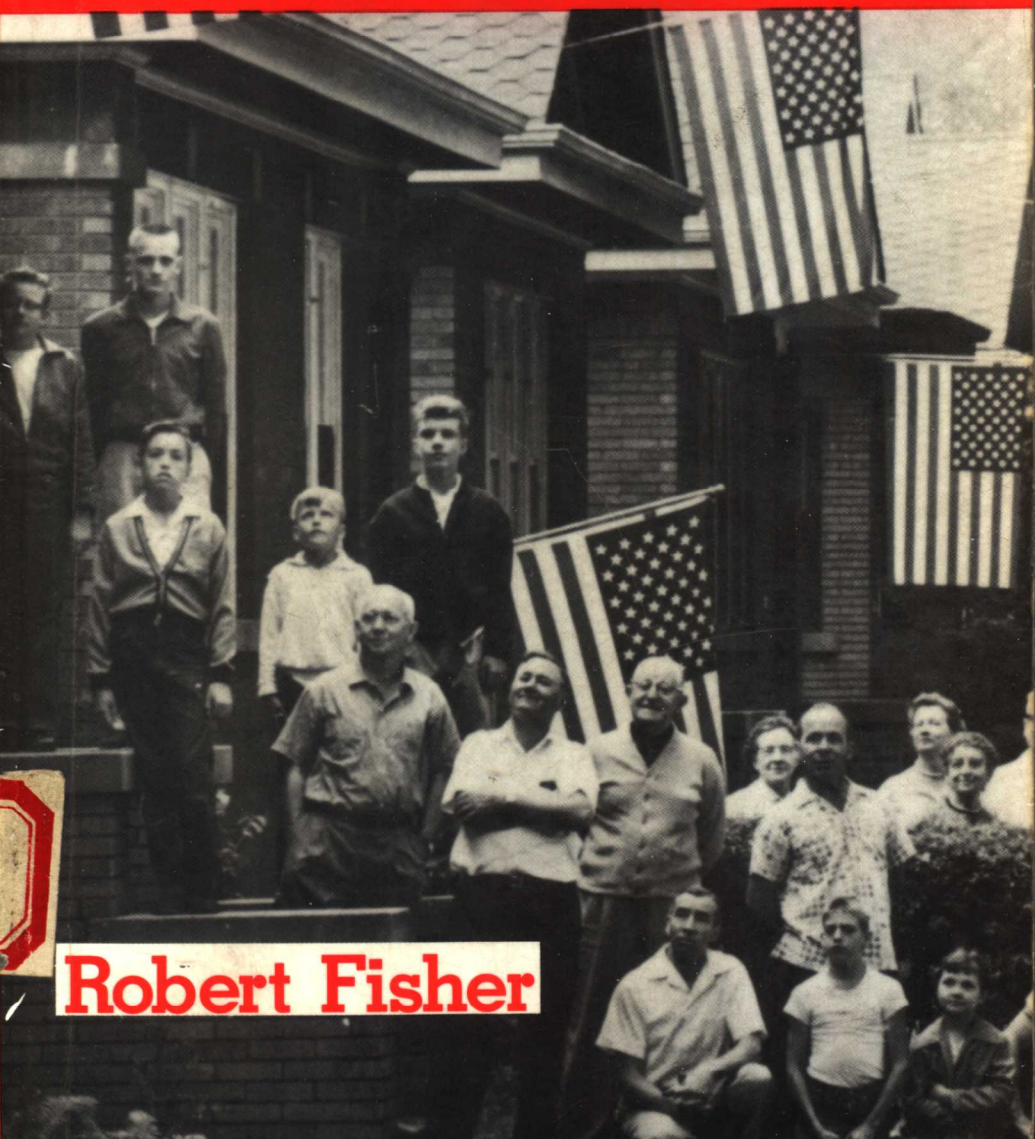


LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE

Neighborhood Organizing in America



Robert Fisher

***LET THE
PEOPLE DECIDE:***

***Neighborhood Organizing
in America***

LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE:
Neighborhood Organizing in America
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS PAST AND PRESENT

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INTRODUCTION

If you want knowledge, you must take part in the practice of changing reality. . . . If you want to know the theory of revolution, you must take part in revolution. All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience.

