



Eyeing the Flash: The Making of a Carnival Con Artist

Peter Fenton

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The year is 1963, the setting small-town Michigan. Pete Fenton is just another well-mannered math student until he meets Jackie Barron, a teenage grifter who introduces him to the carnival underworld -- and lures him with the cons, the double-dealing, and, most of all, the easy money. The memoir of a shy middle-class kid turned first-class huckster, *Eyeing the Flash* is highly unorthodox, and utterly compelling.

Eyeing the Flash: The Making of a Carnival Con Artist Details

Date : Published March 6th 2006 by Simon Schuster (first published December 21st 2004)

ISBN : 9780743258555

Author : Peter Fenton

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Crime, True Crime, Biography Memoir, History, Biography



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From Reader Review Eyeing the Flash: The Making of a Carnival Con Artist for online ebook

Shawna says

I had hoped for more depth, for Jackie to be a redeemable scoundrel, for young Pete to learn some life lessons from the grizzled old souls who ran the midway, but this was not to be. Everyone in this story seems just plain awful. Perhaps that's the point. I didn't engage with Peter or feel like I was ever on his side. The story also had moments where I just flat out thought, "That never happened." (Example: the scene where the degenerate gambler lunch lady comes out with a special gourmet lunch she made for Jackie, who shared with Pete: a tremendous amount of food, including curly fries. First, no one in the kitchen questioned why she was cooking up all that pricey food? Was there no inventory or budget at that school? And second, apparently there were curly fries in a school cafeteria in a small town in Michigan in the 60s. I'm skeptical.)

Considering the author was writing about a few months of his life that happened over 40 years ago, it stands to reason that more than a little was reinvented to fill the gaps of time and memory. Also considering he was a trained conman, I took the stories with a grain of salt, and I think that is largely why I didn't enjoy the book more—I didn't feel I could trust this guy to tell me the truth, so I never let my guard down.

The book did bring back memories of Coke bottle and Find the Duck carnival games from my childhood, and the Himalayan ride he describes – I remember it too, it seemed like a furious flashing nightmare – guaranteed to induce seizure or vomiting.

I think the author might have been better served to turn his experiences into a novel. And actually when I saw that he had written for the National Enquirer I really hoped he'd tell us about that at some point in the book, but alas it was not to be.

Jilly says

I think this guy used to come into my parent's drive-in. Really.

Bookmarks Magazine says

Fenton (*Truth or Tabloid?*) came of age at the carnival. When he left his small-town, middle-class Michigan home for life on the road when he was 17, he began his transformation from math geek to con artist (and eventual reporter for *The National Enquirer*). Critics agree that Fenton tells his tale of carnival life (or, as *The Oregonian* notes, "a sort of evil Horatio Alger story") with humor and insight. Who else would admit to cheating small children out of their last nickels? They also praise Fenton's polished writing and fast-paced, twisted dialogue and scenes. A few question the full veracity of the story, but never mind. Fenton never fails to entertain—and teach us a thing or two about a con man's tricks.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Patrick says

This volume is a true story of how one individual became a side-show con artist. It describes the techniques the 'carnies' use to empty the pockets of the rubes that enter the tents of the traveling fairs, carnivals and circuses.

I recommend this book if you want a 'beyond the canvas' look at what it takes to scam the innocent and live the life of a showman...on a fairly low level of the entertainment business.

Heather says

I rather enjoyed this look into the bizarre world of a carnival con artist.

Kathleen says

Eyeing the Flash is subtitled The Making of a Carnival Con Artist, and boy does it live up to its name. It's a pretty quick and weird read chronicalling Fenton's descent from a straight-A student to a carnival huckster, with the help of his friend Jackie Barron, and pretty unusually it doesn't follow him back up. He talks about con tricks and carnivals in great detail, but skims over most of his life that doesn't have to do with that, which I think is pretty admirable. I also think it's pretty sneaky-- he never outright says he's telling the truth, so how do you know he's not scamming you now? Pretty meta.

The thing about Eyeing the Flash is that there's no real coherent story beyond Fenton learning to grift. It's a series of connected vignettes more than a coherent story, but those vignettes are memorable. They're also entertaining. There is always that nagging question, though... are they true or not?

Does it matter?

Phil W says

Seeing my dad get frustrated and losing countless hours/dollars to carnival games makes sense now. I felt like the truth was stretched quite a bit at moments but enjoyed reading it nevertheless.

Rachel says

This was such a weird little book, and I really enjoyed it.

Peter Fenton, local Detroit high schooler, seems like a nice kid who could go places, until he skips town with a friend's family carnival. From driving semi-trucks without a license to setting up an illegal basement casino to having an all-out winner-takes-all midway competition, Fenton had more adventures in his teens than

most people have in a lifetime -- and it's all true! (Well, he claims it is, anyway. The whole point of the story is to show you what a shyster he was, so who knows whether he's still pulling your leg?)

The inside look at carnivals and the lives of small-time con men was fascinating and fast-paced. Lots of fun.

Dave Peticolas says

Fenton's memoir of his time as a carnival con-man.

Gabe Labovitz says

This was a fun little book, quick-reading. Cute characters. A bonus for me was that it took place in MI, so many of the locations rang true (though the main character's hometown of Mineralton is obviously fictional). If by its description and cover you want to read it, you will probably not be disappointed. Conversely, if it doesn't look interesting to you, you probably won't find it interesting.

Robert says

A carny memoir that brings unexpected depth to a familiar setting

Peter Fenton says

I'm the author

Daniel Rozanski says

I love carnivals. I love the Midway. I love games at theme parks and boardwalks. I am a high school Math and Computer Science Teacher with a Masters in Computer Science. If I get free time in class I will often demonstrate the probabilities of winning at casino games, hoping that the students will think twice before playing. I will also show how Mathematics and Geometry govern the chance (or lack thereof) of winning certain carnival games. This book is the epitome of one of my life's wacky interests. It was very well written and I think it would make an incredible movie.

Lorie says

Here's the thing: it's an accurate tale of one person's experience in carnie life. But as I read, I kept thinking that I'd never believe this if I hadn't been there myself, which I have to a lesser degree.

Bob Redmond says

Eyeing the Flash is Peter Fenton's coming-of-age memoir, set in Michigan, mostly on the low-rent carnival circuit. He quits his high school football team to hook up with fellow classmate Jackie Barron, scion of a carnival-owning family. Jackie initiates young Fenton into the ways of midway grifting, they have some adventures, summer ends, end of story.

The book is well-written, with plenty of interesting terminology and characters. For such a full-bodied topic, however, the story is awfully thin. First of all, while written in 2005, the story happens in 1967, but nothing--absolutely nothing--is made of the year or era of the book. Second, the emotional engine of the book is set up to be the relationship between Pete and Jackie, but for the most part the author keeps this topic at arm's length. Ditto for the second most important relationship--that between Pete and Mandy, the object of his affection. Lastly, other than some early conversations between Pete and Jackie about the nature of the con--"some people are ulcer getters; some people are ulcer givers"--there's no examination of the carnival itself.

It's all a bunch of cotton candy: feels good going down, but unfortunately, doesn't stick to the ribs.

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WHY I READ THIS BOOK: During a recent visit to Portland, I found this at Powell's in one of the sections I browse there. The Puyallup Fair makes for Carnival Season, so I thought it was a good time to read it.
