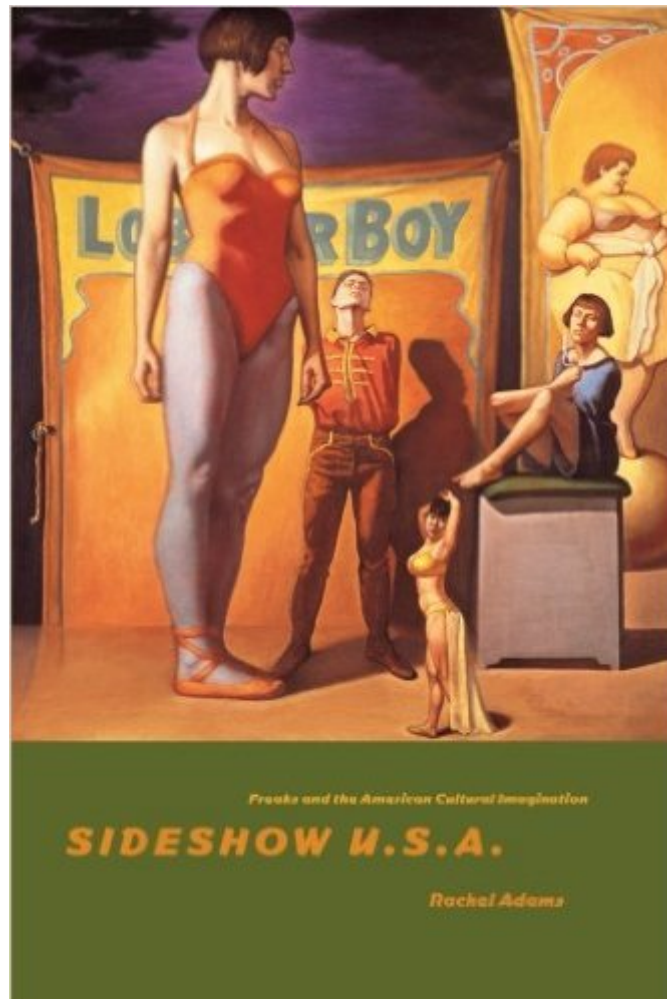


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Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks And The American Cultural Imagination



Synopsis

A staple of American popular culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the freak show seemed to vanish after the Second World War. But as Rachel Adams reveals in *Sideshow U.S.A.*, images of the freak show, with its combination of the grotesque, the horrific, and the amusing, stubbornly reappeared in literature and the arts. Freak shows, she contends, have survived because of their capacity for reinvention. Empty of any inherent meaning, the freak's body becomes a stage for playing out some of the twentieth century's most pressing social and political concerns, from debates about race, empire, and immigration, to anxiety about gender, and controversies over taste and public standards of decency. *Sideshow U.S.A.* begins by revisiting the terror and fascination the original freak shows provided for their audiences, as well as exploring the motivations of those who sought fame and profit in the business of human exhibition. With this history in mind, Adams turns from live entertainment to more mediated forms of cultural expression: the films of Tod Browning, the photography of Diane Arbus, the criticism of Leslie Fiedler, and the fiction of Carson McCullers, Toni Morrison, and Katherine Dunn. Taken up in these works of art and literature, the freak serves as a metaphor for fundamental questions about self and other, identity and difference, and provides a window onto a once vital form of popular culture. Adams's study concludes with a revealing look at the revival of the freak show as live performance in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Celebrated by some, the freak show's recent return is less welcome to those who have traditionally been its victims. At the beginning of a new century, Adams sees it as a form of living history, a testament to the vibrancy and inventiveness of American popular culture, as well as its capacity for cruelty and injustice. "Because of its subject matter, this interesting and complex study is provocative, as well as thought-provoking." —Virginia Quarterly Review

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Customer Reviews

Recently I've read through a few books on sideshows and freaks (sort of side research for my next novel). Most are skimming histories of people and events. Adams has created something altogether different. Drawing on poststructuralist techniques, Barthes, theories of the leisure class, and methodologies of deconstructing narratives of the other (what "freak" would do all this!!??) she pursues the notion of freaks from appropriated nomenclature to social constructs, to name a couple avenues. You want to understand Browning's movie, then this is the essay. Her research drew upon many sources, often comprehensive, at other times less than complete. The problems are minor, some people in photographs or freaks who wrote about their positions are not mentioned, or a name might be missing in the index, or a photo clearly dated 1885 in the picture is listed as 1903. And on a broader level I suppose she could be faulted for falling into the same trap she critiques, that of denying her her subjects voices (kudos for mentioning Gayatri Spivak but what would she say about this?) But don't misread my finicky carping. This is an excellent book and one I'd recommend above all others I've seen for digging into our individual and collective psychologies. Read it and learn why the freaks say, "Gooble Gobble Gooble Gobble, we will make you one of us."

I wanted to like this book; I really did. The synopsis on was intriguing, and the subject matter had already captured my imagination. But rather than having the snap and sparkle of a sideshow, this book read like a leaden lecture, more suited to a grad school classroom. I found myself re-reading some sentences four and five times. Why didn't a good editor get ahold of this book and pare down the dense and sluggish passages that show up on every page? History and criticism don't have to feel like a visit to the dentist; they can read like a trip to the beach, and still get the point across. Kenneth Tynan and Bruce Catton come to mind... While the book contains much interesting information, I just don't think the destination is worth the trip. It's not that I'm dense; I have a master's degree myself, and I have read plenty of advanced textbooks. It's just that a book on sideshows should bring a certain amount of the magic and wonder of those shows to the reader, instead of feeling pretentious and cold. A good opportunity missed; you'd be much better served reading Marc Hartzman's "American Sideshow" or Joe Nickell's "Secrets of the Sideshows," both available on , and worth your money. But skip this one unless you just have to have every book on

the subject, or you want an example of how not to write a book.

I ordered this book because of my thesis. I wasn't sure how exactly I was gonna include it, but it turned out great. Great info about sideshows. Thanks, I got an A and graduated

Excellent and detailed history. Would highly recommend!

For me, this book was somewhat boring because the author seems to be showing off her intellect, rather than focusing on freaks. She did a fantastic job of using big words and analyzing every possible aspect of freak shows, the people involved, and what other people think about it. It's a well written book for someone who likes to read analytical opinions, and I understand that the opinions expressed were pretty correct, but as I said, it was boring to me. If you are one who can read "big words" and "big sentences" (more educated than me, and able to get the sense and meaning of long statements with big words without having to stop and go over what was being said or to look up the meanings of words)....you would most likely enjoy this book. You can see that the author is an intelligent and highly educated person.

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