Mao Tse-Tung

The problem with history is that it's written by college professors about great men. That's not what history is. History's a hell of a lot of little people getting together and deciding they want a better life for themselves and their kids.

Bill Talcott, community organizer

The idea for this book originated in 1973–74 while I was teaching in Boston and working with a neighborhood organizing effort in Cambridge. In 1973, I moved to Cambridgeport—a working-class and student populated neighborhood across the river from Boston University, sandwiched between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University—where I quickly became involved in the founding and development of the Cambridgeport Homeowners and Tenants Association (CHTA), an Alinsky-style neighborhood organization. This was my first opportunity to assume leadership and responsibility in a political organizing effort. Like millions of others, I had been active before in the antiwar movement of the late 1960s, but I was not really a “movement person” and my participation was limited mostly to political discussions, leafletting, and protest demonstrations. Organizing at the grassroots level in Cambridgeport in the neighborhood where I lived felt right. Talking politics with the neighbor next door or the grocer across the street, or

getting a slumlord's vacant building torn down and replaced with a community controlled cooperative garden, grew naturally out of everyday experience with friends and neighbors.

CHTA was founded largely by Steve Meacham, who had the original idea to build an insurgent neighborhood organizing effort around the issue of housing. But unlike the more radical tenant organizations in Cambridge, Meacham sought to unite tenants and resident homeowners in a class-based, not single-interest, organization willing to fight as much for just rents for tenants as tax rebates and a stable neighborhood for resident homeowners. From 1973 to 1976 hundreds of meetings were held in people's homes, churches, and neighborhood cooperatives. We held actions to protest university expansion into, and destruction of, the neighborhood, picketed City Hall to demand improved services, walked in support of strikers in local labor struggles, blocked evictions, and traveled on weekend mornings to the suburban homes of neighborhood slumlords to hand out leaflets informing neighbors of how the man next door exploited poor people.

Unlike new left radicals of the early 1960s, the organizers in CHTA consciously downplayed their radical sentiments and rarely sought to clarify their ideology. The organizers—those neighbors, most often college educated and young, who took a more active role in building the organization—were not leftist “intellectuals.” In fact, we consciously sought to get beyond the barriers that radical ideology and rhetoric seemed to foster between activists and workers in the 1960s.

While CHTA won many battles, improved the quality of life in the neighborhood, and raised many people's political consciousness, it ultimately failed to create a working-class neighborhood organization. It remained dominated largely by young, college-educated, white men and women who had been or were still active in the peace and women's movements. The goal of empowering people at the neighborhood level in order to build from the grassroots up a left-oriented, national movement of working people was never approached. Initially most white working-class people in Cambridgeport were suspicious of the politics and motives of CHTA organizers, and the countless hours spent working, playing, and meeting together succeeded in bringing a significant but nevertheless small number of neighborhood natives into the group's leadership. CHTA had even less success with organizing the black residents in the neighborhood, who tended to doubt the primarily white organization's long-term dependability. Nevertheless, CHTA's serious commitment to democracy at all steps of the organizing process continued over time to break down resident suspicions. Despite obvious weaknesses, the organization in 1976 was

growing, winning battles, broadening its focus by uniting with other efforts in the neighborhood, and continuing to be self-critical but also moderately self-satisfied. Then the "split" occurred.

The split in CHTA was caused by organizers who were more radical and who pointed out the limits and failures of CHTA's "nonideological" approach. They emphasized that a militant, avowedly socialist ideology—a clearly stated view of how the capitalist system works and why working people needed to join together to oppose it—was lacking. CHTA needed a clear and correct "line" to offer working people; then residents would get involved and devote more time and energy to building a multiracial working-class organization.

A few key leaders agreed almost completely with this criticism. They felt that CHTA needed to come out of the closet and openly advance an anticapitalist ideology. Many of the working-class leaders supported this position as well. And while most participants in the organization agreed to strive toward greater ideological clarity and organize people around a socialist vision, the split occurred because most of the more active members did not share the same socialist analysis and vision. The more individualistic and democratic socialist members emphasized the need to place democracy and democratic process at the center of community organizing; they believed that a socialist analysis would emerge from effective leadership and resident involvement. The more communistic members said that was like the tail wagging the dog and that "letting the people decide" was what CHTA and other "neo-Alinskyite" groups had been doing over the years with only limited success. They emphasized the importance of a clear, socialist ideology in attracting working people and the need for a centralized organizational structure which would provide direction and unity from above without sacrificing democracy at the grassroots. The "individualist" segment believed that the "centralists" had no understanding at all of democratic process, and were fundamentally authoritarian, doctrinaire, and dogmatic. The communists saw their opponents as petit-bourgeois reformers. Everyone was forced to take sides.

