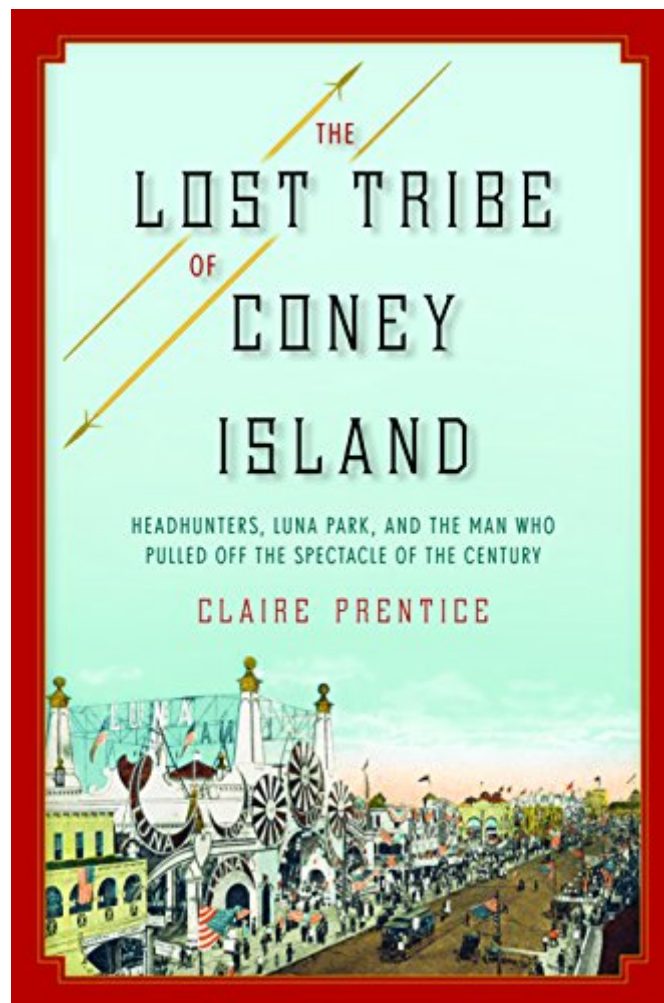


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# The Lost Tribe Of Coney Island: Headhunters, Luna Park, And The Man Who Pulled Off The Spectacle Of The Century



## Synopsis

Shortlisted for the 2015 Brooklyn Eagles Literary Prize Best Book of the Month, History • “October 2014 New York Post • “must read” • “October 2014 Coney Island, summer 1905: a new attraction opened at Luna Park. Within weeks it would be the talk of the nation. For the first time, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* unearths the incredible true story of the Igorrotes, a group of • “headhunting, dog eating” • tribespeople brought to America from the Philippines by the opportunistic showman Truman K. Hunt. At Luna Park, the g-string-clad Filipinos performed native dances and rituals before a wide-eyed public in a mocked-up tribal village. Millions of Americans flocked to see the tribespeople slaughter live dogs for their daily canine feasts and to hear thrilling tales of headhunting. The Igorrotes became a national sensation • “they were written up in newspaper headlines, portrayed in cartoons, and even featured in advertising jingles, all fueled by Truman’s brilliant publicity stunts. By the end of the summer season, the Igorrote show had made Truman a rich man. But his genius had a dark side and soon he would be on the run across America with the tribe in tow, pursued by ex-wives, creditors, Pinkerton detectives, and the tireless agents of American justice. Award-winning journalist Claire Prentice brings this forgotten chapter in American history to life with vivid prose and rich historical detail. The book boasts a colorful cast of characters, including the mercurial Truman Hunt; his ambitious, young Filipino interpreter, Julio Balinag; Fomoaley Ponci, the tribe’s loquacious, self-important leader; Luna Park impresarios Fred Thompson and Elmer • “Skip” • Dundy; and Frederick Barker, the government man dead set on bringing Truman to justice. At its heart, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* is a tale of what happens when two cultures collide in the pursuit of money, adventure, and the American Dream. It is a story that makes us question who is civilized and who is savage.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As I was reading this book, I was thinking to myself, "Thank goodness we've moved on from this sort of distasteful voyeurism." And then I immediately came across an article in Travel + Leisure about a tour group that went gawking at remote tribespeople in Ethiopia. "We were here with the shared and uneasy goal of visiting a human zoo," the writer says. So, apparently, we haven't evolved one bit... today, we just have the technology to go to the zoo instead of bringing the zoo to us! In the early 1900s, outlandish exhibits at fairs and amusement parks were all the rage. Elephant tamers, circus performers, rides depicting the horrors of hell or a trip to the moon -- Americans were eager to slap down their quarters for these experiences. At Luna Park in Coney Island, two showmen put together a blockbuster attraction -- a man-made village peopled with Igorrotes, a primitive tribe of nearly naked, head-hunting people imported from the Philippines. The tribe would eat, sleep, cook, do their war dances and perform sacred rituals for the entertainment of curious Americans awed by such an exotic sight. The biggest fascination of all: They slaughter dogs and eat the meat! The author chronicles the life of the Igorrote tribespeople as they are exhibited in the 1905 summer season, and then are moved around the country to various fairs. They are under the care of showman Truman K. Hunt and at first the arrangement is liveable, although less than ideal. The Igorrotes are confined to the small village and are subjected to the constant noise and lights of the park. They get sick, as they are forced to ingest an unnatural diet.

