



# Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America

*Jonathan Levy*

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Until the early nineteenth century, "risk" was a specialized term: it was the commodity exchanged in a marine insurance contract. *Freaks of Fortune* tells the story of how the modern concept of risk emerged in the United States. Born on the high seas, risk migrated inland and became essential to the financial management of an inherently uncertain capitalist future.

Focusing on the hopes and anxieties of ordinary people, Jonathan Levy shows how risk developed through the extraordinary growth of new financial institutions—insurance corporations, savings banks, mortgage-backed securities markets, commodities futures markets, and securities markets—while posing inescapable moral questions. For at the heart of risk's rise was a new vision of freedom. To be a free individual, whether an emancipated slave, a plains farmer, or a Wall Street financier, was to take, assume, and manage one's own personal risk. Yet this often meant offloading that same risk onto a series of new financial institutions, which together have only recently acquired the name "financial services industry." Levy traces the fate of a new vision of personal freedom, as it unfolded in the new economic reality created by the American financial system.

Amid the nineteenth-century's waning faith in God's providence, Americans increasingly confronted unanticipated challenges to their independence and security in the boom and bust chance-world of capitalism. *Freaks of Fortune* is one of the first books to excavate the historical origins of our own financialized times and risk-defined lives.

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