

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

By John F. Kasson

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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.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
"Me Tarzan, You Jane. Me White, Me Better." That was the subtext not only of Edgar Rice Burroughs's novel Tarzan of the Apes, but also of magician and escape artist Harry Houdini's career, as well as that of vaudeville star and bodybuilder Eugene Sandow, according to this illuminating and engrossing cultural study of modern masculinity. Exploring how public presentations of the white male body, particularly in popular culture, reinforced both gender and racial superiority in the formative years of this century, Kasson (professor of American studies at the University of North Carolina) deftly weds these three major figures into a single narrative. Sandow embodied pure male form and strength in response to women gaining more social power, Kasson says, while Houdini represented the survival of the threatened male body in an age when the state was imposing more control over the individual. Meanwhile, the fictional Ape Man symbolized the inherent mastery of whiteness in an increasingly complex racialized world. Drawing on a wide range of sources including vaudeville programs and photos, newspaper reports, personal letters and autobiographies, as well as medical texts, historical accounts and cultural theory Kasson manages to weave in other (mostly forgotten, but historically important) figures such as Julian Eltinge, the world's most noted female impersonator, and spiritualist Mina Crandon, who was exposed as a fraud by Houdini. Witty and well written, this is a top-notch work of cultural history that can be read with great enjoyment by general readers and social historians alike.

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From Library Journal
Here is an unusual and thought-provoking look at the evolving concept of manhood from the late 19th century through the World War I era, when social, technological, business, and urban changes reshaped many traditional perceptions. Kasson (Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America) presents a well-researched study focusing upon three figures who underscored the male image in the public eye albeit a dominant, white-male image that remained throughout ensuing decades. Eugene Sandow, a bodybuilder and vaudevillian known as the Perfect Man, set a standard for physical perfection. Harry Houdini performed death-defying magic that emphasized triumph over physical circumstances at a time when technology seemed to threaten individuality. Through his novels, Edgar Rice Burroughs created ideal heroes, particularly in his "Tarzan" series, who imposed control and values upon wild and dangerous surroundings. Using these popular figures as a basis for discussion, Kasson examines a rich variety of trends, customs, values, and philosophies, offering unique commentary on issues pertaining to manliness in modern society. Numerous illustrations enhance this fluidly written text. For academic libraries and large sociology and history collections. Carol J. Binkowski, Bloomfield, NJ
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From Booklist
Starred Review Sex and danger sell. Kasson explores how audiences in the late 1800s and early 1900s were thrilled and titillated by the performances of Eugen Sandow, known as the "Perfect Man"; Harry Houdini, the daredevil escape artist and magician; and Edgar Rice Burroughs' creation Tarzan. All three male images effectively used the double-edged sword of sexuality between repression and exhibitionism that existed in society to avoid censors and entice men and women to the theater. Kasson theorizes it was this modernized concept of the white male, someone of European descent, the right class, amazing strength and

ingenuity, and a touch exotic, that became a commodity that was displayed and sold to the public. He suggests this modernized ideal was formed and flourished in this period because the white male wanted to re-exert his superiority. It also afforded women and some men the opportunity to view and fanaticize about these scantily clad men exhibiting muscles, escaping bondage, and rescuing people in a way society deemed acceptable. Examples of these types of male idols still exist today in the personas of James Bond, the spy in *Mission: Impossible*, the Terminator, and other films. This excellent, thought-provoking book explains how it all started. *Eileen Hardy*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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