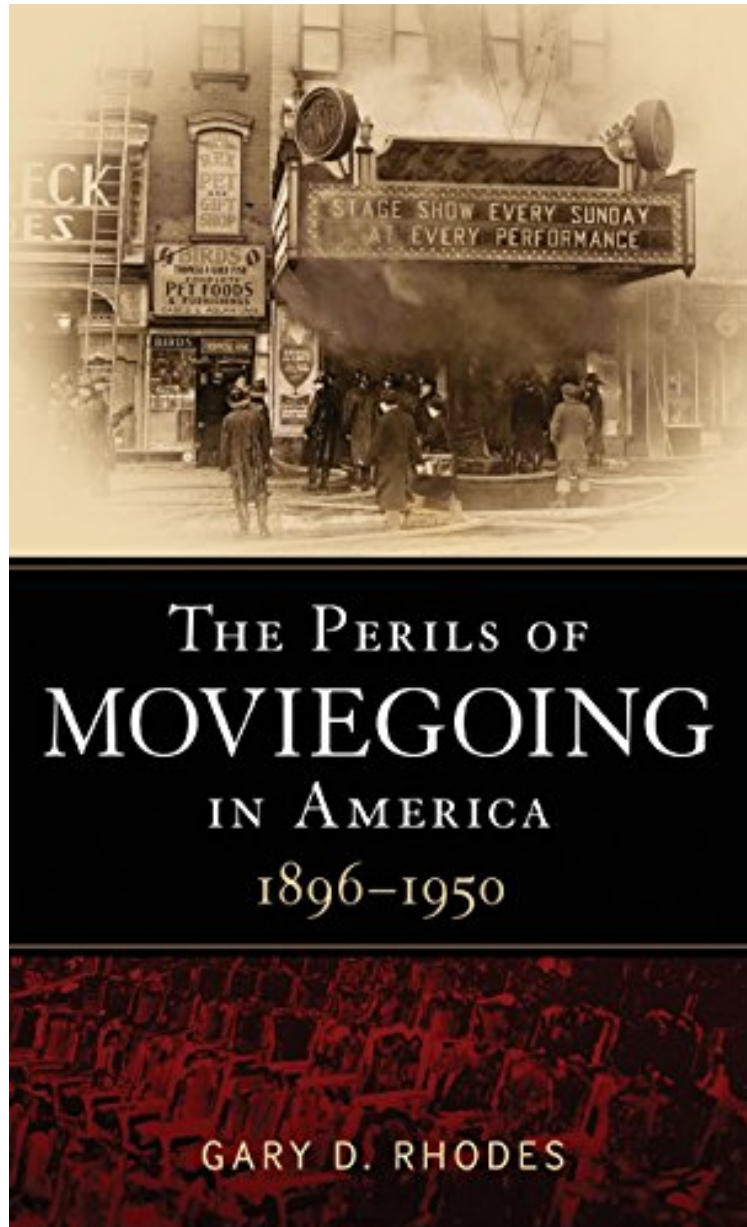


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## The Perils of Moviegoing in America: 1896-1950

*Gary D. Rhodes*

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**Gary D. Rhodes : The Perils of Moviegoing in America: 1896-1950** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Perils of Moviegoing in America: 1896-1950:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Enjoy the show--but keep your guard up!By David J. HoganDetails

