



# **Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York**

*Kathy Peiss*

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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.

## Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York Details

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Author : Kathy Peiss

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# **From Reader Review Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York for online ebook**

## **Rachel Jones says**

I don't wish I could work 14 hour days in a sweatshop, but I do wish I could go to Coney Island in the days of Luna Park.

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## **Jaime Rispoli-Roberts says**

At the end of the 19 century and the beginning of the 20th, new leisure activities emerged. As New York became more industrialized many girls of working class immigrant families had to find work outside of the home. Although women's lives were often restrictive during this time, the new autonomy that developed as a result of becoming a wage earner, gave working class girls the chance to develop their own leisure culture. Businessmen were quick to pick up on this and many new activities were created or increasingly more commercialized to appeal to a younger, more Americanized generation. Ultimately, this influenced a new mass culture of leisure, which in turn, created a new set of drawbacks for women.

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## **Courtney says**

This was the easiest reread this year. Thank god Peiss is straightforward and organizes the book logically. No crazy offshoots or uneven chapters. It also helps that last time I read it, I highlighted the important bits and left my sticky notes in it..... Twas a good combo.

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## **Dan Gorman says**

The story of working women and their leisure pursuits in one city really comments on the changing opportunities for women in all of America. The rich details and smooth writing make for a wonderful read. There's a reason this book is a classic.

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## **Tessa says**

I thought this book had a lot of potential to be informative and interesting. However, it seriously lacked in the later. Although there was quite a bit of good information in the book, the writing style made the book incredibly dull. Compared with other historical books that I have recently read, this one paled in comparison.

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## **Emily says**

Using the case studies of dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theaters, Peiss not only chronicles the leisure pursuits of white, working-class women in the period 1880-1920, but argues that the heterosocial desires of these subjects in fact shaped 20th century mass culture from the bottom up.

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## **Marla McMackin says**

In *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-century New York City* (1986), Katherine Peiss explores the social experiences of young working-class women between 1880 to 1920, looking for clues to the way they constructed and gave new meaning to their lives. She utilizes extensive archival sources on working-class life in New York, ranging from records of middle-class reformers who descended upon the city to oral testimonies of young white women who ventured into the developing sphere of public leisure. Her subjects are typically young immigrants or the daughters of immigrants who lived in well-defined tenement districts, and labored for wages while unmarried, usually in factories, homes, and sales and service jobs. Peiss' central concern is the cultural handling of gender, but she presents a convincing argument that young working-class women pioneered new manners and mores, including those related to sexuality.

Although the working-class standard of living was improving at the turn of the century, most families could only afford the cheapest amusements, including window-shopping, outings to parks or small gatherings in the home, all divided by gender. The leisure time of married women was also constrained by responsibilities to the home, which left them with more narrowly defined opportunities for participation in public forms of leisure. One exception to this homosocial pattern of recreation was an emerging group of single, adolescent wage earners. "Unlike their mothers, young women gained access to new forms of social life in the public arena, an experience structured and formed by their entrance into the labor force" (Peiss, p. 33).

These generally foreign-born or daughters of immigrant parents dominated the female labor force. New jobs in department stores, large factories, and offices provided alternatives to domestic service and household production. With fewer time restrictions than working mothers, and seeking temporary reprieve from the drudgery of labor, leisure was seen as a separate sphere of life to be consciously protected from interference. "Young women marked out a cultural terrain distinct from familial traditions and the customary practices of their ethnic groups, signifying a new identity as wage-earners through language, clothing, and social rituals" (Peiss, p. 47).

These new social rituals were often constructed in commercial dance halls, cheap theaters and amusement parks, where female participation was profitable and therefore encouraged. They were also played out in outdoor venues, including picnic areas and in the streets. Most activities were heterosocial, focused on meeting men, dating and romance. Young working-class women also experimented with identity, trying on new images by adopting the cultural forms around them, including music and language. Clothing was a highly visible and therefore potent way to play with notions of respectability, allure and independence. Each assertion of distinct identity was a potential source of conflict, which would become a hallmark of adolescence throughout the twentieth century. "While daughters may have accepted the family claim to their wages and work, struggles often ensued over their access to and use of leisure time. Participation in social life, parental supervision, spending money, and clothing were common issues of conflict. As wage-earners and contributors to the family, they sought to parlay their new-found status toward greater autonomy in their personal lives" (Peiss, p. 69).

