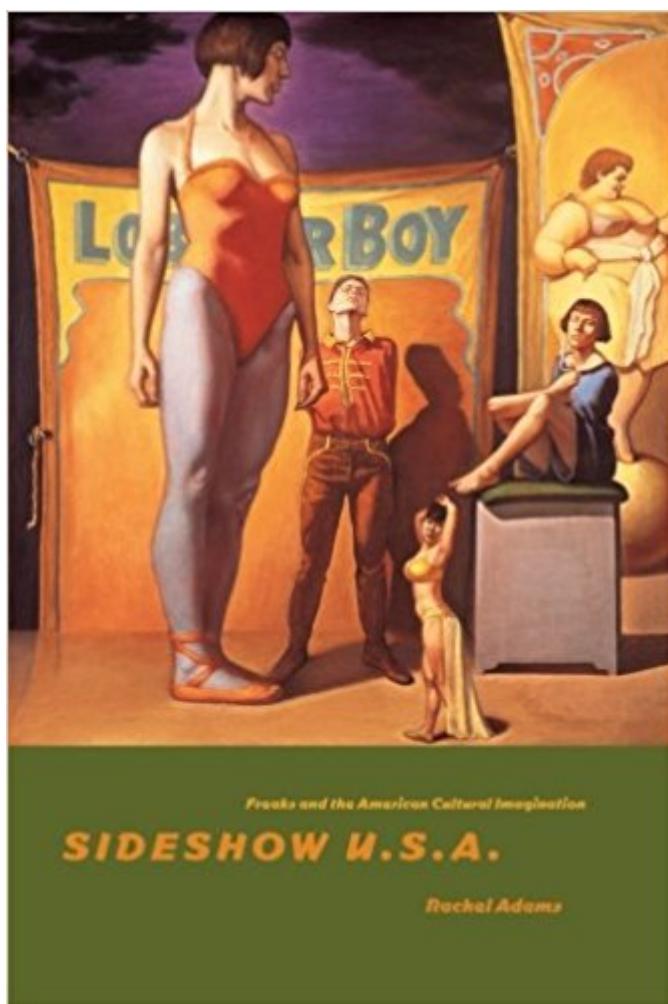


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# Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks And The American Cultural Imagination



## 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 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

## Book Information

Paperback: 296 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; 1 edition (December 1, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0226005399

ISBN-13: 978-0226005393

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #664,866 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #51 in Books > Arts &

## Customer Reviews

"I feel my spine tingle and my heart leap as I relive the wonder of seeing for the first time my most private nightmares on public display out there," wrote 1960s and '70s social and literary critic Leslie Fiedler about the "freak show." Adams, assistant professor of English at Columbia University, explores this common critical perception of the "freak" including, over the centuries, carnival performers, people with physiological disabilities, hippies, people who blur gender conventions and people from radically different, non-Western cultures as distorted visions, or metaphors, of viewers' inner fears. In this wide-ranging, wonderfully imaginative and often startlingly provocative analysis of U.S. representations, displays and marketing of "otherness," Adams exposes the dark side of the mainstream. Documenting the traditional sideshow with sensitivity and shrewd examples, she expands into such diverse phenomena as Carson McCullers's use of "freaks" as a metaphor for nonconformist sexuality in *Member of the Wedding*, Diane Arbus's disturbing photography and the treatment of freakishness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. While frequently uncovering shocking facts in 1906, a Batwa Pygmy from Central Africa named Ota Benga shared a cage with an orangutan at the Bronx Zoo Adams's prodigious research also renders witty, insightful and original readings of such cultural artifacts as Tod Browning's 1932 film, *Freaks*; Katherine Dunn's 1983 novel, *Geek Love*; and Fiedler's 1978 analysis of Browning's movie, also called *Freaks*. A final chapter deals with how postmodern counterculture attempts to reclaim the idea of the freak Jennifer Miller, head of Circus Amok, calls herself a woman with a beard, not a "bearded lady," and gives feminist lectures during her act bringing all of Adams's themes to an intellectually, politically and emotionally satisfying conclusion. B&w photos. (Dec.) Forecast: This smart, academic book is a natural for students of the sociology of deviance, but it should have a life outside of academic circles, too. It has the quirkiness to receive substantial mainstream press attention, and if other major review outlets endorse it, it could be one of the press's biggest books. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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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.

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.

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.

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 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 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

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