



The Fear of Sinking: The American Success Formula in the Gilded Age

By Paulette D Kilmer

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

Throughout American history, the obsession with success has been a persistent and pervasive theme. It is an obsession that has shaped all arenas of life, and at its heart lies a profound discontent: the fear of "sinking", of failing to do better than someone else, particularly one's parents or siblings. In this provocative study, Paulette D. Kilmer examines the ways in which the national preoccupation with success and its attendant anxieties have been manifested in popular culture. Her focus is on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries - an era in which industrial growth and urbanization wrought enormous changes in the country. Faced with the insecurities and dislocations caused by this social transformation, Kilmer shows, millions of Americans sought reassurance and inspiration in the popular press. Through a variety of genres - including news accounts, dime novels, romances, mysteries, religious epics, children's books, and domestic fantasies - the burgeoning publishing industry fed a seemingly insatiable public appetite for stories of success. Analyzing contemporary newspapers and more than forty representative works from the period, Kilmer shows how retellings of the Cinderella story, which embodied the "rags-to-riches" paradigm, permeated all of the popular genres and not just the famous Horatio Alger serials. The formula plots used in these genres, she argues, derived from an earlier oral tradition. Readily adapted to the form of the novel and updated with references to current events, these tales proposed to teach their readers how to balance spiritual and worldly well-being.

Users Review

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