The autonomous heterosocial culture young working-class women created was also a source of cross-class

conflict. Although many Americans were debating new ideas about womanhood, sexuality and leisure, Victorian values continued to guide most middle-class women, including reformers who turned their attention to the working-class. For them, cheap amusements were a social problem that not only threatened the virtues of chastity and decorum among single women, but also the primacy of motherhood and domesticity. They segregated youth from family, fostered a dangerously expressive culture and were linked to promiscuous sexuality. Reformers hoped to limit, redefine and even purify behavior by regulating commercial amusements and creating single-sex social clubs for young working-class women. However, “indifference and hostility led them to adjust their programs in light of working women’s interests. In this process of social interaction, reformers’ attitudes about leisure and womanhood were reformulated to accommodate – albeit grudgingly – a heterosocial and expressive commercial culture” (Peiss, p. 164).

The cheap amusements these young working-class women preferred offered an arena for the articulation of new values and behaviors. The resulting shift from homosocial to heterosocial culture, and the redefinition of gender relations it required, played a role in the wider passage from Victorian culture to modernism. While Peiss does not assert a “trickle up” theory, she suggests that the lines of cultural transmission traveled in both directions as members of the working- and middle-class adopted new norms. The desire for self-determined pleasure, sexuality and autonomy expressed by these young working-class women would also prove to be a compelling issue throughout the twentieth century. “It remains so in a society whose sophisticated engines of culture rapidly commodify the expression of those outside the mainstream, draining it of its dissonance and challenge in the process. That working women ‘just want to have fun’ may thus be taken as a trivial claim, easily achieved in the world of leisure, or as a profoundly liberating – and unfulfilled – feminist demand” (Peiss, p. 188).

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### **Bruce says**

The subtitle should not be read as if *Working Women were the Cheap Amusements of Turn-of-the-Century New York*. This book about how working women found amusements for what leisure time they had and how the purveyors of amusement changed to garner their business. Women were paid a lot less than men so they got men to spend money on them. They went to dances in clubs and then in public dance halls. Later with the reform movement some stayed in settlement houses. There was a difference between those women from immigrant communities and those whose families had been in America a long time, at least in the beginnings. But things changed.

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### **Michaeline Duskova says**

Excellent book that brings color and life to the late 1890s to 1920s, especially for women. Nice details about Coney Island, how women lived, boarding houses vs. family home, and some of the differences in the way women of different backgrounds were able to use their free time.

A big help for my research, as well as being entertaining to read.

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## Jessi says

A good, well-written book that illustrates an oft ignored topic- the leisure patterns of young women. Peiss details the processes of commercialization that led to the ideal of the "new woman" in the lives of young working class women in Manhattan. She accurately asserts, however, that leisure patterns varied greatly by class, nativity status, and educational level. Although they experienced greater integration with men than the generations before them, Peiss suggests that only until the 1970's would working-class women gain a sense of gender consciousness within their leisure patterns. My only criticism is that the book only looks at white working-class women.

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## Anne Sanow says

Thorough and fascinating study, and the academese is less turgid than many a dissertation-cum-book. My suggested companion read is the autobiographical novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, which depicts various working-class female characters attending theater and other vaudeville acts, etc.--in other words, it brings this study to life.

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## Jessica says

So I was mostly reading this for the purposes of writing an essay on how working-class women in turn-of-the-century North America experienced their sexuality, and this book is positively brilliant for learning about that. It draws extensively on primary sources (as you would hope I guess, but I digress...) and paints a vivid picture about how individuals' experiences were shaped by their class, gender and ethnic backgrounds.

One aspect I found particularly interesting was the phenomenon of "treating", by which working-class women would expect their male companions to pay the cost of an outing, their entertainment needs, etc. - and frequently certain other costs as well, like for clothes and shoes. It seems that there was a kind of continuum from this behaviour, through casual prostitution, to "fully-fledged" prostitution... and as someone who cares passionately about women's oppression, I am *vehemently* opposed to the existence of that industry. However, the practice of "treating" seems to have been qualitatively different, a far more liberating practice which ascribed far more agency to the woman involved. Which is not to say that working women in the 1910s were all sexually free and liberated - far from it! - as Peiss describes, women's wages were so low (below the living wage of the time) that they were economically dependent on men, which pressured them into this behaviour of course. BUT it ALSO means that many working women (although by no means all... again, this tended to vary by things like ethnic background) were able to experiment sexually, flirting and fooling around with boys etc., at a time when this would have (and did...) completely scandalised bourgeois moralists.

In the last chapter, chapter seven, Peiss describes how bourgeois women tried to create some kind of cross-class solidarity among women. I found this interesting because it seems to me that Peiss, as a feminist, really sympathises with these bourgeois reformers' aims, but working women of the time evidently did not! Working-class women, by and large, identified with the men of their own class before the women of the bourgeoisie; they resented bourgeois women's individualism and identified with the labour struggle instead (if they were political) and even if they were not, they preferred to mingle with men - and enjoyed the freer sexual culture of the working class - to stuffy, stultifying notions of respectability.

