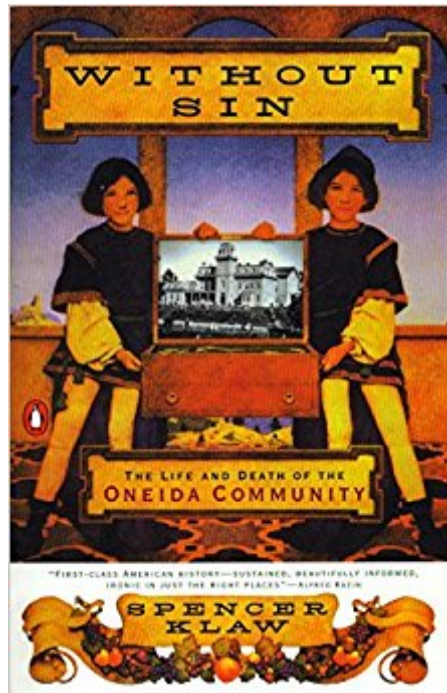




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Without Sin: The Life And Death Of The Oneida Community



Synopsis

Without Sin chronicles the rise and fall of nineteenth-century America's most successful experiment in Utopian living: New York's Oneida Community (1848-1880). Founded by the charismatic Christian Perfectionist John Humphrey Noyes, this remarkable society flourished for more than thirty years as a unique world where property was shared, men and women were equals, sex was free and open, work was to be joyous, and pleasure was felt to be "the very business that God set Adam and Eve about."

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Customer Reviews

From 1848 to 1880 a unique experiment in cooperative living took place in Oneida, N.Y. This was a utopian socialistic society founded by John Humphrey Noyes, a follower of Christian Perfectionism, a belief in moral perfection and in separation from the world of sinners. Drawing on documents left by some of the original 200-plus members, Klaw (*The Great American Medicine Show*) provides an informative account of the commune. In his striving for the perfection of life without sin, Noyes imposed "complex marriage" at Oneida, a system that provided men and women with multiple sex partners and prohibited monogamy because "it impeded the free flow of Christian love." Conception of children was forbidden unless Noyes approved of the genetic attributes of the prospective parents. Members pooled their labor and had cooperative ownership of the animal trap and silverware business that supported them. After Noyes fled to Canada in 1879 in fear of prosecution for unorthodox sex practices, residents gradually adopted more traditional social arrangements.

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Disturbing tale of a 19th-century utopian community. Klaw (The Great American Medicine Show, 1975, etc.) wrote this with the cooperation of descendants of the Oneida Community, who granted him access to unpublished memoirs and letters. The result is a thorough if somewhat blinkered look at a daring experiment in social and biological engineering, a sort of Victorian brave new world. Oneida was the brainchild of John Humphrey Noyes, a preacher and writer who believed himself to be God's chosen instrument. Like other utopians, Noyes taught the perfectibility of the human being; more controversially, he also condemned monogamy in favor of sexual libertinism. After some false starts--including an arrest on morals charges--Noyes put his theories to the test in 1848 by establishing his own Eden in Oneida, New York. At first, the community flourished. Inventions poured out, including the stainless-steel cutlery still manufactured today; members enjoyed courses in languages and science, as well as equality in food, clothing, and shelter. But too often Noyes's activities seemed a forerunner of China's cultural revolution. Romantic love and celibacy were banned; at 13 or 14, girls lost their virginity, usually to Noyes himself in sessions known as "interviews." Privacy was nonexistent, and members were subjected to scathing public criticism of their every fault. Noyes ruled as absolute dictator, wielding power by manipulating sexual privileges. His social experiments reached their nadir with "stirpiculture," an attempt to produce superior human beings (with Noyes blood involved, if possible) through breeding experiments. Predictably, the community's idealism faded rapidly, and, by the 1880's, Oneida was more or less defunct. Effectively told, although Klaw is too busy praising Oneida life for its liberalness to grasp the parallels to modern religious cults, including the Branch Davidians. (Eight pages of b&w photographs--not seen) -- Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A fascinating topic, but I have some reservations about the way this book was written. It struggled to settle on an organization, at times seeming chronological and at others focusing on a single topic (ex. one chapter on communal child rearing). Often Klaw would go several pages without mentioning a year, which made it difficult to trace the trajectory of the community. As an undergrad, I may not be qualified to make this criticism, but I felt that this could have been better sourced. In such a information-dense book, it would make a lot of sense to have frequent endnotes. For academic settings, it becomes difficult to confidently cite a source that doesn't source its own facts.

This was a very funny and engaging book. Ironical humour was very much in evidence. But, I also found myself engaged with the leader and even saddened as the book progressed through to the demise of the community. As a person of faith I clearly identified the errors of Noyes' theology but was still impressed at how the community progressed and even thrived in spite of and because of his leadership. Very enjoyable and instructive read.

I bought this book as required reading for an American History class I was taking. I tend to have a hard time getting into anything that I'm "forced to read", but this book pleasantly surprised me. I found myself wanting to know more about the Oneida community and John Noyes's ideas and couldn't put the book down. If you are interested in Utopian Communities you will love this book.

The Oneida Community and its leader, John H. Noyes, are frequently cited in reference and history text books as examples of the transition of American religious life and practice in the 19th century. However, except for a few sentences and brief descriptions of their more lurid practices--especially the sexual freedom of "complex marriage"--the Oneidans have not gotten their historical due. Klaw rescues the Oneida Community from its relative obscurity in popular history. His research is top-notch and thorough, the analysis inspired and compelling. Klaw takes us inside the mind of John H. Noyes and the day-to-day life of this religious community. Readers of this book will find a sympathetic and even-handed account of the Oneidans and their leaders, wrapped up in the larger context of American religious life.

An interesting read. The story does jump around a lot but a great introduction to a little known society.

Being a fan of social engineering, alternate social models and utopias, I can just praise this book as a highly interesting exposition of a very diverse mode of social organization. At the century, after the spectacular failure of communism (Marxism), to be able to study a system that went much deeper into the alternate structures of society (specially with the community of husbands wives and children) is amazing. Not the least amazing is the fact that Oneida is one of the few communalistic attempts that not only were economically successful but left an industry and wealth. It's clear that the founder of Oneida was influenced by Plato, and it's remarkable how far he was able to bring to reality important aspects of the Idealistic community. A great reading. I'll surely read this book again.

First of all, "K", whose review also appears here, misspells the author's name--it is "Klaw". The author, who died recently at 84, was a life-long journalist and historian of journalism with a distinguished career at Columbia U and UC Berkeley. Unlike "K", I was not required to read this book, but sought it out after a serendipitous visit to the historic Mansion House of the Oneida sect in the central NY town of that name--where the action was set. This book is a well researched and well documented account of the rise and fall of founder John Noyes's Utopian world-view and of the hundreds of Americans connected to it and to him. This experiment in Utopian living was the foundation of the Oneida Community silver flatware company, among other interesting connections. Klaw's annotated bibliography is extensive, giving one everything one might want to know for further reading and exploration. As "K" reported, the book is an absolute page-turner! The Oneidans had a lot of good ideas, along with some truly bizarre ones. Read the book and then visit the historic site, which is open to the public and also rents rooms for overnight stays, in the town of Kenwood, near Oneida NY.

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