



Risk Culture: Performance and Danger in Early America

Joseph Fichtelberg

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"As a number of recent studies have shown, the north European commercial world made the precise calculation of risk a central concern of the intellectual project of exploration, trade, and colonization. The great merit of Fichtelberg's book is systematizing the imaged world of dangers, and charting the various kinds of ritual and discursive performances marshaled to deal with the pressure of the unspeakable in early America from the 17th into the early 19th century. The readings of texts are invariably careful, and the points made, persuasive."

---David Shields, University of South Carolina

Risk Culture is the first scholarly book to explore how strategies of performance shaped American responses to modernity. By examining a variety of early American authors and cultural figures, from John Smith and the Salem witches to Phillis Wheatley, Susanna Rowson, and Aaron Burr, Joseph Fichtelberg shows how early Americans created and resisted a dangerously liberating new world. The texts surveyed confront change through a variety of performances designed both to imagine and deter menaces ranging from Smith's hostile Indians, to Wheatley's experience of slavery, to Rowson's fear of exposure in the public sphere. Fichtelberg combines a variety of scholarly approaches, including anthropology, history, cultural studies, and literary criticism, to offer a unique synthesis of literary close reading and sociological theory in the service of cultural analysis.

Joseph Fichtelberg is Professor of English and Chair of the English Department at Hofstra University.

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