In all honesty, this was a really fun book to read - and short too! Goodreads claims it's 288 pages, but the copy I read is more like 188, plus endnotes and index etc. - and if you are even remotely interested in sexual liberation or women's oppression (particularly if you, like me, want to research this entire topic in the first place because most studies of women's sexuality ignore working-class women entirely) THIS IS A MUST-READ. I am not even kidding.

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### **Kim Adamache says**

Interesting historical narrative regarding what working-class and immigrant young women did for leisure and amusements in New York City. Also goes in into great detail about the socio-economic changes that facilitated many of the new amusements and city life happening during this turn of the last century account.

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### **David Bates says**

Kathy Peiss's 1986 work *Cheap Amusements* is a social history of working class women, mainly the young daughters of immigrants, in New York at the turn of the twentieth century. New jobs for young women in department stores, factories and offices, rather than in domestic service, drove tensions within working class families, especially immigrant families, and a shifting emphasis within the Women's Movement. With a clearer distinction between work time and leisure time, and with some funds at their disposal, young women voted with their nickels and hours for "emergent forms of commercialized recreation, such as dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theaters." The enthusiasm for inexpensive amusements, late hours, and unsupervised relationships with men signify for Peiss a moment of opening social freedom that contrasted markedly with the claustrophobic lives of married women in the same communities. The culture created by that opening found many detractors, from employers who complained about the "Blue Mondays" of their tired staff, to traditionalist family members, to Progressive reformers who sought to shut down recreational venues that they felt corrupted the integrity of the family unit. It did, however, find support in the commercial relationship which emerged with businesses and venues that profited by commodifying leisure. Especially through the power of the emerging American cinema industry and engagement with Women's Movement organizations, Peiss credits working class women with pivoting American culture away from the middle class Victorian ideals of the late nineteenth century and toward and toward a culture of "social freedom, freer sexuality, and mixed-sex fun," in which "[r]eformers were seen as hopelessly out-of-date by the younger generation, their criticism of heterosocial commercial culture irrelevant."

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### **Vicki says**

Studying work by Peiss is standard fare for courses that touch on cultural history, sexuality, gender, and American pop culture. She's written landmark stuff that many historians continue to work off of. Which makes this 1985 work a scholarly classic.

Working-class women are the focus, particularly immigrant women or daughters of immigrants, living in NYC between 1880 and 1920. She takes on a highly diverse demographic to explore women's changing relationship to work and to the home.

Essentially, the equation becomes... more working women + an independent income = new culture of leisure

and activities. It's an easy, and almost obvious, conclusion to come to, but Peiss, of course doesn't stop there. With money to spend, single, working women begin to enter into mixed-sex social situations (i.e. dance halls, "amusement resorts", nickelodeons), where previously the majority of women would have been housebound. So the nature of gender relations did a 180, from male/female segregated spheres to more relaxed social environments.

I read this study and kept thinking, "Oh, yes, of course!" Because once Peiss gets there, once she laces her assertions together, the cultural characteristics of that time period begin to add up to a larger picture—that there is nothing simple or singular about the rise of Coney Island, but that it is a microcosm producing entirely new implications about urban socialization and culture. For Peiss, what all of this boils down to is, working-class women created new forms of behavior through their leisure activities, which changed gender roles and contributed to the growth of a mass culture. And it is a reason to love her. Because certainly at the time she wrote this, women were not seen as a serious driving force behind major changes in history. But alas! Peiss has sworn "to restore working-class women to history," and in this study she's done it.

Peiss really hits her stride once she relates the female consumer to the rise of commercialization. Corporations began thinking, *how can we make bank on single ladies?*, and suddenly you couldn't walk more than two feet without tripping into a nickelodeon. Hello, mass culture.

*Cheap Amusements* is not perfect. Peiss' research is incredibly focused and therefore, limited.

1. working-class immigrant women
2. turn of the century
3. NYC.

So it's gender-specific, restricted to a very brief time and unapologetically regional. This book obviously can't give readers an accurate picture of what women did in their free time in the rural south in 1902. Nor do I think her research can be generalized to all American cities as NYC's high immigrant population adds a different character to the city's development. But that's the downside of any subculture study: It elevates the importance of a small, unique group of people and alienates those not in it. So readers may believe men played more of a role in the development of leisure time. Readers may even think the author's definition of leisure is too limited, or gendered.

But guess what? This book is great anyways.

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