



Theda Bara, Hollywood's first femme fatale, was a nice Jewish girl from Cincinnati named Theodosia Goodman. She and her tent make only a fleeting appearance, though, in Diana Altman's novel.

To Hollywood – via Haverhill

Novel captures spirit of movie pioneers

By Daniel M. Kimmel

Historical fiction is a tricky business, in that it mixes real people and situations with characters that exist only in the author's imagination. Diana Altman has neatly placed a fictional Jewish orphan among the folks starting the film industry in the early 20th century – and gets nearly all the details right. It is an entertaining read, even for those who think they already know about the birth of Hollywood.

Harry Sirkus, her protagonist, loses his parents in the horrific 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire. His uncle – his only living relative – can't take responsibility and places young Harry in an orphanage in Haverhill, Mass. It turns out to be fortuitous timing, because as Harry finds himself lured to the local theater showing movies, he meets a young Canadian entrepreneur who has set up shop there: Louis B. Mayer.

Over the course of a story spanning two decades, Harry grows up, works for Mayer for a while, but eventually enters the employ of one of the least known of the founding movie moguls, William Fox. Fox was one of the major players of the era, and Altman revels in the irony of Harry going to work fabricating newsreel footage for the original Fox News. Later, when sound came in, it would be re-named Fox Movietone News.

Although the Fox name permeates the media today, William Fox would be out of the industry by the early 1930s, and mostly forgotten by the time of his death in 1952. Harry's encounters with Fox bring to life one of the major players who didn't succeed and who, in the end, watched on the sidelines as

Book Review

"In Theda Bara's Tent," by Diana Altman. Tapley Cove Press, 2010.

his name became famous without his control. We also see Mayer struggle to become a force in a new industry where he's considered a minor player, but who never stops believing in his own destiny.

Besides all of this early industry gossip, the story takes us back nearly a century, where a home in Brookline was considered out in the country, and when American Jews had to worry about the likes of Henry Ford, who used his money to promulgate anti-Semitic propaganda. There are also the details of life in the era, of Manhattan speakeasies and Long Island estates, of gossip magazines and a Hollywood so undeveloped that movie stars longed to head back to New York and civilization.

It's a delightful and informative read, marred most by a misleading title. Though there is a scene in the tent of the famous silent actress – whose name was an anagram for "Arab Death" although she was really a nice Jewish girl named Theodosia Goodman – it is her only appearance in the novel. Perhaps "Mayer, Fox and the Birth of the Movies" wouldn't be as sexy a title as "In Theda Bara's Tent," but it would be closer to the mark of what the reader will find inside.

Daniel M. Kimmel, a Boston-based film critic and author, lectures on a variety of film-related topics and can be reached at danielmkimmel@gmail.com.



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