat, received only $80,000. An elderly resident in the town was awarded $25,000.

Ron Gonzales, who grew up next to the plant and suffers skin problems, says that he initially received only $100,000, a sum that was doubled after he complained to Masry. His sister, who had most of her cancerous lower intestine removed, received about $2m. Gonzales charges that Masry and Brockovich advised residents not to appeal against their pay-outs.

'Masry and Brockovich got greedy,' he said. 'They could have settled for less and given the money to the people that deserved the money. Masry is portraying himself as such a big hero. He and Erin are claiming to be saviors, but Erin got more than my sister did. And my sister's sick.' Contacted by Salon magazine, Brockovich herself did not seem to understand the process of private arbitration or the fact that the records of the case remain secret.

Her former employer, Masry, was unable to explain the process either. 'Why are you being stupid?' he retorted. 'It was a complicated $333m settlement. Are you an idiot?'

One of the most damaging allegations against Masry and the other lawyers concerns the settlement to the town's 100 children. In California, lawyers are usually only allowed to take 25 per cent of any pay-out to minors. But the judges in the case allowed the lawyers to take one-third. Moreover, the clients were billed an extra $10m for expenses that were never detailed, although some suspect Brockovich was paid out of this money.

Earlier this year, Masry settled a second suit against Betz, the makers of the poisonous chromate, for about $75m. As soon as that money is dispersed, Masry's firm may be sued by a Bakersfield lawyer named Mike Dolan over the issues of the minors' fees and the expenses. Dolan has calculated that the average pay-out to the 81 townsfolk he has spoken to is $151,000.

He plans to demand release of the lawyers' accounts on behalf of his clients. 'They threatened to drop anyone from the Betz litigation if they went with me,' said Dolan. 'But as soon as my clients get their cheques, I am going to sue them.

'They had absolutely no right to take a third of the kids' money, and I want full disclosure of how the expenses were calculated and how the entire amount was dispersed.' But in a small town where the sudden influx of money has caused ruptures, attitudes are divided.

For different reasons, many now regret allowing the case to be settled by arbitration rather than in a court of law. Roberta Walker, who suffers from a number of chromium-related conditions, is one who wishes it had gone to court. 'PG&E ripped us off,' she said. 'They're the villains here. The lawyers just took what every lawyer would take. I wanted carte blanche on medical expenses, and I didn't get that.'

Lynn Tindell, who got $50,000, also said she wished the case had been settled in public. Her anger is directed at Masry and the other lawyers. 'I feel like I was treated like a country hick that didn't understand plain English. We are the ones who made those guys zillionaires.'