

Dreamland

Nancy Bilyeau

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In Nancy Bilyeau's *Dreamland*, the staid, guarded world of New York's upper class is invigorated by Coney Island's seaside air and spectacle.

Set in 1911, *Dreamland*'s bright, witty heroine is twenty-year-old heiress Peggy Batternberg, who longs for independence and chafes at the demands of her wealthy family. The Batternbergs summer at Brooklyn's Oriental Hotel—a posh establishment that's quite close to the raucous expanse of Coney Island—and try to negotiate a marriage between Peggy's sister and Henry Taul, the scion of another society family.

With striking historical detail, *Dreamland* contrasts the Batternbergs' sumptuous meals and doting servants to the swarms of immigrants and “common” New Yorkers who either visit Coney Island or work there. Peggy is intrigued by Coney Island's crowds and sideshows, and she begins a secret affair with Stefan, a Serbian sketch artist and pushcart vendor. Beyond her new discoveries and passionate romance, Peggy also becomes involved in a murder mystery when the bodies of young women begin showing up at the beach.

Though Coney Island is the colorful, chaotic nexus of *Dreamland*, Peggy's confined upbringing is an integral part of the novel, too. Peggy and her sister Lydia enjoy many material comforts, but their ability to live as they please is limited by a complex web of elite restrictions. Even Peggy's desire to drink Coca Cola meets with disapproval, as do the alterations she makes to her woolen bathing suit, cutting off folds of bulky fabric so that she can enjoy her daily swim.

From the rarefied air of tea at the Manhattan Beach Hotel to Coney Island's unique odors of “taffy and cotton candy, fried crab ... greasy machinery and rank human sweat,” *Dreamland* surges with the sights and secrets of a bygone era and the waves of progressive change that the twentieth century would bring.

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