



Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America

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A remarkable new work from one of our premier historians

In his exciting new book, John F. Kasson examines the signs of crisis in American life a century ago, signs that new forces of modernity were affecting men's sense of who and what they really were.

When the Prussian-born Eugene Sandow, an international vaudeville star and bodybuilder, toured the United States in the 1890s, Florenz Ziegfeld cannily presented him as the "Perfect Man," representing both an ancient ideal of manhood and a modern commodity extolling self-development and self-fulfillment. Then, when Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan swung down a vine into the public eye in 1912, the fantasy of a perfect white Anglo-Saxon male was taken further, escaping the confines of civilization but reasserting its values, beating his chest and bellowing his triumph to the world. With Harry Houdini, the dream of escape was literally embodied in spectacular performances in which he triumphed over every kind of threat to masculine integrity -- bondage, imprisonment, insanity, and death. Kasson's liberally illustrated and persuasively argued study analyzes the themes linking these figures and places them in their rich historical and cultural context. Concern with the white male body -- with exhibiting it and with the perils to it --reached a climax in World War I, he suggests, and continues with us today.

Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America Details

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From Reader Review Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America for online ebook

Thomas Santomartino says

A good overview of how Sandow, Houdini, and Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan influenced the views of manhood and masculinity from the late 1800s to mid 20th century. There is some commentary on contemporary culture and masculine identity but it takes up only a small portion of the book. It has lots of great photos and is very informative if you want to explore the good and bad of the this topic in depth.

Amelia Briggs says

Kadson explores the white male identity crisis at the turn of the 20th century, roughly the time period between emancipation of the slaves and the culmination of the women's suffrage movement. Within these ever-changing societal and cultural standards, the average American white man was lost, his very identity threatened, allowing men like Eugen Sandow, Harry Houdini, and fictional characters like Tarzan, to be held up as ideals of modern masculinity. Kasson could have delved more into the specific effects emancipation and suffrage had on white male society, but otherwise the book is interesting and readable.

Natalia says

Still waiting to give half-stars....

Anyway, 3.5 overall.

Courtney says

Kasson is accessible to the non-academic audience (which is great), but the way the book is organized is a bit odd. Each chapter follows a semi-biographical narrative for each of the stars---here's my complaint: all of the historical context us in the introduction. All of it. Kasson doesn't bother giving much more than generalized callbacks to the information needed to understand Sandow, Houdini, and Tarzan.

The chapter on Eugen Sandow is really well done but the wheels start to come off the wagon as the author pivots into the life of Harry Houdini. Some of the sources are shaky or rely too heavily on what Houdini said/reported/retold. By the time I reached Tarzan in the last chapter I discovered that this section was more about the job Edgar Rice Burroughs hated than Tarzan himself. An odd ending to a book that I honestly expected to like more.

Rating: 3.5/5

Simon J. says

Insightful chapters on three major figures of American popular culture. Kasson, an experienced American Studies author, brings them together well with the theme of the body as a new sign of modernity.

Oliver Bateman says

Kasson was a professor of mine at UNC-CH, and though I made little impact on him (I made little impact on anyone during those dark days, so loaded was I on various substances), his lectures on American culture changed the direction of my intellectual life ("What a terrible thing to have lost one's mind. Or not to have a mind at all. How true that is"). This book fashions a coherent narrative out of three somewhat disparate subjects, examining the concept of white masculinity through a prosopographical study of early 20th century icons Sandow, Houdini, and ER Burroughs (with occasional digressions to examine other noteworthy individuals). There's nothing that's Bourdieu-level mindblowing here, which one wouldn't expect from an American historian working on an American topic, but Kasson's about as readable as it comes where this stuff is concerned, and HT&TPM is another strong effort. Full disclosure: I'm working on what's essentially a follow-up to this book with Chapel Hill Press that'll focus on Charles Atlas, Steve Reeves, Jim Brown, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and LeBron James, taking the story from 1920 up to the present and examining crucial issues of race that are omitted here. So yeah, this formula, however bewildering it might initially seem, has proved quite useful for me.

Kaufmak says

When I read this book, it was still relatively new, not quite ground breaking, but still fresh. In the cascade of studies about masculinity, whiteness and body image in the ensuing decade, this book still holds up pretty well. Kasson examines three male figures from the turn of the century and discusses how they all contributed to the masculine image of the day, an image that in many ways we still admire, promote and covet. Within the discussion Kasson draws out the ties between race, civilization and culture. All three of the subjects are Horatio Alger-like stories in their transformation from weak, small Victorian men, to objects of power, beauty and sexual energy. It was as Kasson discusses a reaffirmation of the white male, a response to the "crisis of masculinity" at the turn of the century (not to be confused with the crisis in the 1930s, 1950s, 1970s, and current crisis that boys are not as smart as girls.) I can't remember if this was also the book that discusses the journeys into the wilderness by middle-class men to reclaim their manliness, but it would have fit in quite nicely.

Peter Tupper says

Fascinating read. The story of three men and their creations of new kinds of male heroes for the industrial age. I say creations because Sandow, the prototypical bodybuilder, and Houdini, the master escape artist, both adopted new names and created characters through their performances in the mass media that were akin to Burroughs' creation of Tarzan.

You can also see Houdini and Sandow's influence on pulp heroes and superheroes (E.g. Doc Savage, the Shadow, Batman, etc.)

Tori says

very accessible for an academic text (when writing about popular culture, imo you should write for the people who consume that culture) and genuinely enjoyable to read. limited in scope, obviously, to the white male body, but i appreciate the book's up-front acknowledgment of its own scope. it doesn't like, claim to be an All Encompassing text about The Male Body or The White Person or The Turn of the Century. it is what it is, and i really enjoyed it for that.

Katie says

This was an excellent book! Clear, entertaining, and very perceptive. Perfect for people interested in late 19th century/early 20th century culture, gender, media, and entertainment history.

Jenny says

I haven't finished it yet, but it's fantastic. Really fascinating stuff. It talks about Sandow, the first body-builder, Houdini (and his escapes) and the author of Tarzan. Really quick read. After a couple of hours, I'm already half-way through.

Nicole Cordier says

This book was really interesting. It had a strong thesis, read almost like a novel, and took an interesting look at white manhood and masculinity in the late 19th/early 20th centuries. I would recommend this for anyone interested in gender or racial studies. The Tarzan section especially interested me, as it really took race into account.

Emily says

Interesting. The Tarzan section was a bit of a stretch, though.

Sarah says

Wow, where to begin with this book. At first, I thought this would be an interesting read for class just from the intro. However, as I got further into this book, I realized the argument is skewed, the citation (internal) is severely lacking, all-in-all this was a history book, and that it could not keep my attention. It pained me to

actually read this. I understand that some history is necessary for a book like this, but don't skew the information in it to fit your criteria. Bring ALL the facts, then present your argument. HOWEVER if you bring all the facts, don't put the reader to sleep. Please. That's just what this book did, sadly. It didn't impress me. There are true things in it, yet I don't know how those three affected modernity. Look at the guys walking around today: they don't fit the criteria of the 20th century. Regardless I'm not a fan.

Conclusion

Maybe I'll read this again. However, that is very unlikely. I can't say I recommend it; it just isn't that good.

Angelina says

I don't usually get around to reading history, unfortunately, but this book brought together a bunch of interesting ideas about modernity, the body, masculinity and whiteness at the turn of the century in a really readable way.
