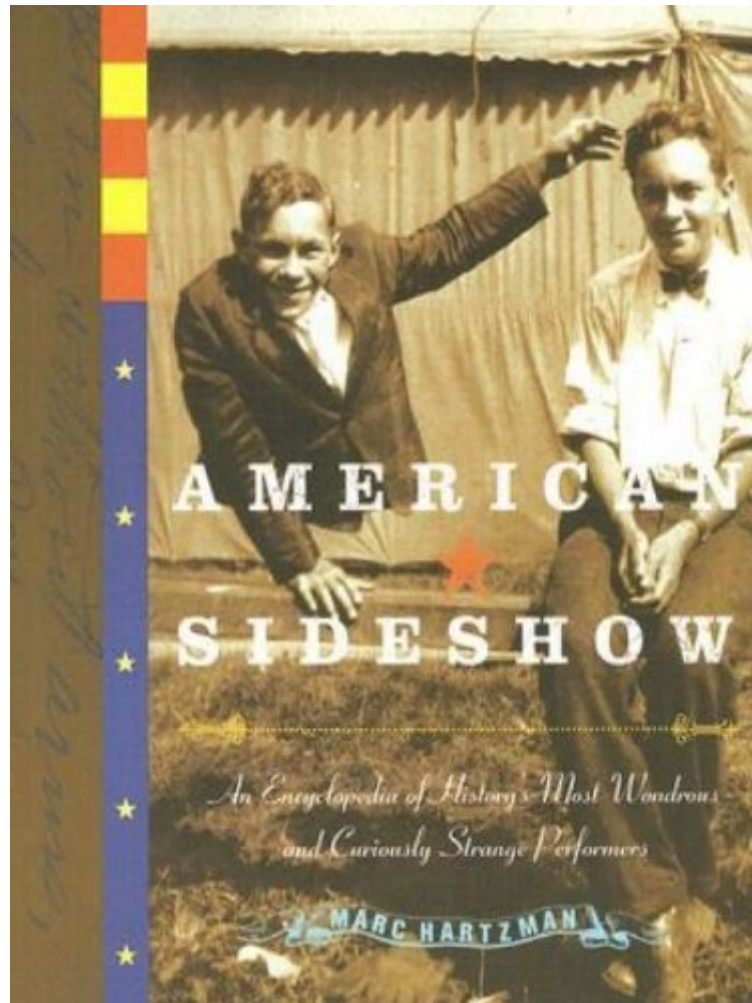


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American Sideshow



Synopsis

A fascinating look into the history of the American sideshow and its performers. Learn what's real, what's fake, and what's just downright bizarre. You've probably heard of Tom Thumb. The Elephant Man. Perhaps even Chang and Eng, the original Siamese twins. But what about Eli Bowen, the legless acrobat? Or Prince Randian, the human torso? These were just a few of the many stars that shone during the heyday of the American sideshow, from 1840 to 1950. American Sideshow chronicles the lives of truly amazing performers, examining these brave and extraordinary curiosities not just as sideshow performers but as people, delving into the lives they led and the ways they were able to triumph over and even benefit from their abnormalities. American Sideshow discusses the rise and fall of the original sideshows and their subsequent replacement by today's self-made freaks. With the progress of modern medicine, technological advancements, and the wonderful world of body modification, abnormalities are being overcome, treated and even prevented: Siamese twins can now be separated, and in addition to this, tongues can be forked, horns surgically implanted, and earlobes removed. There are also, of course, modern-day giants, fire eaters, sword swallowers, glass eaters, human blockheads, and oh, so much more. These fascinating personalities are celebrated through intimate biographies paired with stunning photographs. Approximately two hundred performers from the past one hundred and sixty years are featured, giving readers a comprehensive and sometimes astonishing look into the history of the American sideshow