This type of split was not novel in the history of the left or neighborhood organizing. As the economic and political conditions of the mid-1970s made effective left organizing increasingly difficult and as many found the "non-ideological" approach to neighborhood organizing of the early 1970s wanting, people seemed to turn on each other and inward to political theory for explanations and solutions.

The split sent people in all directions. Some activists left CHTA, joined more radical organizations, and went to work in factories to do union organizing. Others remained in Cambridgeport and continue today in their struggle to

build a cooperative community that supports and empowers neighborhood residents in conflicts with slumlords, university expansion, and so forth. I got another teaching job and, with a good deal of doubt, left Cambridgeport.

Organizing with CHTA was one of the most powerful learning experiences of my life. But it left as many questions about political and neighborhood organizing as it had provided answers. Why do grassroots groups succeed or fail? How important is ideology and a long-term vision in the organizing process? How do successful groups balance a commitment to democracy with the need for direction and leadership? What were the advantages and limits of organizing at the neighborhood level? Can groups operating at a community level ever achieve any significant degree of success as social change organizations? How can grassroots groups connect up with national movements or organizations? These questions and many others heightened my interest in studying the history of neighborhood organizing and this book in large measure is the product of my search since leaving CHTA.

One of the central themes of this book, that neighborhood organizing movements must be seen and evaluated within the context of national political and economic developments, grew not only out of my experience with CHTA but also out of changes in the historical discipline. For years people had been taught that the historical arena was limited to politicians in Washington or corporate executives in New York City. This led to a distorted view of how history is made, for it assumed that most people—those of the working class, minorities, women—did not have the power to affect history, that they were not historical actors but only objects of the forces set in motion by “historymakers.” Historians were the chief proponents of this elite-serving myth. Courses and books in United States history traditionally limited their scope to the history of white, wealthy men. Even when addressing locally initiated efforts, historians wrote history from a national perspective and from “the top down.”

In the 1960s a new group of historians emerged, reflecting both the radical spirit of the decade and different class and ethnic backgrounds from their elders in the profession. They began to study the historical roots of contemporary social problems. They wrote urban, ethnic, family, labor, community, and women’s history. They consciously explored history “from the bottom up,” and as they did the daily life and human relationships of ordinary people became an increasingly important and valuable part of the historical record.

But the “new social history” had a serious limitation. In the effort to uncover and write a “people’s history,” social historians rejected traditional approaches and thus tended to ignore political and economic developments at the national level which directly affected the lives of working people. The “turning inward” of members of the profession to locally based issues yielded an

understanding of the history of working people and how "ordinary people" play a part in shaping history. But there was an absence of analysis of how the overall system functioned and where working people fit into it.

This limitation began to be corrected in the late 1970s as a better integrated social history emerged. Marxist historians have always written social history within the framework of larger political and economic developments. Increasingly their wider view, if not always their methods and conclusions, came to be adopted generally. "The social interpretation of history," a non-Marxist wrote recently, "places ideas, events, and behavior as well as institutions in a larger context of the overall social system."¹

What I came to learn from the events and literature of the 1970s was that social developments are part of a total economic and political system—a political economy—in which all strands of life, from the national to local level, intertwine with each other. Most problems that contemporary communities face manifest at the neighborhood level but result from city, state, national, and even international factors. What is most striking, however, is how immune we think we are from the penetrations of the national political economy into our daily lives. We live in local communities, neighborhoods, towns, and cities; we participate in neighborhood organizing efforts on a scale of society where decisions of immediate and direct importance occupy our days. We direct our attention to our jobs, to the price of groceries, cars, and housing, to our health and that of our family. The local area is where we live our lives on a small, intimate, comprehensible scale. And rarely do we know or do anything about decisions made in corporate and governmental centers which will determine our course next year and many years after.