A well-written account of actual events, very disturbing actual events. I had never heard of The Igorrot tribe before and was intrigued. This took place during the time when American was trying to work out their role in the Philippines after the Spanish-American war in 1898 which resulted in Spain ceding the Philippines (as well as other territory) to the U.S. That was then followed by a bloody conflict known as the Philippine-American War. As Americans poured into the Philippines a few got

the idea of showcasing the incredible culture one of the native people, a head-hunting tribe. There is more than a suggestion that it was approved by the government for political reasons. They felt that if Americans saw how primitive and "savage" these people were then they would be on board with the U.S. maintaining a high profile in the Philippines because surely these people couldn't run their own country. Despite the obvious meticulous research, and clear story-telling by the author, I really can't say I enjoyed reading this book because just when you thought Truman, the "Showman" couldn't stoop any lower, he did. What is also sad is that people came out by the tens of thousands to gawk at this tribe as they went through their scared rituals and daily chores. They were cruelly exploited and they yet naively followed and did this man's bidding out of their own sense loyalty and integrity. These 50+ proud tribesmen and women lived their lives in a fish bowl for well over a year with each month bringing new trials and humiliation. What started out as a money-making enterprise for both parties, became slavery.

In the early 1900s exhibiting humans to be gawked at as though they were animals was a common practice in side shows at fairs and amusement parks. In her book, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island*, Claire Prentice brings to life the story of the Igorrotes, a Filipino tribe imported to the United States for the purposes of such an exhibit, and describes their fate in a compelling and sensitive manner. A group of Igorrotes had been a popular attraction at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition in 1904. The manager of the Igorrotes for this short exposition was a Dr. Truman Hunt, who had lived in the Philippines amongst the Igorrotes and knew them well. Given the success of the exhibition, Hunt switched hats from medical doctor to impresario and decided to bring a group of Igorrotes back for an extended tour of the United States. Hunt would pay the Igorrotes monthly more than they could make for a year of work in the Philippines and in return he would get the lion's share of the profits from the tour. For a short while, things seemed to go as planned, but rather quickly it all unhinged. Truman would end up keeping the Igorrotes in America for well over the agreed upon year, exploiting them, and would end up extorting their money. To make matters worse, Truman was not only duplicitous, he also had major skeletons in his closet. Prentice takes us through the Igorrotes American journey which started with promise but eventually descended into madness. Using a multitude of primary and secondary sources from the time, Prentice puts this amazing journey into the context of the times. She documents Truman's descent from impresario to shameless promoter to charlatan to petty criminal.

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