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# Miracle At Coney Island: How A Sideshow Doctor Saved Thousands Of Babies And Transformed American Medicine (Kindle Single)



## Synopsis

How did thousands of premature infants come to be exhibited at America's most popular amusement park? In *Miracle at Coney Island: How a Sideshow Doctor Saved Thousands of Babies and Transformed American Medicine*, Claire Prentice uncovers the incredible true story of Martin Couney, the "incubator doctor." Couney ran his incubator facility for premature babies at Coney Island from 1903 to 1943 and set up similar exhibits at World's Fairs and amusement parks across America, and in London, Paris, Mexico and Brazil. Couney's techniques were advanced for the time and his facility was expensive to run. But he didn't charge the parents of the preemies a penny; instead the public paid to see them. He claimed to have a survival rate of 85 percent. By contrast, most mainstream doctors in the early part of the 20th century regarded premature babies as "weaklings" and did little or nothing to save them. Prentice's meticulous research unravels the mystery of Couney's origins, and reveals that the "incubator doctor" was not all that he seemed. She brings one of the most extraordinary stories in American medicine to life through interviews with Couney's former "incubator babies." Claire Prentice is an award-winning journalist and the author of *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island: Headhunters, Luna Park, and the Man Who Pulled Off the Spectacle of the Century*. She has contributed to the BBC, the Washington Post, the Times of London, The Guardian, the Smithsonian magazine, the Huffington Post, NPR, Marie Claire, and the Sydney Morning Herald.

## Book Information

File Size: 1378 KB

Print Length: 96 pages

Publication Date: May 17, 2016

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B01FV5QU5M

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #12,993 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #2  
inÃ  Kindle Store > Kindle Singles > The Sciences #10 inÃ  Kindle Store > Kindle Nonfiction  
Singles > Reporting #11 inÃ  Kindle Store > Kindle Singles > History

## **Customer Reviews**

I can't tell you how many times I've read about these babies at Coney Island and elsewhere while reading other things, whether it was books or magazine articles, or encyclopedias. So when I saw this book on the 'doctor' who started all this, of course, I grabbed it. The book didn't disappoint too much. It was very interesting...I'm always amazed at the types of things that people got away with prior to even the 1960's. Considering I've read so much about eugenics and the Nazis (and written about all of this and the disabled in papers), you would think nothing would surprise me at this point. At least this time, the man involved in all this was trying to do something good, besides making a profit. The author makes it clear from her research that Dr. Couney really was not an official doctor. Which definitely raises the question...how did Couney get away with all of this? Even though there are much stricter laws on the books concerning doctors, we still have people out there who have no degrees who present themselves as having the background and training to treat people with things like cancers. But back in the early 1900's, we did not have the access to information that we have now, as well as not having the laws to protect those who are unable to protect themselves. Couney performed a necessary role in spite of his lack of credentials. Hospitals and doctors were not trying to save the lives of premature infants at this time period. They thought it was a waste of time and resources to even try. But Couney's show demonstrated to doctors and hospitals that these lives could be saved under certain conditions. Incubators and special care through feedings could preserve the lives of babies who were below the normal weight of six pounds. My big complaint about the book was the lack of information about the scientific aspects of the incubators. Where did Couney first get his incubators? Were they already available somewhere? Or did he make any changes to incubators? There was absolutely no information about how incubators came about, and very little about the science behind saving these babies lives. As someone who teaches science, I really would like to have that information.

An interesting read, but fairly flaky on the facts. For the simple fact that the Mrs. Prentice did not bother to get someone who knew also French and German and thus only did really research the English language material available. If she had, she would have found out immediately that the French doctor who invented the incubator was someone she did not even mention in her book and

who was actually the one in charge of the exhibit in Berlin. There are actual photographs there where the people who worked on the exhibit can be seen. The Germans kept very detailed material on the case which has not been lost in WWII. What is more, if she would have bothered a bit more with the Jewish angle of the Mr. Couney's background, then she would have discovered the reason why he could not have studied medicine, or at least not in the form that one would have expected, but that he did have access to both Berlin higher politics and England exhibits through other prominent members of his native town. It is likely that those could have backed him up should anyone from the US have enquired during his life time about him. Still, interesting read if one has never known before about how the incubator came into being and became a standard fare for premies.

This is a very interesting and bizarre tale. Today it sounds so strange that premature infants were used in a side show - dare I say freak show - at world fairs and Coney Island. A lot of things people used to do back in the early 20th century seems odd now when one looks back on it. But this actually turned out well for the infants, most of whom lived. Human life was not seen as valuable back then as it is now. Even in the 1950's parents did not hover around their children as they do nowadays. Kids were allowed to bounce around the car like pennies in a tin can and nothing was considered as to safety. The author writes well and the book moves quickly.

There is some great research here. That Couney/Cohen never received any medical degree being the big reveal. Finding and interviewing his former patients of the infantorium is quite a coup, but not being able to post the pictures of those patients is a loss to the reader after she wrote the photos are proudly displayed in their homes. I've been interested and trying to find out more about Couney's life for almost a decade after reading about the infantorium when my son was born premature. Kudos to Claire Prentice for doing a good job in telling the world about him in this book. One big mystery has always remained for me though, what happened to his daughter Hildegarde? She seems to have completely disappeared.

What an amazing story of how a Sideshow Doctor saved thousands of babies, some still living! My parents often spoke of the babies saved by this man who invented incubators and the many babies who lived in them! Had to read every word of this historical book! An incredible story!

This is an astonishing look at a relatively recent period of time where the lines between charity,

public interest, science and spectacles of amusement were blurred, and yet in a fascinating way served to advance best practices for the tiniest and most vulnerable among us. The author makes some interesting observations as to motives at the end, but admits that they are merely speculative. Nonetheless, this book is well-written with easy readability about an historical medical advance we might otherwise know nothing about.

I loved it, had no idea this occurred. My sister and I both were in incubators, she being a preemie, me low birth weight, but in the 50s. What a great man and what a great movie this would make. We need more heros like him!

This is a short book that is fun to read. It tells how a sideshow at Coney Island was pivotal in proving the incubator was a tool that could help premature babies survive. Many babies were save at Coney Island and in the beginning Coney Island was one of the few places that had the incubators to save preemies.

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