But this is not a one-way street where the national political economy exerts its will over a populace preoccupied with daily living. There is a dialectical relationship between the national and local arenas in which working people and their communities are not only acted upon but also cooperate with, resist, and stimulate national developments. For every national decision to expand the rights of workers in a Wagner Act in the 1930s, or to increase federal social services in a War on Poverty in the 1960s, there were militant local strikes and urban rebellions and protests which demanded and initiated these social changes. For every national decision, from declaring war against the Japanese in 1941 to invading Cambodia in 1970, there were the people who lived their lives at the local level who did or did not consent to fight.

The brief history of neighborhood organizing which follows seeks to contribute to the new social history by viewing the subject within the context of changes and developments at the city and national level, with an eye to the interpenetration between the national political economy and neighborhood-

based organizing efforts. Accordingly, this study divides the past century into five periods which correspond with shifts in the national political economy and changes in the dominant form of neighborhood organizing. Each section begins with an overview of the political economy of the era and is followed by case studies of the most prominent or significant neighborhood organizing projects of the time. As sketched in Table 1 and discussed more fully in the Conclusion, the book organizes the history of neighborhood organizing into three dominant and distinct approaches: social work, political activist, and neighborhood maintenance. The goal, then, is to describe and assess the history of the dominant strategies of neighborhood organizing used since the 1880s, and to provide a general introduction, not a comprehensive history, primarily for students and organizers, which does not artificially isolate the subject at the local level.

The need for such a book is evident. Neighborhood organizing is currently experiencing a second heyday. The first period of popularity was the initial decades of the twentieth century, when reformers identified the neighborhood unit as an ideal base for solving the severe problems of the emerging urban-industrial order. The second period of wide interest in neighborhood organizing began in the early 1960s, again in response to an "urban crisis," and interest in neighborhood organizing has continued to grow since. At least three major political parties in the election of 1980—the Democrats, the Republicans, and the Citizens—emphasized the value of neighborhood organizing in their party platforms. Jimmy Carter in a campaign speech in Brooklyn four years earlier said that "if we are to save our cities we must revitalize our neighborhoods first."² While his efforts in this direction were minimal, the National Neighborhood Policy Act of 1976 was the first since the Model Cities Act of 1966 to articulate at least some of the needs of neighborhoods, and his Urban Policy of 1978 did note the importance of neighborhood organizing in the city building and revitalization process.

Carter knew what the people in Brooklyn and communities throughout the nation wanted to hear. The list of supporters of the new interest in neighborhoods and neighborhood organization is nearly endless. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 42 percent of the people interviewed belonged or wanted to belong to a neighborhood organization effort, and more than a majority expressed a willingness to take direct action in defense of their neighborhood.³ Conservative theoreticians proclaim that neighborhood organizing can protect us "against the disjointed and threatening world 'out there.'"⁴ Leftists active since the 1960s continue to organize tenant and homeowner associations; food, day care, fish, fuel, and bicycle cooperatives; and militant social action organizations to empower neighborhood residents. One recent study sees a "Back-

yard Revolution" underway in America which has the potential to form a new political movement out of its network of grassroots democratic organizations. Another author proclaims that "Livable Cities" of the 1980s will be dependent on effective neighborhood organizations.⁵ It is clear that neighborhoods and neighborhood organizing appeal to a citizenry alienated from its economic and political power centers, and groups spanning the political spectrum from revolutionary to reactionary, from the public and private sector, are seeking to organize, acknowledge, coopt, and profit from this development.

What this contemporary interest in neighborhood organizing lacks is a sense of its past. Neighborhood organizing is not a recent phenomenon; it has a long and instructive history. But few neighborhood organizers or members of neighborhood groups seem to know this. At best they think neighborhood organizing is but twenty years old. Milton Kotler, the current director of the National Association of Neighborhoods and the author of a pioneer book on the subject, *Neighborhood Government*, dramatized the problem when he wrote recently:

It is time to take stock and consider very seriously why we should support neighborhoods and strong neighborhood organizations. To do this we must remember where the neighborhood movement came from and what happened to create the present situation. The neighborhood movement did not fall from heaven yesterday. *It began in the 1960s.*⁶ (italics mine)

This is not to suggest that the history of neighborhood and community organizing has been completely ignored. The work of Frances Fox Piven, Richard Cloward, Harry Boyte, Sara Evans, Lawrence Goodwyn, Mark Naison, Patricia Melvin, Thomas Philpott, Clayborne Carson, Janice Perlman, and Arthur Dunham, to name only a few, has enriched our sense of the history and the process of grassroots community organizing, and this book relies heavily on it. Given this expanding literature and contemporary interest in neighborhood organizing, the time appears right to attempt a synthesis of these materials and to write a history of neighborhood organizing movements.

