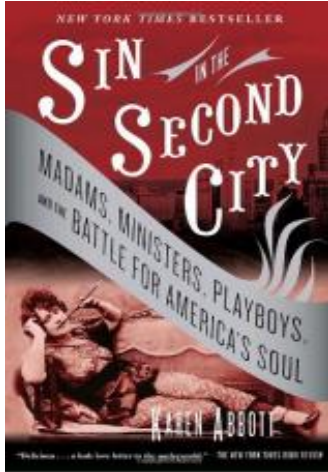


# Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America's Soul

by Karen Abbott



## About the Book

Step into the perfumed parlors of the Everleigh Club, the most famous brothel in American history --- and the catalyst for a culture war that rocked the nation. Operating in Chicago's notorious Levee district at the dawn of the last century, the Club's proprietors, two aristocratic sisters named Minna and Ada Everleigh, welcomed moguls and actors, senators and athletes, foreign dignitaries and literary icons, into their stately double mansion, where thirty stunning Everleigh "butterflies" awaited their arrival. Courtesans named Doll, Suzy Poon Tang, and Brick Top devoured raw meat to the delight of Prince Henry of Prussia and recited poetry for Theodore Dreiser. Whereas lesser madams pocketed most of a harlot's earnings and kept a "whipper" on staff to mete out discipline, the Everleighs made sure their girls dined on gourmet food, were examined by an honest physician, and even tutored in the literature of Balzac.

Not everyone appreciated the sisters' attempts to elevate the industry. Rival Levee madams hatched numerous schemes to ruin the Everleighs, including an attempt to frame them for the death of department store heir Marshall Field, Jr. But the sisters' most daunting foes were the Progressive Era reformers, who sent the entire country into a frenzy with lurid tales of "white slavery" --- the allegedly rampant practice of kidnapping young girls and forcing them into brothels. This furor shaped America's sexual culture and had repercussions all the way to the White House, including the formation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

With a cast of characters that includes Jack Johnson, John Barrymore, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., William Howard Taft, "Hinky Dink" Kenna, and Al Capone, *Sin in the Second City* is Karen Abbott's colorful, nuanced portrait of the iconic Everleigh sisters, their world-famous Club, and the perennial clash between our nation's hedonistic impulses and Puritanical roots. Culminating in a dramatic last stand between brothel keepers and crusading reformers, **Sin in the Second City** offers a vivid snapshot of America's journey from Victorian-era propriety to twentieth-century modernity.

## Discussion Guide

1. The Everleigh sisters were technically criminals, yet they genuinely believed they were helping the girls in the Club. What do you think about the Everleigh sisters? business practices? Why were they so successful?
2. How are Minna and Ada alike, and how are they different? Who was the stronger sister, in your opinion? How were they able to perpetuate so many lies for so long?
3. In what ways does Abbott's portrait of turn-of-the-century America mirror the present day?
4. At the time the Everleighs ruled Chicago, what other choices did women have? Do you judge the women who became "sporting girls"? Do you judge the madams? What path do you think you would have chosen if you'd been alive and facing similar circumstances during the turn of the century?
5. On the surface it seems that there are only two sides in **Sin in the Second City** --- the reformers and the sisters?but there are actually a few more: the politicians, the Levee gangsters, and the rival madams. Are there heroes in Sin in the Second City, and are there villains? Who did you sympathize with? Did you find your loyalties shifting at any point along the way?
6. Do you think the reformers exaggerated or accurately represented the "white slavery" situation?
7. At one point, the African American boxing champion Jack Johnson shows up at the Club, and his presence causes quite a commotion. What does his visit tell you in terms of race and America at the turn of the century?
8. How did America's sexual culture change during the Everleighs' reign? Who was primarily responsible for these changes, the reformers or the underworld?
9. Chicago is as much a character in Sin in the Second City as the gangsters and the madams. Why do you think the Everleigh sisters chose to settle in Chicago? Would they have been as successful in another city, or was Chicago particularly conducive to their success?
10. Many reformers cited strong religious convictions as a reason for fighting the red-light districts. How do you think the religious tenor of the times compares to that of today?
11. What was your favorite Everleigh Club anecdote?
12. What satisfaction can be derived from a nonfiction book like Sin in the Second City that can't be from novels? In what ways is the book like a novel?
13. Abbott stumbled upon the story of the Everleigh sisters while researching a long-lost relative. How much do you know about your own family's history and ancestry? Do you know where they were and what they were doing from 1900 to 1911, when the Everleigh Club was in business?

## Author Bio

Karen Abbott is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *SIN IN THE SECOND CITY*, *AMERICAN ROSE* and most recently *LIAR*, *TEMPRESS*, *SOLDIER*, *SPY* and *ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS 2014* by *Library Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and Amazon. She has written for *New Yorker.com*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *Salon* and other publications. Her latest book is *THE GHOSTS OF EDEN PARK*.

## Critical Praise

"Assiduously researched? even this book?s minutiae makes for good storytelling."

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