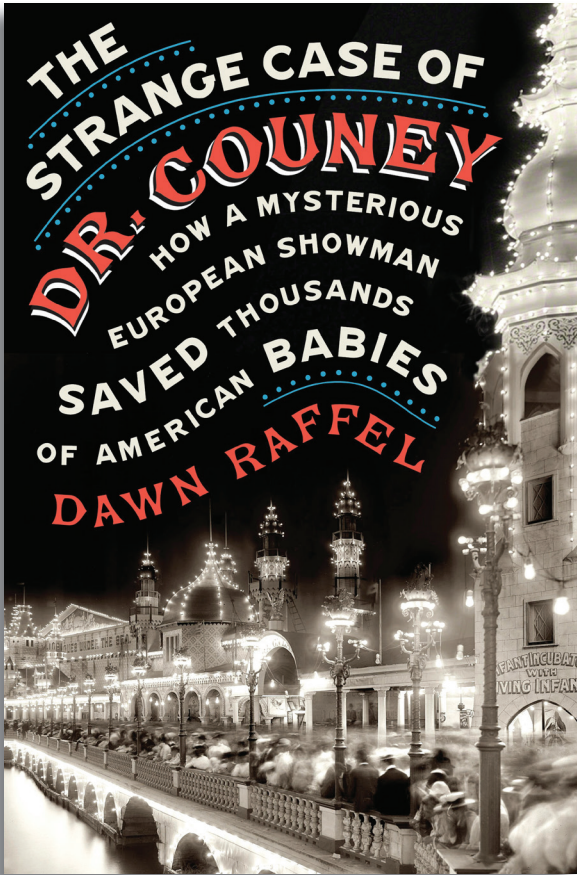


THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. COUNEY

*How a Mysterious European Showman
Saved Thousands of American Babies*

By **DAWN RAFFEL**



This is the extraordinary tale of how a mysterious immigrant “doctor” became the revolutionary innovator of saving premature babies—by placing them in incubators in World’s Fair side shows (including the Chicago “Century of Progress” World’s Fair of 1933-34), and on Coney Island and Atlantic City.

What kind of doctor puts his patients on display?

As Dawn Raffel artfully recounts, Dr. Couney figured out he could use incubators and careful nursing to keep previously doomed infants alive, and at the same time make good money displaying these babies alongside sword swallowers, bearded ladies, and burlesque shows. How this turn-of-the-twentieth-century émigré became the savior to families with premature infants, known then as “weaklings”—while ignoring the scorn of the medical establishment and fighting the climate of eugenics—is one of the most astounding stories of modern medicine. And as readers will find, Dr. Couney, for all his opportunistic entrepreneurial gusto, is a surprisingly appealing character, someone who genuinely cared for the well-being of his tiny patients. But he had something to hide.

Drawing on historical documents, original reportage, and interviews with surviving patients, acclaimed journalist and magazine editor Dawn Raffel tells the marvelously eccentric story of Couney’s mysterious carnival career, his larger-than-life personality and his unprecedented success as the savior of tiny babies.

Blue Rider Press/Hardcover/August 2018/Nonfiction
6” x 9”/306 pages/9780399175749/\$27 US/\$36.00 CAN

Dawn Raffel’s illustrated memoir, *The Secret Life of Objects* was a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller. Previous books include a critically acclaimed novel, *Carrying the Body* and two story collections, *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe* and *In the Year of Long Division*. A longtime magazine editor, she helped launch *O, The Oprah Magazine*, where she was executive articles editor. She has also taught creative writing in the MFA program at Columbia University; at summer literary seminars in St. Petersburg, Russia; Montreal; and Vilnius, Lithuania; and at the Center for Fiction in New York. She now works as an independent editor and book reviewer.



Photo: Claire Holt

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. COUNEY* BY DAWN RAFFEL

“With colorful descriptions of the carnival world and the medical marvels of early neonatology, Raffel makes a fascinating case for this unusual pioneer’s rightful place in medical history.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

“Many readers will share Raffel’s admiration of Couney ... The book’s title is no hype; this is a startling account of an improbable huckster who made his living promoting a lifesaving device.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

“Raffel’s research is impressive ... her interviews with Couney’s former patients are inspiring and the numerous historic photographs are amazing and complement the story quite effectively. The topic is compelling on many levels, and Raffel’s arresting and illuminating work of hidden history should not be missed.”

—**Booklist**

“Long before modern neonatal clinics made it possible and even commonplace to save premature babies, Dr. Couney’s “infant incubators” welcomed the “tiniest bits of humanity” into the world with two drops of brandy and a show name. A fantastic, carnivalesque story filled with twists and surprises, *The Strange Case of Dr. Couney* entertains with a delightful assortment of historical oddities and a serious, sobering look at health practices, missteps, and unexpectedly resourceful advances in American medicine.”

—**Kristen Iversen**, author of *Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats*

“This astonishing new book will be an instant classic of literary nonfiction—painstakingly researched and written with lyricism and irony. Dawn Raffel has pulled the curtain on one of the most remarkable rescue missions in history. Over seven thousand innocent lives saved at a time when medical science turned its treasonous back.”

—**Dennis Covington**, National Book Award finalist, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*

“In carnival midways in the early decades of the 20th century—amid carousels, elephants, fire-eaters, and pie-eating contests—a gentleman of indeterminate origin, of unspecified medical background, displayed premature human babies in incubators that looked like arcade games. They were real babies, not wax; struggling to live; at home among the “Human Oddities!” of the side-shows only because preemies weighing two or three pounds at birth didn’t ever survive, had rarely been seen. Fair-goers bought tickets and lined up to gawk at them, and were asked to refrain from trying to reach in and poke the infants. Though Dr. Couney (both the prefix and the name were inventions) was more showman than doctor, he saved the babies’ lives by the thousands and pioneered American neonatology. His story is richly told in a book that savors every honk of John Philip Sousa from a marching band, every salty crunch of carnival popcorn, every sparkle of a Ferris wheel turning in a night sky, and the desperate hopes of parents traveling from their lying-in hospitals by bus or subway to the carnivals, carrying their premature newborns in shoe boxes and hat boxes or inside their coats.”

—**Melissa Fay Greene**, two-time National Book Award finalist for *Praying for Sheetrock* and *The Temple Bombing*

“A compelling historic mystery uncovered.”

—**Saturday Evening Post**
