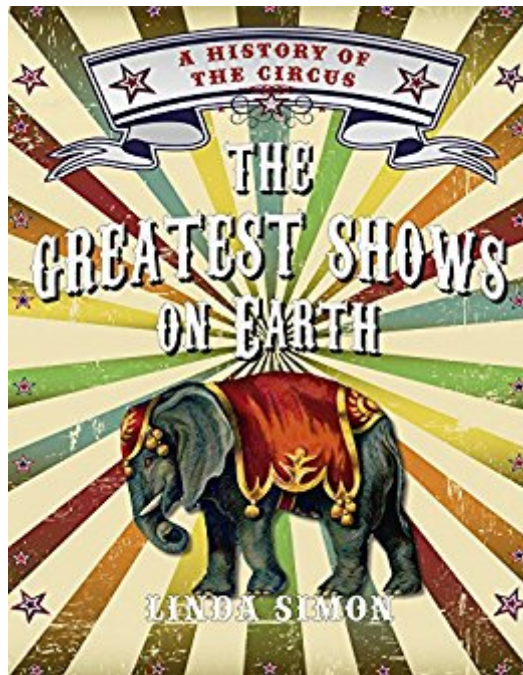




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The Greatest Shows On Earth: A History Of The Circus



Synopsis

Dazzling, clamorous and exotic, the circus is a theatre of the improbable and impossible. From the days of travelling troupes of acrobats and jugglers to the grand spectacle of the Cirque du Soleil, the circus has exerted an indelible fascination. Of all our myths of reinvention, rebirth, second acts and new identities, running away to join the circus has a special allure. In this book Linda Simon asks why we long to soar on the flying trapeze; to ride bareback on a spangled horse; to parade through city streets in costumes of glitter and gold. Why have artists and writers repeatedly or obsessively taken the circus as their subject? What does the circus offer us that we think we so desperately need? The Greatest Shows on Earth takes us from eighteenth-century hippodromes in Britain to intimate one-ring circuses in nineteenth-century Paris, where Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso became enchanted by aerialists and clowns. We meet P. T. Barnum, James Bailey and the enterprising Ringling Brothers, who created the golden age of American circuses. We explore contemporary transformations of the circus, from the whimsical Circus Oz in Australia to New York City's Big Apple Circus. Circus people are central to the story: trick riders and tightrope walkers, sword swallows and animal trainers, contortionists and clowns – these are the men and women who create the sensational, raucous, titillating and incomparable world of the circus. Beautifully illustrated, rich in historical detail and full of colourful anecdotes, Linda Simon's vibrant history is as enchanting as a night at the big-top itself.

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Customer Reviews

Articulate and very well written. Easy read - still reading - but I would think anyone who is a circus enthusiast or historian will find this useful. I will say unfortunately like the circus itself the binding came undone - nothing a little glue didn't fix!

Well-written and absorbing. A sociological review of rootless circus performers that explains that little bit of wanderlust in all of us. A thoroughly enjoyable book!

This is an excellent book, but the title is somewhat misleading. The book has a lot of circus history, but it is by no means complete. You'll pick up a lot of circus-related information. George Washington was a repeat customer of the first American circus in 1793. Picasso's first lover was a trick rider and his first art dealer, a former clown. Alexander Calder (inventor of the mobile) made toy circus figures and then on his hands and knees would manipulate them as a performance--audiences loved it. Simon breaks down the circus into 10 chapters that includes the development of circuses like Ringling and Barnum Bailey, but the strength of the book is looking at the kinds of acts that go into a circus, and these chapters include some remarkable stories of iconic and not so famous performers. These include Chapter 4, Cavalcades, on the era of circus parades. Chapter 5, Without a Net, looks at rope acts, high wire acts and related, including such artists as Blondin.. Chapter 6, Beasts, is on animal acts, particularly big cats and "lion tamers." Chapter 7 Clowns, looks at how clowns developed and at some of the major artists such as Oleg Popov and Emmett Kelley. Chapter 8 Feats, looks at strong men (and women), acrobats, contortionists, jugglers and others. Chapter 9, Prodigies, looks at sideshow elements such as the bearded lady and three legged boys, and may be the best chapter in the book--apparently, the circus provided a sense of acceptance and larger family for people who'd not have done so well elsewhere. The book is nicely illustrated. The other chapters are less focused. Chapter 10 "Transformations," looks at the present and evolving future of the circus and while brief, the rise of shows like the Cirque du Soleil. Chapter 1 lays out a circus history and Chapter 2 "Cirques Intimes" looks mostly at French and British shows ancestral to and variations on the usual idea of the circus, but these tended to be repeated shows in a dedicated

venue rather than the traveling circus that is the usual circus stereotype.

