

# Cheap amusement book review

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Dereck Rickman Scott Keys History 9September2012 In the book, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Piess takes the reader on the journey of trials and tribulations in working-class women's lives in the turn of the century. Going in depth of the unfair familial roles and societal female disparities, all the way to what women liked to wear and do for leisure, Piess allows the reader to step into a time machine and gives them a first-class look into what a woman's daily life was like in late 1800's and early 1900's.

By using 'expert' sources and 'investigators', Piess succeeds in her goal by honing in on a specific time and topic which allowed the reader to feel as if they were reading an in-depth history textbook on the matter, but failed at providing deeper substance and backbone through concrete details. Starting off by explaining the typical family roles in the turn of the century, Piess expresses how while the men may spend his evenings at a local saloon, at a baseball game or reading his daily paper, the women would often be expected to work her "double day".

Piess explains this concept of the double day to be that the woman is expected to go about her daily work day of typically "domestic servants, needlewomen, laundresses..." (Peiss 1986), and come home to start her other job, being the housewife. The housewife duties usually entailed cooking, cleaning, washing, scrubbing, and most importantly... making her husband and kids happy. All the while, when the woman got her hard earned paycheck, it was expected to go towards family needs.

Even as young women in the family home, young working girls were expected to hand over their paychecks in their entirety while their male

counterparts were only asked for a small portion of their earnings. Even though women were getting paid at lower wages and it being justified because women were seen as “ temporary wage-earners who worked only until marriage” (Peiss 1986), Piess automatically shows the struggles and disparities women faced in the work field and even at the home front.

Even if the young girl or woman say the disparities for what they were, she were to keep her opinions of the unjust actions to herself or she would find herself alienated and estranged from her own family. Even though the disparities and unequal behavior was seen and picked up throughout the book, Piess moves on to lighter topics such as leisure and fashion. “ Not content with the quiet recreation in the home, they [women] sought adventure in dance halls, cheap theaters, amusement parks, excursion boats, and picnic grounds” (Peiss 1986).

Women would often time seek refuge through the cheap amusements they would find in their spare time. If not the small concept of gossiping on the walk home from work, going to parks, or catching a small gossip break at work, women would often frequent the local dance halls where most of the time their admission was waived or lowered. These dance halls were a way for women to dress in their flashiest attire, talk in their unladylike manner, be pursued by the opposite sex, consume alcoholic beverages, and let loose on the dance floor. When it came to fashion and and the pursuance of men in the dance halls, the two went hand and hand.

Piess found that a pair of sisters frequently opted out of such social gatherings simply because they could not afford the fashion to attract the likes of the opposite sex; “We have not themoneyfor pretty clothes to

attract the boys who would really care for us and of course we have no money to pay for our own amusement, and as a result we stay at home” (Peiss 1986). Even if it was a new hat to wear to work, women would find the means to get their feminine itch for retail... even if it meant going without a meal or walking the great lengths to work.

Even when women were at the leisure, they were still being treated as unequal partners to the superior man. When out at a dance hall, men would choose who they wish to dance with and it was customary for women, like it or not, dance with the man who chose them for at least the remainder of one song. Peiss explains a process that was customary at dance halls and is even seen at modern day clubs, “ At the beginning of a dance, women would dance together, with the men watching them from the sidelines; then ‘ the boys step out, two at a time, separate the girls, and dance off in couples” (Peiss 1986).

The aforementioned process was known as “ breaking” in which the women involved had no say in who she wished to dance with. If a man were to “ treat” a woman, it was only polite that the woman dish out something in return. Be it flirtatious notions or sexual gestures, women were expected and most of the time willful partner in the prostitution-like proposition of the male and female interaction. “‘Many women do their washing in this yard,’ noted a middle-class tenement inspector” (Peiss 1986). Piess uses inspectors and random sources throughout her book as guides to prove or solidify her point.

What I was very curious about was who these people were in which she was quoting. I do appreciate the fact that she uses outside sources, but who are these outside sources and how reliable can they be? When it comes to her

more specific sites, such as, “‘Some never boarded a street car for an evening’s ride without planning days ahead how they could spare the nickel from their lunch or clothes money’ noted reformer Esther Packard, describing women who lived on six dollars a week” (Peiss 1986), Peiss never goes into depth who the source is or a deeper back-story to the individual that the reader would really be inclined to know.

When Peiss was able to give names to the quotes she used, it showed credibility and left the reader wanting more of an understanding of the person’s story. Though Peiss did a phenomenal job at proving her thesis in the sense of giving a book on a specific time and topic, she failed to give the reader some real life backbone through a more personal aspect. The reader is left feeling the need of wanting more from the sources rather than from Peiss as a historian.

Just as a simple observation was made throughout the length of the book, it seems that Peiss may have been suggesting a certain parallel that is seen in the 1890’s-1920’s in comparison to today’s world. When referring to the saloons and how women who came unescorted by a male counterpart was seen as “fair game”. In today’s world, if a woman attends a bar without a man, she is also seen as such game. Though the dangers as being seen as a prostitute are not paralleled between the two different eras, the concept of men pursuing an unescorted female in such a setting remains consistent.

In another similar tone, the notion Peiss points out of dance halls either lowering their fares for women or waving the fare altogether is consistent with the parallel thought of clubs often times lowering or waving cover charges for women for the simple fact of luring women into their

establishments. Peiss explains that owners of dance halls would alter their fees for women because women were usually unable to afford the fee and the owners really wanted more women, like today, to be at their establishment so the men would also come and lavish the women with drinks.

Other similarities are seen throughout Peiss' work such as women going on outings in pairs or groups of women, and also how when on the outings their "popularity" with the men is dependent on their willingness and capability to drink alcohol. An Appalachian State University student, John C. McKnight at [www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com) boldly and confidently states, "Her study should be considered a valuable source by all historians and should become a reoccurring theme of the Gilded and Progressive Era as far as the history of American woman is concerned" (McKnight 2011).

Though I could understand where Mr. McKnight is coming from as far as the history aspect is concerned, to go as far as to openly say that this piece of work should be considered a valuable source and should become a reoccurring theme is a tad outlandish. As far as a concentrated topic of a forty year time period is concerned, Peiss did a phenomenal job at capturing the essence of a fairly large group of women. But the fact of the matter is that Peiss only concerned herself with a forty year window of a specific gender, of a specific class.

Moreover, it took her nearly two hundred pages to repeat her central idea several times over. Peiss, though could manage to make her book a less repetitive insight into working women's leisure, did a great job at showing the reader what life looked like at the turn of the century for working class

women. Peiss created a very narrow window for the reader to look into and gave them a concentrated view of what a certain time frame looked like for a specific group of people in a certain social class.

The book was very well organized and was interesting in its topic of choice. I believe that this is an “ O. K. ” book for historians to engage in. Besides the book’s incredible organization and interesting topic, the book itself is very repetitive and I believe too concentrated to take much more than needed on the concept of working-class women and their leisure time in the turn of the century. Bib Mcknight, John C. " Cheap Amusements Review. " Scribd. N. p. , n. d. Web. 18 Sept. 2012. .