

argues in his engaging foreword, Sunday was, “at the core of his being, an insecure, lonely boy who needed mothering” (xxiv). A wistful ribbon winds its way through the text, as Sunday looks back to his orphaned Iowa youth for better morals and stouter men. In this rendering, his grandfather is the prototype: “Granddad wore a coonskin cap, rawhide boots, blue jeans, and said ‘done hit’ instead of ‘did it,’ ‘come’ instead of ‘came,’ and ‘seen’ instead of ‘saw.’ He drank coffee out of his saucer and ate peas with his knife. He had no ‘soup-and-fish’ suit to wear, so he did not go” (3). Sunday’s later eschewal of fine talk and complex theology is rooted in this primal Iowan.

The subsequent text explains only the first half of Sunday’s life, offering sweet anecdotes as plot points from his childhood to baseball career to evangelistic campaigns. “I quit playing ball when I was a top-notch and went into Y.M.C.A. work in Chicago,” he announces (59). The last 30 years of his life are summarized in ten pages, concluding quickly with a summary reminder to his readers that they ought only to “live the Christian life” (86). Perhaps short shrift is given to the bulk of his fame because it was then when his narrative became less easily Christian in rendering, when the tugs (material and psychological) of celebrity undermined any possibility for believable charm. Most infamous were the struggles and loss of his children, who received ample funds but little attention from their touring parents. As a result, their early deaths—to multiple sclerosis, suicide, drunk driving, and war—are painful counterexamples to Sunday’s beatific sermonic storytelling. The promises of Sunday’s family values collapsed in his own progeny during the years of his greatest success. Celebrity here has a familiar tone, doling as much joy and material pleasure as it does internal strife and splashy suffering. To remember celebrity, now and then, is to remember the cruel balance of prominence, offering glossy pictures, brandy snifters, and the inevitable insults of Satan’s playground.

The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance, by Charlotte M. Canning. *Studies in Theatre History and Culture*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005. 284 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$34.95 cloth.

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The culturally influential circuit chautauqua, a midwestern-centered institution that eventually brought educational and motivational

speakers and variety entertainment to small towns across America, eluded serious scholarly attention until Charlotte Canning wrote *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance*. Andrew Rieser has written a remarkable study of the New York Chautauqua Institution from which the circuits sprang, and John Tapia and James Schulz have written useful popular overviews of circuit chautauqua, but Canning's work is the first critical book-length study of this ubiquitous early twentieth-century phenomenon. As such, it provides the academic or popular reader with a greater understanding of the nature and impact of circuit chautauqua. Most of Canning's sources are drawn from the extensive Redpath and Horner Collections in the University of Iowa Libraries' Special Collections Department, an appropriate home for the collection since the circuit system began in Iowa and was especially popular in the state.

Circuit chautauqua was part of the chautauqua movement, which began in 1874, when a week-long educational and cultural retreat was held for Sunday School teachers on the shores of Lake Chautauqua in New York. Soon, community chautauquas emulating the Lake Chautauqua institution sprang up. In 1905 commercial lecture promoters created the circuit system, which began to offer a slate of speakers and culturally refined entertainment to the community chautauquas and also to towns that had not previously hosted chautauquas. The circuits largely replaced the community-run chautauquas.

The Chautauqua institution in New York often worked to distance itself from the circuits, and those who ran community chautauquas sometimes disparaged the circuit chautauqua as little more than traveling shows in fancy clothing. Yet the circuits had lasting cultural influence, which often at least partially lived up to their stated ideals of promoting cultural enlightenment and informed citizenship.

Canning aims to explore circuit chautauqua in a way that will reach both popular and academic audiences. To reach out to general readers, she has kept the book to an easily readable length and has included a wealth of photographs of chautauqua performers, grounds, audiences, and programs. She provides insights for scholars from the fields of theater history, cultural studies, and history by using the concepts of performance and, to a lesser extent, community, to frame her exploration of the influence of circuit chautauqua. These concepts allow her to show the key role of circuit chautauqua in shaping the idea, and the identity, of Americanness as middle-class, white, midwestern, and rural. Although this understanding of American identity was, arguably, becoming obsolete by the early twentieth century, its hold on the American psyche continues to this day.

Canning uses the concept of performance broadly, focusing on ways Americanness was performed, created, and shaped on the chautauqua circuits, both on and off the stage. The audience, the local promoters, and the chautauqua business personnel as well as the stage performers all took part in this performance. The first three chapters focus on the performance of community, in terms of the national community, the white midwestern community, and the seemingly transitory, but also permanent, community of the chautauqua itself. The next two chapters focus on performances occurring on chautauqua stages, specifically the performance of oratory and the later introduction of full-scale drama in the form of plays. Canning ends the book with a chapter exploring some contemporary remembrances of chautauqua, suggesting that those memories do not fully reflect chautauqua's long-term impact.

Overall, this book succeeds in providing an enriched understanding of chautauqua as a cultural institution that promoted democracy, yet was often exclusionary in its definition of that concept. In aiming to reach both popular and academic audiences, the book falls somewhat short of fully meeting the needs of either. General readers might wish for a simpler, more narrative organizational structure, while academics are likely to feel that more in-depth scholarly analysis is needed in a number of areas. For example, the complexities of circuit chautauqua's relationship to respectability and to consumerism merit greater attention and more nuanced discussion. More in-depth gender analysis would provide a great deal of insight into this institution that was in many ways female-centered. Canning focuses more on the control exercised by male managers than on the ways that chautauqua's programming and physical space were fundamentally shaped by the predominance of women in the audience. She also states that there is "no evidence . . . that any African American woman was ever featured as a serious lecturer," but Mary Church Terrell, in her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1968), wrote about speaking at chautauquas. Throughout the book, one senses that Canning's research, while extensive, was far from comprehensive. A bibliography would also have enhanced the book's usefulness. Still, the author makes no claim to comprehensiveness, and the book does contribute to our understanding of the early twentieth-century United States. I recommend it to academic and popular readers alike as a thoughtful introduction to the fascinating phenomenon of circuit chautauqua.