

# Capsule reviews of 'Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy: The Tragic Life of an Outsider Artist'; 'I Don't Know: In Praise of Admitting Ignorance (Except When You Shouldn't)'; 'Room 1219: The Life of Fatty Arbuckle, the Mysterious Death of Virginia Rappe, and the Scandal That Changed Hollywood'; and 'Raising Henry: A Memoir of Motherhood, Disability, and Discovery'

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## ABSTRACT

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## FULL TEXT

HENRY DARGER,  
THROWAWAY BOY:  
The Tragic Life  
of an Outsider Artist  
By Jim Elledge  
Overlook/Duckworth  
396 pp. \$29.95

Henry Darger was known only as a hermit-like eccentric in his Chicago neighborhood until after his death in 1973, when his landlord uncovered a trove of extraordinary artwork, including three long, fantastically strange, illustrated manuscripts. The most famous was "The Realms of the Unreal," an epic drama in which cruel, child-killing Glandelinians attack the innocent children of "the Christian nation Angelinia." The book's heroes are the Vivians, sexually ambiguous siblings who battle to protect the Angelinian children. Both rapturous and disturbing, the illustrations' violence and repeated depictions of nude children prompted more than a few critics to wonder whether the artist himself was a pedophile, or even a killer. A new biography passionately debunks these notions. Elledge, whose previous books explore myths and literature of sexuality and gender, places Darger in the context of pre-Stonewall gay America, chronicling a life that included a decades-long relationship with William Schloeder. Although the two men never lived together, their romance reveals itself in small, heart-tugging clues, such as when Darger wrote Schloeder's name on a form asking for a "Person Who Will Always Know Your Address." But the core of this book -- and of Darger's -- is in Henry's unbearably sad childhood. Darger's mother died in childbirth when he was four (Henry's sister was immediately placed with adoptive parents). Henry's alcoholic father placed his son in a series

of institutions, culminating in the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children (a psychiatrist said that then-12-year-old's masturbation habit would inevitably make him an "invert," or homosexual). Small for his age, Darger was bullied by his peers and almost certainly beaten by adult staff members; he was likely initiated into a sexuality that was by turns coerced and consensual. It was his own victimhood as a child, Elledge argues, that imbues Darger's art with its dizzying blend of anger, compassion, and hope.

The fear of looking dumb, Leah Hager Cohen argues, is pervasive and powerful (just look at the enduring fable of the Emperor's New Clothes), and it's something we should get over. Releasing our fear of not-knowing allows us to truly learn new things, she writes, because "what constitutes wisdom is at least in part our ability to be clear-sighted about our ignorance." In this slim yet expansive new book, Cohen spins an elegant web of reasons to embrace (or at least endure) doubt: because when we are less certain we are more open to one another; because when we listen rather than argue, we can expand our understanding of the world. In the end, she's arguing for an almost spiritual abstention from absolutism: "The opposite of fundamentalism is the willingness to say 'I don't know.'"

For most of us, Fatty Arbuckle's is one of those names that rings a bell -- a warning bell -- but delivers only the faintest details. In 1921, though, it was big news when Arbuckle was arrested following the death of a woman four days after Arbuckle allegedly molested her at a drunken party at a San Francisco hotel. Arbuckle was then one of silent film's biggest stars, a comedic talent on par with Keaton and Chaplin. All of that was about to change. "ARBUCKLE, THE BEAST," shouted a representative headline. One religious leader charged that Arbuckle "assaulted public decency and morality. He has betrayed the thousands of little children who laughed at his antics." Fearing the Arbuckle scandal would turn away fans, the young film industry rushed to clean up its act, onscreen at least, hiring US Postmaster Will H. Hays to craft a code sanitizing its movies.

Film historian Greg Merritt gives readers a deeply textured portrait of a long-ago Hollywood, one that cranked out vaudeville-inspired comic shorts that hummed with "car chases, foot chases, custard pies to the kisser." He also meditates on success and fame while sketching the lives of Rappe, the circumstances of whose death remain an enduring mystery, and Arbuckle, whose career as an actor never recovered, despite eventually being acquitted in Rappe's death. Their lives are strangely parallel -- both were orphaned young and scrambled to survive in a hardscrabble new century -- and Merritt portrays each with a sort of sad sympathy.

When her second son was born, Rachel Adams writes, he had the same "scaly newborn feet" as his older brother but still, "there was something about him that didn't quite make sense to me." Henry had Down syndrome, she soon learned, and in this quietly moving memoir, Adams writes about coming to terms with her son's diagnosis, education, limitations, and identity. A professor whose own research focused on the tradition of the freak show, Adams is well-suited to explore the meanings of disability -- and her affection for the "rebellious individuality" of the so-called freaks gives her a kind of courage with which to help her son. Generous and honest, Adams politely rejects some of the frames others want to put on her family. Henry isn't an angel, she isn't a saint. "We didn't plan for things to happen this way," she writes, "but our lives weren't tragic."

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