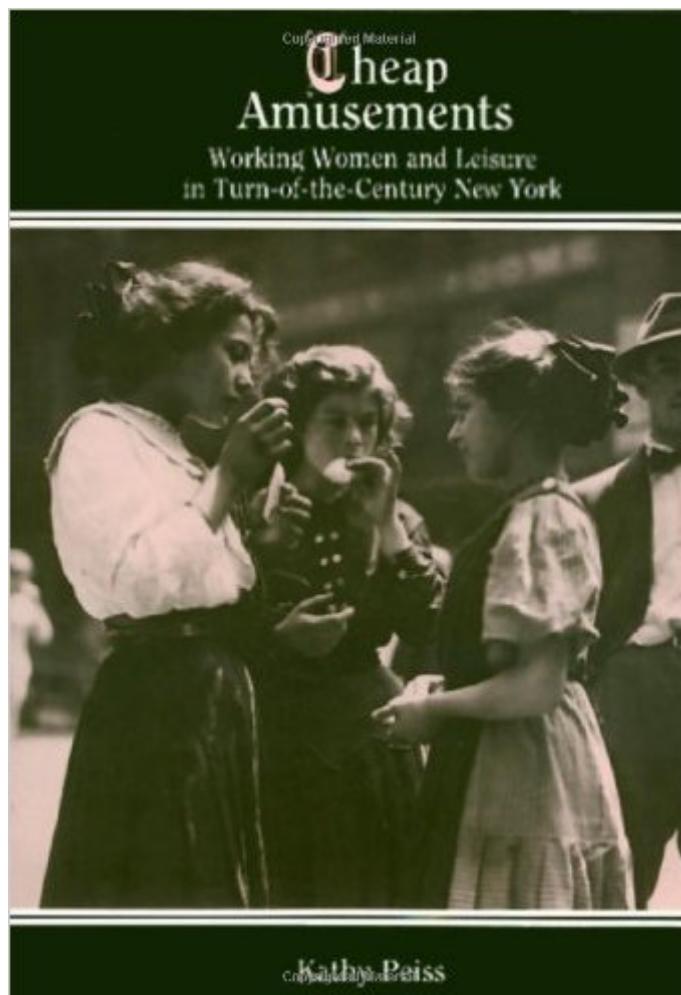


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Cheap Amusements



Synopsis

What did young, independent women do for fun and how did they pay their way into New York City's turn-of-the-century pleasure places? Cheap Amusements is a fascinating discussion of young working women whose meager wages often fell short of bare subsistence and rarely allowed for entertainment expenses. Kathy Peiss follows working women into saloons, dance halls, Coney Island amusement parks, social clubs, and nickelodeons to explore the culture of these young women between 1880 and 1920 as expressed in leisure activities. By examining the rituals and styles they adopted and placing that culture in the larger context of urban working-class life, she offers us a complex picture of the dynamics shaping a working woman's experience and consciousness at the turn-of-the-century. Not only does her analysis lead us to new insights into working-class culture, changing social relations between single men and women, and urban courtship, but it also gives us a fuller understanding of the cultural transformations that gave rise to the commercialization of leisure. The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of "heterosocial companionship" as a dominant ideology of gender, affirming mixed-sex patterns of social interaction, in contrast to the nineteenth century's segregated spheres. Cheap Amusements argues that a crucial part of the "reorientation of American culture" originated from below, specifically in the subculture of working women to be found in urban dance halls and amusement resorts. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

Peiss begins her argument by explaining the relationship of industrial capitalism to wage labor in creating class-conscious leisure arenas, literally recalling Roy Rosenzweig's study. Peiss's distinction lies in "this conception of leisure did not develop historically in the same way for both sexes." (Peiss, 4). Sexual division ultimately shaped and confined women's leisure to their homes. Thus, the typical wage-earning females in pursuit of leisure were young and single. Their youth and marriage status turned their attentions from the leisurely pursuits of Rosenzweig's working men but to dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theatres. The emerging youth-oriented forms of recreation could not be ignored by the commercial industry, which viewed female participation as lucrative. In addition, these commercialized forms of amusement fostered a heterosocial culture that eventually brought new meanings and restriction to same-sex gender friendships. Rather than stand by and chronicle these changes in leisure for working-class women, Peiss makes the bold argument that these women were actual agents in shaping the nature of their leisure, and Peiss proves again and again to be correct. Even more impressive is her claim that the majority of these women were immigrants or second-generation immigrants (Peiss, 56-88). In examining the actual amusements of working-class women--dance halls, excursions, amusement parks, and the movies, Peiss illustrates vividly how women had a place in the architecture of their own leisure. It is Peiss's conclusion that women's suffrage and the growth of women in the public sphere "infectiously appealed to other middle-class women who were less politicized.

New York City at the turn of the twentieth century was a landscape troubled by class and ethnic tension--there were mansions on Fifth Avenue and tenement houses of Italian, Irish, and German immigrants along the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Kathy Peiss analyzes working-class women's free time and leisure. She recounts how Victorian sexual mores and ethnic traditions that restricted women's presence in the public sphere were replaced by a commercialized culture with more modern entertainments: dance halls and clubs, early movie theaters, and summer resorts with amusement parks and shoreline hotels. Examining these social spaces as representative of gender relations,

Peiss asserts that young working women viewed these free time pursuits as expressions of autonomy and excitement, but were also exploited by entrepreneurs of the entertainment industry and by men who perceived financial dependency. The book does offer insight into the gendered nature of capitalist work patterns. The residual nineteenth-century domestic ideal clashed with women's increasing participation in the workforce, rendering their desire for leisure outside the home problematic to their parents. Ultimately Peiss' work succeeds in its depiction of working class leisure culture, reconstructing working women's attitudes toward living arrangements, fashion, romantic relationships, and elaborate kinship and social networks. To escape the Victorian constraints of their mothers' generation, these young wage-earners embraced a nascent entertainment culture of dance halls, amusement parks, and movies, which enforced sexual objectification even as it offered ostensible freedom.

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