

The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements. *By Woody Register*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xi + 400 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-195-14493-7.

By Robert W. Snyder

In *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements*, Woody Register looks into the bright lights of Coney Island to see the transformation of men's identities in America. Creatively and persuasively, Register shows how Fred Thompson—creator of Coney Island's fantastic Luna Park and more—encouraged early-twentieth-century men to embrace play as the antidote to the stresses and strains of a new corporate economy built on consumption.

“In the nineteenth century,” Register writes, “the main elements of identity and citizenship for white men in America were grounded in work and workplace loyalties and in religious and civic obligations.” As the nation's economy moved into the making and selling of goods and services, sanctioned by a new ethos of spending and desire, many men worried. What were they if not workers, worshipers, and citizens? Could they embrace the new culture of abundance and still be manly?

Thompson believed they could. In amusements, world's fairs, and stage shows, he told American men that spending, play, and the cultivation of their inner spirit of boyishness—essential elements of a “Peter Pan culture”—were the building blocks of a healthy male identity. “Thompson encouraged his ‘Peter Pan’ celebrity,” Register writes, “and urged contemporaries to join him in full-scale rebellion against the enfeebling prudence, restraint, and solemnity of growing up.”

It was a tense and contradictory transaction, Register argues, but it was something more than infantilization. “The idea that a man, in order to achieve and enjoy the full benefits of American life, should never stop playing or being a boy,” he states, “would become one of the most important cultural fictions used by ‘av’rage’ businessmen to justify and give an institutional, aesthetic, and moral foundation to consumer capitalism.”

In this new “Peter Pan manhood,” as Register puts it, men created “new ways of exercising power, using the concepts of play and childhood to build markets, defuse the worst associations of consumerism with women and effeminacy, and reconcile their expectations of social, political, and cultural priority with the tendencies of the new economic world.” The consequences of this process are still with us, Register explains, in everything from the swinging bachelors of *Playboy* magazine to the boy-men of Steven Spielberg films.

*The Kid of Coney Island* is not a conventional biography delivered in a chronological narrative. Thompson left too scant a record of his inner life to admit such a study. Instead, Register's book unfolds as a series of rich, lyrical, and densely argued chapters. Each one analyzes a phase of Thompson's unfolding career: early days in expositions, Coney Island, Hippodrome spectaculars, Broadway melodramas, and his final days in the toy industry. Standing on the foundations of David Nasaw's work on public amusements and William Leach and T. J. Jackson Lears's writings on consumer culture, Register adds important new insights for understanding the business of pleasure and the evolution of male identity.

In Thompson's life, Register argues, Peter Pan culture emerged from the belly of the old industrial world. "The Kid of Coney Island" was the son of an English immigrant who labored as a skilled ironworker and then moved into management. Young Thompson, reared in a succession of steel cities before the family settled down in Nashville, Tennessee, grew up with a taste for machinery. But he chafed at the restraints that were part of factory life and rebelled against the middle-class injunctions to obtain steady work and prudently accumulate savings. He pottered around as a janitor, sketch artist, newspaper stringer, and art student before he found his true calling in building the machinery of play.

At the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in Nashville, as he would later at other venues, Thompson demonstrated a talent for creating amusements that offered fantasy, illusion, and thrills. Thompson sought a middle-class audience that wanted to be both upright and excited. Like other entrepreneurs of entertainment in his time, especially vaudeville showmen, Thompson acknowledged older conceptions of propriety, even as he nurtured a new culture of endless play. "Thompson tried to make his amusements respectable without being prissy," Register argues in his chapter on Coney Island's Luna Park, "suggestively fun without crossing over into raciness."

To build this new world, Thompson used the media and the emerging industries of promotion and celebrity. Register reports that, in all his research, he found Thompson's actual signature "fewer than a dozen times." Nevertheless, his image, impact, and persona seemed to flow like quicksilver through telegrams, public-relations pitches, and newspaper features. Behind Thompson's success lurked his courtship and manipulation of newspapers and magazines, from mass-circulation dailies to theatrical papers to the trade publications of the toy industry. Journalism seems to have been integral to the Kid of Coney Island's advance—not just as a chronicle, but as an active force in propelling his career. The full details of this story merit further research and analysis. Register's discussion of the long-term impact of Peter Panism on *Playboy* is insightful; Thompson's impact on the journalism of his own time deserves similar treatment.

What happened, for example, when Peter Pan culture met the sporting, randy ethos of the *National Police Gazette*?

Register's book also suggests the need to understand how working-class men experienced the rise of Peter Pan culture. Thompson aimed at a middle-class audience, and *The Kid of Coney Island* understandably concentrates on middle-class men. But what became of the working-class men who encountered a male culture of play in the early twentieth century? In the nineteenth century, middle-class and working-class men had shared in the pleasures of boxing and the sporting life. (It's not that middle class men didn't play before Thompson, but that they played in rougher and rowdier ways.) The middle-class men who enjoyed Thompson's extravaganzas seem to have been a long way from the swells that flocked to bare-knuckle prize fights. Did working-class men undergo a comparable transformation? Again, Register's book suggests fruitful lines of inquiry.

As *The Kid of Coney Island* concludes, the consequences of the transformation that Thompson contributed to are still with us. In "the hip, playful toy-building entrepreneurs" who built Microsoft and the "information economy," Register sees modern incarnations of Peter Pan culture. It would be too much, however, to expect that the recent troubles of the dotcom economy will shock our modern-day Peter Pans into maturity. As this insightful book shows, many men have a deep interest in growing older without growing up.

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