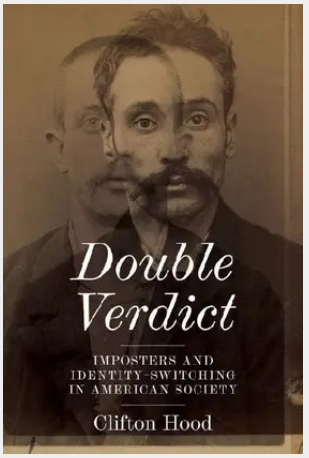
Hood

Double Verdict

Imposters and Identity-Switching in American Society



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A sweeping history of imposture, identity, and the contested boundaries of self-invention in America. Americans have long celebrated the idea that people can reinvent themselves. But who has been allowed to do so, and who has been condemned for trying? In Double Verdict, historian Clifton Hood explores the history of imposters and identity-switchers to reveal how struggles over identity have shaped American society from the nineteenth century through World War II. Although many historians have profiled the lives of particular imposters, Hood is the first scholar to write a macrohistory of imposters and imposture. This innovative approach sheds new light on American history. Hood traces hundreds of stories of people who assumed new identities to seek opportunities, escape hardship, gain wealth, or challenge social boundaries. From counterfeit aristocrats and con artists to people who crossed social boundaries through racial passing, religious dissent, or gender nonconformity, these stories illuminate the shifting line between accepted self-fashioning and condemned deception. As transportation facilities expanded, identification technologies evolved, and ideas about selfhood changed, Americans increasingly embraced reinvention for some while denying it to others. Hood shows that accusations of imposture often reflected deeper conflicts over race, class, gender, and power rather than simple questions of truth and fraud. Double Verdict offers a fresh perspective on American cultural history by examining the people who lived between accepted identities and forbidden ones. Spanning business history, social history, literary culture, and the history of technology, Hood demonstrates how debates over authenticity, belonging, and personal transformation have shaped American life for generations—and why they continue to resonate today.

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