

Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press 1997).

Since the publication of Frederick Drimmer's ground-breaking book, *Very Special People* (1974), there has been a steady increase both in the quantity and quality of freak, freak show, and dime museum historical literature. Serious work by serious academics such as Brooks McNamara (1974), Leslie Fiedler (1978), and Robert Bogdan (1988) have established these subjects as worthy fields of study. Sadly, the latest contribution to the literature, Andrea Stulman Dennett's *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (1997), constitutes a step in the wrong direction. This book is plagued by contradictions, errors of judgement and profound misinterpretations. Perhaps more importantly for scholars in the field, Dennett's work contains little in the way of new research. In short, since the many severe weaknesses of Dennett's book overshadow whatever merits it may possess, it cannot be called a valuable addition to the existing literature.

Dennett argues that dime museums emerged out of the social and economic chaos of the urban antebellum American landscape. Metropolitan vices such as intemperance, tenements, and early industrialisation, combined with immigration and rural to urban emigration, created a need for "new commercialized amusements" "to knit, momentarily, a heterogeneous audience into a cohesive whole by promoting assimilation, patriotism, and temperance." (4) Dime museums were "extremely democratic," "a great economic equalizer." "Pleasure seekers" of whatever class, whichever race, and of either gender could enter and enjoy the attractions that dime museums had to offer. It was all good fun. As Dennett puts it, in "the middle of the nineteenth century, the dime museum ... emerged as a novel form of recreation that could divert a heterogeneous audience while supporting a new industrial morality of hard work, temperance, and perseverance." (5) Inside dime museums there was a variety of entertainments and amusements ranging from lectures and scientific displays to morality dramas, wax works, and of course, freaks. Finally, Dennett argues, dime museums flourished throughout the nineteenth century, reaching the peak of their popularity from 1880 until 1900 when they fell victim to new forms of electric and mechanical diversions, moving pictures and the like, as well as the splintering of dime museum amusements into individual enterprises such as the freak show, the theatre, and the theme park.

Much of this is problematic. The words that Dennett chooses to describe dime museums are not examined in any detail. Recreation, amusement, temperance, morality, order, diversion, patriotism, and assimilation, each

important and worthy of a great deal of attention and scrutiny, are all taken at face value by Dennett. What does it mean to say that dime museums promoted assimilation? Or patriotism? Or sobriety? What exactly was the audience expected to take away from the show? Without discussing the politics of the language employed by dime museums, we are none the wiser. If, furthermore, these were indeed the kind of values dime museums hoped to impart to their audience, perhaps they did more than simply “divert” men and women from the routine of their day to day lives. Perhaps dime museums had more to do with the construction of the American nineteenth century middle-class identity than Dennett seems to suggest.

This problem is compounded by Dennett’s failure to make distinctions between dime museums of the Bowery and the more famous institutions on Broadway, specifically Barnum’s American Museum. Had she decided to investigate the differences between Bowery museums of the early nineteenth century and the refined and respectable museums like Barnum’s and the Eden Musée, class would have become an issue for her. It should have struck her during the course of her research, as it would most likely strike most people, that if an institution once located only in working-class neighbourhoods and attended only by working-class men, is uprooted from the Bowery and relocated in a more fashionable district, that if it is owned by the middle class, operated by the middle class, and if it consistently portrays middle-class values, fears, and desires, then class just might be something worth investigating. Race and gender are equally under-examined. How did African Americans experience dime museums? *Did* African Americans experience dime museums? How did women react to these “extremely democratic” institutions (such as, for example, the New York Museum of Anatomy, which prohibited women from entering)?

There are, in addition, other more damaging errors. By arguing throughout her book that “entertainment” not “education” was the most important purpose of the dime museum, Dennett consistently undermines her own position. While it is true that dime museums were commercial ventures first and run to make a profit, this does not make them incompatible with instruction. Barnum himself could not have made this point with greater clarity. “My whole aim,” he wrote to a friend in 1850, “is to make my museums totally unobjectionable to the religious and moral community, and at the same time combine sufficient amusement with instruction to please all proper tastes.” (A.H. Saxon, 1983, 43) “Stressing the educational benefits of a visit to a dime museum, however,” Dennett writes, “was largely a simple marketing device ... Whatever learning did in fact take place was almost accidental, for the dime museums were established as family recreational centers, not as temples of learning.” (6) If

indeed museums were designed to entertain, not educate, how exactly did they “knit ... a heterogeneous audience into a cohesive whole” and impart to the audience the sort of values mentioned above?

This is more than a serious contradiction. Dennett’s condescending attitude is just plain wrong. However much the scientific content of dime museums may appear frivolous and dated to Americans of the late twentieth century familiar with NASA and recombinant DNA, that is not the issue. The panoptic architecture of freak shows and dime museums were instrumental in the creation of a public scientific episteme. In other words, dime museums taught people how to know and that knowledge is only attainable according to the strict requirements of the scientific method. Had Dennett considered the way exhibits were arranged, and consulted the works of Jeremy Bentham and Michel Foucault, she might have reached this conclusion. This is an error, furthermore, that highlights many key elements and concepts left out of Dennett’s book. An understanding of freaks requires an understanding of the history of the grotesque and of monstrosity. Comprehending the demise of freak shows and dime museums requires a working knowledge of the rise of the American middle-class, the growth of medical culture, and scientific imperialism. These errors of oversight and omission weaken the book.

The most serious problem here involves evidence. Few primary sources are supplied to support the argument, and little evidence has been culled from outside New York City. More significantly, many of Dennett’s more provocative conclusions, for example her argument that dime museums were “extremely democratic” simply have no foundation in any of the evidence she has gathered. As a result, the book suffers at a fundamental level from a lack of credibility.

The book is not without some redeeming features. Dennett’s middle chapters, specifically those that focus on the various amusements within dime museums, wax works, lecture hall dramas, and late nineteenth-century film, add a great deal to our knowledge of what actually occurred within the walls of the more opulent museums, Barnum’s for example, as far as it goes. But without analysis, her discussion devolves into a mere accumulation of facts without meaning. The strengths of the book are limited.

While this is not an inexcusably terrible book, there are too many errors on Dennett’s part (some just not worth going into, specifically her tired and trite discussion of contemporary freak shows, daytime television talk shows, body piercing, and tattooing) to call this a successful and valuable contribution to the literature. The subject at hand is far richer and much more complex than the treatment it has been given. Concluding her book, Dennett writes, “Historical accuracy is not a concept one associates with dime museums.” (146) Historical

plausibility is not a concept which I can associate with this book. One can only hope that the many questions left unanswered and avenues of research left unexamined will spur future scholars to produce new and better work.

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