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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

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## Customer Reviews

I came across this book after hearing, "My Life Under Glass" on Radio 4 a documentary about Dr Martin Couney's Infant Incubator exhibit, bizarrely situated at Coney Island. This is the story of how a sideshow doctor saved thousands of lives and transformed medicine, though exhibiting premature babies in a sideshow exhibit. From 1904 to 1943 the crowds flocked to see a medical miracle - while the parents of the babies were never charged for the care, the cost being met by the entrance fee, the question is whether they were exploited. Indeed, this is central to the book "was Dr Couney a showman and a charlatan or a dedicated life saver? Although this is a kindle single, it actually covers a lot in terms of the history of the early care of premature babies and of Couney's actual life story. We begin with Martin Couney's (or Cohen's) early life. How he told his story (although, as we later learn, he had the showman's ability to reinvent himself) from being born in Alsace-Lorraine and studying under obstetrician Pierre Budin. How he was sent to the Berlin Industrial Exposition in 1896 and found himself between a Congo village and Tyrolean yodellers in "The Child Hatchery". Therefore, the linking of science and technology and entertainment was one that was familiar to him. However, when he attempted to take the exhibit to London, doctors were not keen that babies should be used as a sideshow attraction and he had to bring premature babies from France. By the time Dr Couney arrived in Nebraska, desperate parents were arriving with their babies, looking for hope. At that time, premature babies really had no medical treatment available. Dr Couney's exhibit "his incubators which kept babies warm and free from germs" seemed to work.

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. Courney 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 Courney'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.

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