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Eyeing The Flash: The Education Of A Carnival Con Artist



Synopsis

The year is 1963, the setting is small-town Michigan. At age fifteen, Peter Fenton is a gawky math whiz schoolboy with a dissatisfied mother, a father who drinks himself to foolishness, and no chance whatsoever with girls. That's when he meets Jackie Barron. Jackie is the unlikely progeny of Double-O and Vera, professional grifters running a third-rate traveling carnival, and he's been part of the family business since he started earning his keep as the World's Youngest Elephant Trainer. Jackie is a smooth-talking teenage carnie with his own Thunderbird, and with wisdom beyond his years. Jackie shares Pete's way with numbers, and he has a proposition. They'll start a rigged casino in Jackie's basement and take their classmates for thousands of dollars. Pete hesitates, but not for very long. Two years later, he's working joints for the Barrons' Party Time Shows, wearing sharkskin suits and alligator shoes, and relieving the public of its hard-earned cash. He learns to hold his own with veteran con men who have nicknames like the Ghost, Horserace Harry, and Talking Tony, and colorful personalities to match. This is the world of the Alibi and the Hanky Pank, of Flatties and the mark. Amazingly, Pete Fenton has never been more at home. But in this strange new world with its topsy-turvy code of ethics, where leaving a mark without a dollar for gas is outlawed while cheating a best friend is par for the course, the tension between teacher and student grows until Pete finds himself attempting the ultimate challenge: to out-con his mentor. Eyeing the Flash is a fascinating insider's view of the carnival underworld -- the cons, the double-dealing, the quick banter, and, of course, the easy money. The story of a shy middle-class kid turned first-class huckster, Peter Fenton's coming-of-age memoir is highly unorthodox, and utterly compelling.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In *Eyeing the Flash*, the teenaged Peter Fenton is introduced by "Jackie Barron" to the world of the carnival. Though Fenton rose quickly through the ranks of the carnival con artists, he didn't make a career out of scamming marks; he pursued a college education and became a writer, working for the *National Enquirer* for 15 years. I imagine that some of the tricks he learned in the carnivals came in handy at the *Enquirer*. I'm not just cracking on the supermarket tabloids there--I think in any kind of creative endeavor with a commercial bent there's an element of "marksmanship" that's not so far removed from the carnivals. Shortly after meeting Barron, Fenton is introduced to gambling, and the pair soon run a clandestine casino out of Barron's basement, gleefully stripping their classmates of all their cash. Fenton, who was not the most popular guy in the school, learns that he's a lot brighter than the star basketball players, whose gifts on the court and in school can't help them in the casino, where Fenton and Barron--thanks to a thorough knowledge of math--have the edge. It's an unlikely sort of underdog story, and I'm guessing that you won't see an adaptation of that chapter as a movie of the week on the Hallmark Channel. That episode highlights a theme that runs through the book--gambling and con artistry as a great equalizer: the jocks might get all the fame, but it is the scammers who get the fortune. Fenton has a number of interesting adventures with Barron, eventually going on the road with him. He treats the reader to an insider's view of the various attractions of the traveling carnival, ranging from kids games to flat-out gambling games. You've got to read it to get the full flavor, but I'll give you a quick summary: they're all crooked.

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