Before proceeding further, some terms need clarification. "Let the people decide" was a slogan used specifically in new left neighborhood organizing projects of the 1960s, but its ideal of democratic grassroots decision making captures so well the history of neighborhood organizing, its strengths and weaknesses, that it seemed a most suitable general title. Moreover, this work is a *selected* history of neighborhood organizing movements. Many important organizing projects are not included. The intent has been to focus where possible on the most significant organizations and the dominant strategies of neighborhood organizing. Where there already is a large body of literature on

Table 1
History of Neighborhood Organizing: Three Dominant Approaches

<i>Social Work</i>	
Concept of Community	social organism
Problem Condition	social disorganization social conflict
Organized Group	working and lower class
Role of Organizer	professional social worker enabler and advocate coordinator and planner
Role of Neighborhood Residents	partners with professional recipients of benefits
Strategy	consensual gradualist work with power structure
Goals	group formation social integration service delivery
Examples	Social Settlements Community Centers Cincinnati Social Unit Plan Community Chests United Community Defense Services Community Action Program United Way

<i>Political Activist</i>	<i>Neighborhood Maintenance</i>
political unit power base	neighborhood residence
powerlessness exploitation neighborhood destruction	threats to property values or neighborhood homogeneity insufficient services
working and lower class	upper and middle class
political activist mobilizer educator	elected spokesperson civic leader interest-group broker
fellow activists indigenous leaders mass support	dues paying members
conflict mediation challenge power structure	consensual peer pressure political lobbying legal action
obtain, maintain, or restructure power develop alternative institutions	improve property value maintain neighborhood deliver services
Unemployed Councils Tenant organizations Alinsky programs Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN)	Neighborhood Preservation Associations Neighborhood Civic Clubs Property Owners' Associations

an effort, such as the social settlements, the treatment here tends to be more analytical; where little is known, the case studies tend to be more descriptive.

The terms neighborhood and neighborhood organizing also require definition. People can usually identify their neighborhood by name; they can give its boundaries; and they know who belongs and who is a newcomer. But because of intrinsic differences "neighborhoods" are sometimes hard to define. Sociologists Rachelle and Donald Warren, for example, identify six major types of neighborhoods based on the extent that people share a sense of neighborhood consciousness, how often neighbors interact with each other, and what channels exist between the neighborhood and outside groups. Suzanne Keller, another sociologist, offers a comprehensive and a workable definition which better suits my purposes: a neighborhood is a locality with physical boundaries, social networks, concentrated use of area facilities, and special emotional and symbolic connotations for its inhabitants.⁷

This study does not seek to romanticize the value of neighborhoods. The more people turn away from large-scale institutions and corporate and government leaders, the greater the tendency to overstate the virtues of smaller institutions such as the neighborhood unit. But not all neighborhoods are desirable places to live, nor do all residents want to live there. Many people are trapped in neighborhoods by class barriers and racism; others view the neighborhood as only a temporary space, a place to live before moving to a better community.⁸

Neighborhood appears at first to be a conservative concept—a place with boundaries to protect, a space where one can be "safe," a site for raising a family, growing up, and going to school. But this should not imply, as many modern sociologists have been quick to do, that neighborhood organizations are fundamentally committed to maintaining the status quo. Sociologist Emile Durkheim saw neighborhood institutions as progressive "mediating institutions" organized by the powerless which could challenge and limit the power of the state.⁹ Neighborhood organizations have as much potential to heighten awareness and promote change as they do to maintain the status quo. It depends, in large measure, on the type of neighborhood, the conditions it faces, its class and racial composition, the motives and politics of the organizers, and the national political-economic situation at the time.