of movie production--casting, shooting, set design, special effects, and so on--are often fascinating, but there is another equally intriguing aspect of the film business: exhibition. In the early days of commercial cinema, exhibition venues were independently owned and often makeshift. Around 1900, converted storefronts began to give way to purpose-built nickelodeons and, later, movie theaters that resemble those that we know today. Tough entrepreneurs put together local and regional theater chains. In the 1920s, major movie studios established their own exhibition arms consisting of theaters that stretched across the nation. Before the silent era was out, filmgoers could sit back, relax--and experience the worst days of their lives. The unwary might suffer the depredations of pickpockets. The sidewalk box office might be stuck up by armed robbers. Ticket sellers, ushers, and unlucky patrons sometimes lost their lives in these attacks. Audiences might perish in labor- or politically-inspired bombings. Patrons' vision might be ruined by "the diseased eye" attributed to screen flicker and general eyestrain. Substandard theater ventilation systems freely recirculated influenza, smallpox, and other potentially deadly ailments. So-called Bank Nights and other promotions often raised the ire of anti-lottery forces. Sometimes, the in-theater giveaways dissolved in shouting, pushing and shoving, and worse. Female patrons might expect to be bothered by "mashers," fondled by deviants, and even led into lives of prostitution. Lax or nonexistent fire codes encouraged awful conflagrations that could gut a large theater, and kill nearly everyone inside. Sunday "blue laws" pitted exhibitors against city councils and other pious gasbags that objected to movie entertainment on the Day of Rest. And we thought the goof with the cell phone was a nuisance. *The Perils of Moviegoing in America, 1896-1950* utilizes lively, engaging prose and scrupulous research to highlight human folly and the drama of the unexpected. Gary D. Rhodes has put together a unique look at a seldom-discussed, and hugely important, part of film history. Illustrated with scores of vintage news photos, advertisements, newspaper accounts, flyers, cartoons, and mug shots.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. An exciting history of movie spectatorship born of profound research. By Michael Lee "The Peril of Moviegoing in America" offers a carefully researched and thoroughly readable page-turner of a history of the dangers, both perceived and actual, associated with attending the movies in the first decades of the cinema. The book will appeal to two distinct audiences. The first are film historians and students of cinema who will benefit enormously from the author's hard work of combing through tens of thousands of newspapers, trade magazines and other documents associated with his topic. The second are readers generally curious to learn more about the lurid side of early cinema spectatorship. For this second group, Rhodes deploys hundreds of true stories of crime, sexual adventurism, tragedy, disease and the varied responses these ills prompted in the circles of power both religious and secular. My sister, a non-academic, called it "a surprising page turner" when she read it over the holidays. While an academic like me cannot imagine teaching the history of film without it now that it exists. Rhodes organized his book into seven discrete chapters each dealing rather exhaustively but never exhaustingly with the seven most compelling perils associated with his topic. The first of these is "Conflagration" an amazing overview of theater fires, a plague on early cinema for reasons inherent to the medium insofar as hot lights must come in close proximity to flammable materials such as celluloid often in makeshift projection booths in buildings designed for some purpose other than screening films. The next, "Thieves Among Us", chronicles various robberies at theaters including three detailed case studies of events typifying the problem. "It's Catching" looks at theater history from the standpoint of communicable diseases and even examines the illness "picturitis" or severe eyestrain that some medical experts felt compelled to warn their patients about during the early days of film. "Bombs Away" looks at theater bombings and begins with a discussion of how civilian authorities tried to preempt war-related bombings. The most interesting aspect of this chapter concerns labor relations and the use of stink bombs when projectionist unions tried to disrupt exhibitions during strikes. Chapter Five considers concerns both real and imaginary about the movie theater as darkened venue for sexual encounters. Thwarting mashers and the efforts of theater owners to curb their industry falling into ill-repute makes for some fun reading. "The Sunday Blues" concerns so-called "blue laws" designed to address the movies' bad influence on morality. This chapter will please readers interested in the intersection of the secular and religious spheres. The book closes with "Something for Nothing" about efforts by theater owners to draw audiences with giveaways, "bank nights", and gambling games like screen-o. Authorities often worried that these giveaways amounted to legalized gambling, so inevitable clashes followed. Each of these chapters can be read individually, but the book works best taken as a whole. All together it tells the amazing story of how cinema survived a troubled infancy to become the dominant force in popular culture at least until radio or television rose to challenge it. Oddly what emerges is a tribute to the enduring fascination movies had for Americans, a fascination that despite hyperbolic press attention to all dangers real and imaginary, the movies marched on. Rhodes uses a fine comb to locate his facts as evidenced by 117 pages of endnotes laying out his careful methods of research. While this will impress and reassure academic readers, these endnotes do not in any way diminish the joy of general readers who are under no compunction to pour over Rhodes' heroic trophy case of primary source documentation. The book's a winner. It should transform every college course on film history by placing flesh on the bones of the story of early cinema spectatorship. The book is handsomely mounted by Continuum Press and contains splendid illustrations.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Gem of a Book! By Brendan This book is a must-have for anybody interested in early American cinema. Completely original and fantastically researched. As described on the back cover: "During the first fifty years of the American cinema, the act of going to the movies was a

risky process, fraught with a number of possible physical and moral dangers. Film fires were rampant, claiming many lives, as were movie theatre robberies, which became particularly common during the Great Depression. Audiences also confronted an array of perceived moral dangers. Blue Laws prohibited Sunday film screenings, though theatres ignored them in many areas, sometimes resulting in the arrest of entire audiences."This book is very different from anything else on early cinema and is a great read. Highly recommended.

During the first fifty years of the American cinema, the act of going to the movies was a risky process, fraught with a number of possible physical and moral dangers. Film fires were rampant, claiming many lives, as were movie theatre robberies, which became particularly common during the Great Depression. Labor disputes provoked a large number of movie theatre bombings, while low-level criminals like murderers, molesters, and prostitutes plied their trades in the darkened auditoriums. That was all in addition to the spread of disease, both real (as in the case of influenza) and imagined ("movie eyestrain"). Audiences also confronted an array of perceived moral dangers. Blue Laws prohibited Sunday film screenings, though theatres ignored them in many areas, sometimes resulting in the arrests of entire audiences. Movie theatre lotteries became another problem, condemned by politicians and clergymen throughout America for being immoral gambling. *The Perils of Moviegoing in America: 1896-1950* provides the first history of the many threats that faced film audiences, threats which claimed hundreds, if not thousands, of lives.

About the Author Gary D. Rhodes, PhD, is currently Head of Area for Film Studies at The Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is the author of *Lugosi* (McFarland, 1997) and *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film* (McFarland, 2002). Rhodes has also written and directed a number of documentary films.