Sideshow babies: ‘The Strange Case of Dr. Couney,’ by Dawn Raffel

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Coney Island, the Brooklyn Eagle opined in 1903, is “the strangest place on Earth for human tots to be fed, nursed and cared for.” Haranguing passersby to pay “a few shekels” to watch Martin Couney’s sideshow, which featured “preemies” in incubators, the Eagle writer acknowledged, “strikes one as questionable, almost repellent.” Nonetheless, the state-of-the-art equipment, the soft, sanitized pillows, the tapered feeding spoon invented by Couney, and the tender care of nurses justified the reporter’s conclusion that the exhibit “was sober and scientific.”

Couney’s gig at Coney Island lasted for 40 years. “Living Babies in Incubators” was featured as well in Atlantic City, N.J., the Buffalo World’s Fair in 1901 (where President McKinley was shot) and Chicago’s Century of Progress in 1934.

In “The Strange Case of Dr. Couney,” Dawn Raffel, a journalist, memoirist and short story writer, draws on newspaper accounts, census and immigration records, the research of pediatrician William Silverman, and interviews with surviving patients, to explain how Couney became a savior to families with premature children and why he chose to put his patients on display.

Raffel nails down some important facts. Couney was born in Krotoschin, in the Prussian district of Posen, not Alsace. His name at birth was Michael Cohn. He never received a medical degree. Nor did he invent the incubator that kept his “preemies” alive.

Raffel also acknowledges that Couney buried evidence about himself, his business (the Infant Incubator Co.), the circumstances surrounding parental grants of custody to him, and his track record, “so deeply that it has never been found.”

And so, “The Strange Case of Dr. Couney” is awash in digressions; conversations with surviving patients who had more questions than answers; narratives shaped by retelling and memory; and speculation. An example: Raffel passes along a “most delicious story” involving a young Brit named Archibald Leach, soon to be rechristened Cary Grant, who allegedly had been hired to stand outside the incubators at Coney Island in 1922, “beckoning the masses while awaiting
stardom.” After wondering whether Archie ever took a pratfall to get attention, Raffel writes: if the “beautiful Coney Island tale” about his incubator stint “isn’t true, it should’ve been.”

More important, Raffel does not interrogate Couney’s unsubstantiated claim that he saved 85 percent of the children entrusted to him. To be sure, she reveals that at the turn of the 20th century very few hospitals were equipped to assist “fragile children in need of long-term care.” Most of them, in fact, “rejected incubators in favor of less effective padded baskets or warm room.” She also implies, rather less persuasively, that at this time eugenicists had created a “cultural undercurrent” that convinced many Americans and a not trivial number of obstetricians and hospital administrators that “anyone who might grow up with an impairment wasn’t worth saving.”

Convinced that Couney’s “bottom line was saving babies, who were otherwise doomed,” Raffel does not ask why his commitment was confined to the summer, when his sideshow was running. “Even supposing” that after he saved children, Couney “brokered adoptions for profit,” Raffel gives the showman a free pass. The choice, she insists, was a foundling institution, where mortality rates were high, especially for children needing special care, or a loving home. “Regardless,” Raffel adds, throughout his life “Martin would deny having done it.” Significantly, in my judgment, she leaves us wondering whether hospital practices improved in the 1920s and ’30s, resulting in a decline in mortality rates for “preemies,” and rendering Couney’s “service” less necessary.

Clearly, Martin Couney is an elusive and enigmatic character. But she does give us the reasons she admires him. Dr. Julius Hess, the “father of neonatology” in the United States (who worked for Couney early in his career), Raffel reveals, often praised Couney as a pioneer in the field. And, Raffel writes, Couney’s babies learned to crawl, attended school, worked in factories and offices, married or didn’t, watched television, bought computers, learned to Skype. Before they died, some of them, no doubt, Googled the man they’d been told had saved their lives, and about whom they — and we — know very little.

The Strange Case of Dr. Couney
How a Mysterious European Showman Saved Thousands of American Babies
By Dawn Raffel
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