Neighborhoods are territorial spaces whose values, goals, and activities are not inherent but rather mirror the class and racial conflicts of the larger system. Poor people facing problems of unemployment, job discrimination, substandard housing, high crime rates, and only slight hope of improvement stand to gain little, if anything, from using the neighborhood as a vehicle to maintain the status quo. Their class position demands social change, and while they

might seek to conserve, restore, and improve aspects of their community, their fundamental goal in neighborhood organizing is to change the conditions which keep them poor and powerless. Likewise, organizations in more affluent neighborhoods most often express the conservative and protective needs of their residents. They oppose commercial development, organize neighborhood police watches, and protect real estate values. The issue is more complex than suggested here. Lower-class and working-class neighborhood organizations also seek to defend their turf and can be as conservative and reactionary as their more affluent counterparts, and neighborhood organizations in more affluent areas often advocate social reform and use their organization to challenge authorities. Nevertheless, class and race factors determine to a large degree the direction and tactics of the neighborhood organizing effort and the extent to which goals can be realized.

In general the term neighborhood organization refers to an institution in which people who identify themselves as part of a neighborhood promote shared interests based primarily on their living or working in the same residential area.¹⁰ The process that they engage in to achieve their objectives is referred to as neighborhood organizing or, covering a somewhat wider area, community organizing or community organization. Neighborhood organizing is often fueled by a conviction that people must take action themselves to realize their aspirations, by an emphasis on organizational autonomy, and by the subordination of all other activity to the priorities of neighborhood issues and concerns. This study focuses on groups that first and foremost identify themselves as neighborhood organizations. Many neighborhood institutions, interest groups, and voluntary associations, such as churches, fraternal associations, and benefit societies, might seem to qualify as neighborhood organizations, but do not fall within these borders. Also not included are the host of racial and ethnic organizations in neighborhoods where residential area was not the primary basis of organization. This comes down to hairsplitting in some cases, as segregation patterns in our cities make it difficult to distinguish an organization based on race or ethnicity as opposed to one based on locality. In some circumstances I have taken the liberty to include organizations which do not fit the mold of a self-defined neighborhood organization in order to describe and assess more fully the variety of neighborhood organizing styles.

The words reactionary, conservative, liberal, and radical, used throughout the study, are relative terms which can hide as much as they explain. Until a more appropriate political vocabulary of neighborhood organizing develops, however, they are the best available. I use them in the following general manner: "reactionary" describes efforts to stop social change and decrease the power of lower-class and minority groups; "conservative" describes attempts

to maintain the political and class status quo; "liberal" describes efforts to promote social changes which do not challenge the existing class and economic system; and "radical" describes efforts to advance political, economic, and social democracy which often, though not always, see the capitalist system as the cause of problems.

This book has been a collective effort from the beginning. The craft of researching and writing a book is an individual and often isolating experience, but throughout the project people too numerous to mention assisted the process. Bruce Palmer, Steve Meacham, Harry Boyte, Bayrd Still, Manfred Jonas, and Juliet Clarke read most of the manuscript, and my debt to them is exceeded only by my appreciation of their help. Mark Naison, Patricia Mooney Melvin, Clarke Chambers, Robert Cohen, Morty Simon, Ellen Fleischman, Sara Evans, Bill Cavellini, Barry Kaplan, and Philip Castille read single chapters and their comments were always thoughtful and challenging. Irwin Sanders, the editor of the Twayne series, devoted valuable time, gave continual support to my efforts, and demonstrated a good deal of patience. The same is true of John LaBine, editor at Twayne. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the University of Houston-Downtown, especially Alexander Schilt and Don Elgin for assisting this project with a university-funded leave of absence, and students in my urban history courses who tolerated and supported my interest in neighborhood organizing. Colleagues and friends at the University of Southern Maine, most notably Joel Eastman, who extended university privileges, office space, computer time, and asked for little in return, made my year there a delight. The National Endowment for the Humanities supplied support for research in the social welfare history archives at the University of Minnesota; John Shanahan and the Southwest Civic Club graciously made their records available to me; and Sue Greenspoon's expertise with the word processor and her caring attitude made the final typing and rewriting of this manuscript a relatively painless task. Lastly, my deepest appreciation goes to my family—Leo, Eve, Marcy, Alden, Joan, Juliet, and Ian—who supported this project in countless ways, and Juliet and Ian even had the good sense to desert me for a short time when I needed to finish it.

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