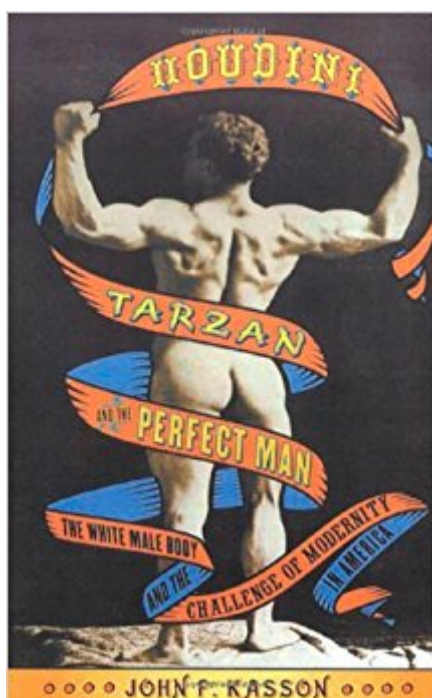


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# Houdini, Tarzan, And The Perfect Man: The White Male Body And The Challenge Of Modernity In America



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"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. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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 Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

While men's history is assumed to be any history excluding women's, this book contains a very

interesting, fresh take on the male identity crisis which occurred during the women's movement in the early years of immigration. The idea of the perfect man, while subjective, encapsulates this crisis and how Sandow, Houdini and Tarzan gave real life examples of what was an abstract idea prior to entrance into the public sphere. This book goes into great details of the three main 'characters' of men who influenced generations of white, Protestant males and the societal expectations while showing the progression of said expectations to new levels. For gender studies history students, this is a wonderful addition to the knowledge base required for such study.

A must read for every man (especially bodybuilders and sportsmen) to see how western society has developed into what the ancient Greeks had arrived upon centuries ago. The blend of a good positive attitude about a man's mind and his physique and then the ramifications when a good thing can go bad if taken to extremes. Scads of books have been written about the social evolution about women's roles in western society, but no one has rendered anything about men's perception of themselves especially about a man's image about himself as a sexual image in the media till this book came on the scene!

Great book for research.

Very interesting book. I am a Houdini fan and grew up reading the Tarzan series.

excellent

INTERESTING BOOK, MY HUSBAND PLAYED TARZAN IN A 1959 MGM REMAKE OF TARZAN THE APE MAN. SO HE IS ALWAYS INTERESTED IN ANYTHING TARZAN. WE ALSO GAVE A COPY TO A FRIEND/TARZAN COLLECTOR.

I read this book years ago when the hardbound edition first came out. At that time, it just struck me as interesting light reading. But since then I have thought about this book quite often. There's more to this book than "interesting light reading," which is why I'm reviewing the book after several years. The concept of an ideal man is at least as old as the Greeks. Greek statuary was admired and revered for its depiction of idealized youths. Kasson traces the late 19th/early 20th century take on this idea by focusing on three men who represented different versions of a "perfect man." Early bodybuilder Eugene Sandow created a sensation in Vaudeville with his act in which he not only

lifted huge weights, but also impersonated Greek statues come to life while wearing only a fig leaf. Then there's Tarzan, a fictional character created by Edgar Rice Burroughs, who is not only physically perfect, but he is uncorrupted by modernity. Tarzan caught fire with a generation of urban Americans nostalgic for a less sophisticated past. But could a modern-day Tarzan survive in the urban jungle? He would need to be wiliier. Enter Houdini, an exhibitionist like Sandow, who used his sex appeal to sell his illusion and escape act. Kasson doesn't really draw much of a conclusion from all this. But he presents the material in such a way that the reader draws his own conclusions. The section dealing with Burroughs was the part of the book that I've thought about most, because it deals with the role of magazines in American culture. Kasson casually notes that magazines were invented only to get people to look at advertising. Now this for me was a bombshell, although I did not realize it at the time. I kept seeing evidence of its truth when new magazines debuted to popularize products of dubious worth (i.e., cigar-smoking and tattoos). This is quick and entertaining reading that has far more depth than at first appears. Worth reading. Four stars.

Wonderful documentation of how we perceive ourselves as a modern man. Since 90% of the media is devoted to on or about women this book is definitely a breath of fresh air in its focus on little explored territory regarding the sociological development and in some instances retardation of men in our western society. John Kasson is a wonderful writer and historian in the best sense of the word as he appears genuinely excited about his discoveries and piecing together of his thesis. That combination never misses! I'd recommend this highly to anyone as a gift to a young man when he hits his later teens or to any man who has pumped the weights and read great books-ergo: Brain & Brawn. Worth the read!

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