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Customer Reviews

This book makes fascinating reading. It's mainly done in an encyclopedia style, with entries for many, many people who chose to exhibit their unusual features or talents. The author obviously feel strongly that they have a right to do so, and shows much caring and respect for them. I really liked how he followed their lives all the way through if he could find the information, so they were presented as people and not just shows. However, I would have really liked a little more context with the listing---more information about sideshows in general and more perspective on the listings. I did like the sidebars here and there, but it would have been great to read more about life in general for all the performers--what it was like to travel with a sideshow, what the people watching the shows acted like, etc. I also found the humor inserted in almost every listing a little forced, and not in keeping with the general respectful tone of the book. There were lots of little puns and silly jokes, which didn't add much and were a distraction. I found the last section of the book, about present day shows and performers, to not really fit with the rest of the book. These performers almost all just do odd and bizarre things, as opposed to having odd and bizarre things thrust upon them. I think it's a very different thing to CHOOSE to be odd and bizarre as opposed to making the best of a life where you already are. It sounds like I liked this book much less than I did. I really did find it an interesting and caring survey of a group of people political correctness often prefers not to talk about. It's ironic that this same attitude probably keeps many people on public assistance, instead of making them extremely rich as many of these performers became!

Hello. My name is Ses Carny. I am only one of the many modern day sideshow performers that Marc interviewed for this book. When I got my copy I was very happily surprised at the fondness found in the pages. Most books about the sideshow performers are somewhat degrading to the acts. BUT NOT WITH AMERICAN SIDESHOW! Marc really went above and beyond to bring out the truth about the performers, both past and present. We are not monsters, or people to feel sorry for. Marc has certainly brought a level of dignity, that has not been found published before, to the acts of the sideshow. Thank you Marc for writing such a fantastic book! I am looking forward to your next venture greatly! Ses[...]

Marc Hartzman has undertaken an ambitious project: a chronicle of those showfolks who performed in America's sideshows from circa 1830 to the present. Starting with the golden era under P.T. Barnum, Hartzman gives the reader brief biographical introductions to these unusual performers. Hartzman's prose offers a good humored look at the place where truth and hype converge in the lives of these human oddities. The text is accompanied by rare photographs from the author's and other collections (including that of yours truly). I find it gratifying that whereas most books focus on sideshow's illustrious (or dubious) past, Hartzman also takes time to acknowledge the contemporary performers and showmen keeping the tradition alive out there on the sawdust trail. The short, the tall, the fat, the tattooed, the conjoined, the hirsute, the limbless: they're all here to discover inside Hartzman's tent.

The first things that come to mind when looking at a book on sideshow freaks wouldn't be dignity, but that is what comes off the pages of Marc Hartzman's documentary. The stories are wonderful and show both the fascination for these people and the oddness of their lives and careers but what you leave with is respect. Not only is this a fun book, it is a social document that reaches into what it means to be an American, and in broader terms, what it means to be human. Quite lofty stuff, but done grandly.

This book is informative, thorough and makes a lively read. Hartzman obviously has a lot of passion and affection for his subject. He has detailed the lives of many odd, strange and unique human beings in a refreshingly straight forward manner. He has a light touch and a wry sense of humor that pokes through from time to time. It is apparent that this was a labor of love and the author brings the book right up to date with a review of contemporary performers who are bringing various aspects of the sideshow to modern audiences. The book opens in the 'golden age' of the sideshow, from the 1830s, through the Barnum years up to the early 1900s. A time when the only way rural working people could be 'amazed and amused' was when the circus or the fair blew in to town. Hartzman documents some of the most famous performers and human exhibits of that period. He continues through the 'silver' age, around the end of WW1 through to the Vietnam era. And finishes with the 'modern' age. The three sections document nicely the rise, decline and subtle rebirth of this unique corner of American theater. In a world where reality TV rules supreme, it is gratifying to read a book that is dedicated to celebrating those who truly kept it and continue to keep it very real. Highly recommended. The pictures alone are worth the price of the book, stop reading and order it.

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