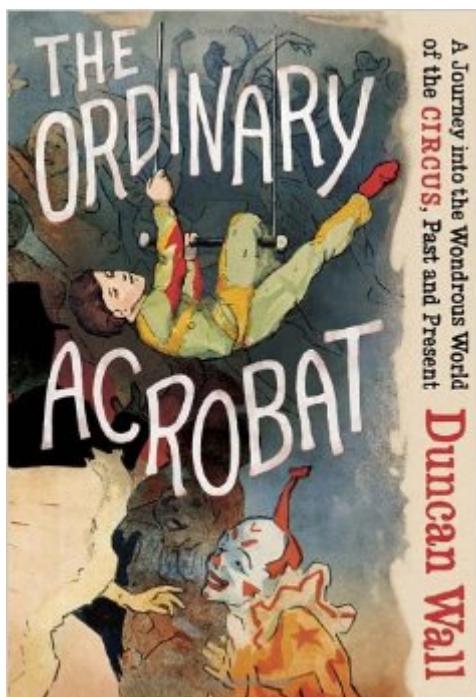


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# The Ordinary Acrobat: A Journey Into The Wondrous World Of The Circus, Past And Present



## Synopsis

The extraordinary story of a young man's plunge into the unique and wonderful world of the circus, taking readers deep into circus history and its renaissance as a contemporary art form, and behind the (tented) walls of France's most prestigious circus school. When Duncan Wall visited his first nouveau cirque as a college student in Paris, everything about it—the monochromatic costumes, the acrobat singing Simon and Garfunkel, the juggler reciting Proust—was captivating. Soon he was waiting outside stage doors, eagerly chatting with the stars, and attending circuses two or three nights a week. So great was his enthusiasm that a year later he applied on a whim to the training program at the *École Nationale des Arts du Cirque* and was, to his surprise, accepted. Sometimes scary and often funny, *The Ordinary Acrobat* follows the (occasionally literal) collision of one American novice and a host of gifted international students in a rigorous regimen of tumbling, trapeze, juggling, and clowning. Along the way, Wall introduces readers to all the ambition, beauty, and thrills of the circus's long history: from hardscrabble beginnings to Gilded Age treasures, and from twentieth-century artistic and economic struggles to its brilliant reemergence in the form of contemporary circus (most prominently through Cirque du Soleil). Readers meet figures past—the father of the circus, Philip Astley; the larger-than-life P. T. Barnum—and present, as Wall seeks lessons from innovative masters including juggler Jérôme Thomas and clown André Riot-Sarcey. As Wall learns, not everyone is destined to run away with the circus—but the institution fascinates just the same. Brimming with surprises, outsized personalities, and plenty of charm, *The Ordinary Acrobat* delivers all the excitement and pleasure of the circus ring itself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In consideration of other reviews here and my own reading taste I will first tell you what I think is most helpful to a majority of readers, there is a lot of circus history here. We are talking about a lot of facts! Author Duncan Wall who decided to enter a circus training school in Paris essentially on a whim, becomes not only interested in the experience but has a thirst to learn about the history of the circus itself. I personally read a lot of memoirs and also appreciate varied non-fiction in addition to fiction novels. That said, what some consider dry is actually fascinating to me and that is why *The Ordinary Acrobat* was a true delight for me to read! We most often think of the circus being comprised of generational participants with fine tuned skills that are practiced from a very young age. It's described as a way of life and a tradition passed down in families. So when it came to *The Ordinary Acrobat*, I was expecting the unique view of an "outsider" who jumps into this world. I did expect more of that view than the utter volume of facts however, if you take in mind that the author then goes on to teach circus history then you will know better what to expect here. Having read the novel "*The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*" which is a bit of historical fiction, I was familiar with some of the facts beforehand. I have read a few other fictional stories of the circus or travelling shows before that give you the feel but without the history lesson. Duncan Wall brings the two together because the information he discovers is told along with his fascination on the subject. We watch his interest in circus history grow and the telling for me was so moving, I could feel how enchanted and fascinated he was to discover more.

Author Duncan Wall has done an impressive job combining both a comprehensive history of various (most?) aspects of the original circuses of European and US history alongside his own memoir of his performing life and skills. One of those narratives would be impressive enough and to combine them both so well is a strong achievement. For the right audience - performers, those with an interest in creative performance, or those who have relationships with performers - I think this would easily be a five-star book. I think anyone with a connection to creative, physical performance could appreciate the history first, but even more Wall's accounts of the demands and amazing effort required of the participants. For instance, I'd never looked at 'juggling' with any sort of the fine-tuned attention that Wall gives it here. A performer could point to examples and say, "see, this is what I'm doing. Get it?" or a family member could understand, "wait, this is what he had to learn to do?" Overall, I liked it - for me, without as direct a 'performer' connection, it sometimes provided too

much information for my interest level and my attention to the details tailed off. At parts I was completely engaged, and at other times simply less connected with the subject matter. That's just me as an audience of one, though, and is no criticism of the amazing amount of research that Wall has provided. I think any fan of history will find something to appreciate - some audiences will simply engage differently than others. This is an aspect of American (and cultural) history that I think it's fair to say is often overlooked.

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