

Movie Kit



American
Spaces



Erin Brockovich

Director: Steven Soderbergh

Year of release: 2000

Starring: Julia Roberts, Albert Finney

Rating: R

Length: 2h 11min

English level: Medium

Themes: Public Health, Women's Empowerment, Environmental Protection, Social Justice, Government Accountability

Warning/General Advisory

Includes profane language and some sexual content.

Context

Set in the small California town of Hinkley in the 1990s, this movie portrays the true biographical story of Erin Brockovich, a woman who fought against a large energy corporation, Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), for polluting the town's water supply. Erin, a single mother who works for a law office, discovers that many of Hinkley's residents have serious medical illnesses that could be linked to PG&E's illegal dumping of a toxic and carcinogenic waste. Erin, with the support of her boss, takes on the multi-billion dollar company to expose the company and to seek compensation for the hundreds of harmed residents.

Important Vocabulary/Places

- **chromium** – a chemical element used to make steel alloys and to coat other metals. The movie refers to hexavalent chromium, which is a form of chromium and causes a variety of health problems. Studies have shown that hexavalent chromium may cause cancer. Erin Brockovich finds that this is contaminating the groundwater.
- **class action lawsuit** – when a group of people with similar injuries caused by the same product sue the defendant as a group
- **groundwater** – water held underground; the source of most people's drinking water
- **Hinkley** – town in southern California
- **Hodgkin's lymphoma** – a type of cancer of the lymph nodes
- **PG&E** – Pacific Gas and Electric Company provides natural gas and electricity to most of California
- **plaintiff** – a person who brings a case against another in a court of law

Discussion Questions

- What did you think of the movie?
- Why did no one take Erin seriously at first? How did she present herself? In your opinion, does the way you dress represent your ability to do a job?
- What did Erin discover about PG&E and its effect on the people of Hinkley?
- How did Erin convince others to take on PG&E in court? What was her motivation to do so?
- Why do you think PG&E was resistant to claiming responsibility for the contamination?
- PG&E provides an essential resource to its people (gas and electricity). How is energy supplied in your community?
- Societies often deal with tensions, where different elements of society have competing wants, needs and desires. For example, businesses and consumers want energy, but producing that energy can cause pollution. What are some areas in which your society has this type of tension and how does it balance the interests of different groups?

FOIA and Public Records

- In the United States, the **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)** is a law that gives you the right to access information from the **federal government**. It is often described as the law that keeps citizens “in-the-know” about their government.
- All **states** also have some form of **Freedom of Information (FOI)** law. For example:
 - Colorado has the Colorado Open Records Act (CORA)
 - California has the California Public Records Act (CPRA)
 - A California Supreme Court Case (CBS vs. Block in 1986) recognized:
“**Implicit in a democratic process is the notion that government should be accountable for its actions. In order to verify accountability, individuals must have access to government files. Such access permits checks against the arbitrary exercise of official power and secrecy in the political process.**”

Freedom of Information (FOI)

Under the **California Public Records Act (CPRA)** guidelines, the people of California have the right to request access to inspect and obtain copies of public records maintained by the **California Regional Water Quality Control Board**. This is how Erin Brockovich was able to access records that showed that the California Water Quality Control Board issued PG&E a “Clean-up and Abatement Order” of hexavalent chromium found in the groundwater (definition of abatement: an ending or lessening of something).

- How easy is it to access public records in your communities? What rules govern such access?
- Why would someone want access to public records?