Linda Simon's book, "The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus" is a remarkably readable, entertaining, thoroughly researched, and historically accurate discussion and investigation of the history and development of the circus. This type of mesmerizing, daring, and dedicated entertainment is wonderfully discussed, tracked, and cataloged in 10 chapters and 136 attractive and carefully chosen illustrations. This fascinating and unique study presents the circus as a historical document of the ideals, desires, and expectations of a given time period. Since the time of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and medieval European fairs and marketplaces, the celebration of "human superiority and vulnerability" has always been a focal point. When such "common experiences" were eventually expanded into a distinct, enclosed, directed place of action, the circus developed greatly as an exciting business and romantic occupation. The spontaneity of street entertainment became increasingly localized as a significant community ritual. The circus provided endless diversions for the audience and endless possibility for professional recognition for the performers. So the circus as an exhibition of similarities and differences between cultures truly made it the ideal arena that "represented the world." The author's first hand accounts of the organization of circus life behind the scenes and in the center of the action, provides many insights on how the "greatest shows on earth" were structured, implemented, and perceived. The author proves that the circus art form began as personal experiment. A given performer wished to test the limits of his or her skill and body. In fact, the premise of the book substantiates that "the body as spectacle is the origin of the circus." As circus performances evolved into increasingly innovative, expressive, and bold displays, transformations of identity flourished. Audiences enthusiastically embraced the unusual, unconventional, and "superhuman". Many individuals celebrated the ideals of freedom and experimentation linked to the "improbable and impossible". Modernists and bohemians, artists and writers especially appreciated and identified with the boldness of expression, visibility, creation of self, and the character of the performers. Artists like CÃ©zanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Seraut, Leger, MirÃ© , Renoir, Chagall, Rouault, Alexander Calder, Picasso, and others enjoyed observing and recording the skills and techniques of the performers. MirÃ© and Chagall were entranced by the surreal and dream-like potential of such an environment. Degas, Renoir, and Toulouse-Lautrec focused on its colorful realism in action. Assemblage artist, Calder enjoyed its playful and changing aspects. Rouault explored the mysterious, wild, and macabre within it. And Picasso's Proto-Cubist phase searched the feelings and lives of performers behind the scenes. Each artist's impression was also united in a joint

admiration for the decision of performers to adhere to a distinct identity not prescribed by tradition or society. French modernist Leger claimed that "the ring is freedom" where the performer "fearlessly displays merits and talents". American Expressionist Marsden Hartley admired the athleticism and "daring equestrianism" in performances. German Expressionist Paul Klee was enchanted by the vibrancy, energy, and complexity of performances. He reinterpreted them as a philosophical interplay between life and nature. He claimed that the performer "learns to balance forces that act upon him or her". Writer E.B. White idealized and romanticized the circus as a "gaudy dream" and "ring of ambition, happiness, and youth." The arena of forgetfulness was endlessly entertaining and inspiring for many other writers such as Henry Miller, Emily Dickinson, and William Dean Howells. Writers and artists enjoyed the carefree spirit of the circus arena as an "antidote to the pressures of life". Each artist and writer did his or her best to reveal the most "intimate and close portrait" of a favorite performer. Not surprisingly, such celebrations of circus life also created what the author labels as "circus myths". These myths were fostered by the glamorous ideals of escape from obligation, the promise of new adventure, and community of camaraderie which the circus profession perpetuated. However, such myths masked the harsh realities of long, dedicated hours of training. For example, many dedicated hours of training for "self expression, self definition, perfection of craft, and human character" were encouraged with the founding of "Clown Schools". These specialized organizations became increasingly popular over time. Perhaps that is why clowns were thought to be "the soul of the circus." Circus performers remained sensitive to the reality of endless competition, the "changing ambience of daily life", jealousy from rivals and teammates, risks of permanent injury, "hidden and shifting identities", emotional stress over rejection, loss of popularity, decreased physical ability, depression, loneliness, and the fear of an uncertain financial future. Since a circus performance often questioned, "what humans could do and what they should do", the circus environment was perceived as inappropriate communal entertainment as well. There was opposition to its function and existence, to its many "temptations", and its lack of restraint. Critics were convinced that it encouraged wild and unbridled behavior, the ridiculing of authority, harsh treatment, and even the enslavement of animals. As a result, such popular social gatherings were often defined as "foolish", of no use to the improvement of society as a whole, and not a career for "useful men." However, it is abundantly clear that numerous seriously ambitious, talented, and creative men and women have enthusiastically embraced the circus profession and its potential for financial and personal recognition. The famous Frenchman, Charles Blondin crossed Niagara Falls on a hemp cable in 1858. Alfredo Condon also distinguished himself as "the most astounding man of the flying trapeze." He earned the flattering title, "Adonis of the Altitudes". Monsier D'Atelie

became the "Man with the Iron Jaw". Tight rope dancer, Con Colleano was declared to be the "Wizard of the Wire", and animal trainer Issac van Amburgh was celebrated as the "King of the Beasts". Circus women also had numerous opportunities to display their distinctive skills, courageous character, and feminine charms. "Dainty Marie" walked the rope with a parasol. Mabel Stark became a tiger trainer, and Katie Sandwina earned the title of "Lady Hercules" because she displayed amazing physical strength. Of course, throughout circus history, there were many more male and female equestrians, tight rope walkers, trapeze artists, wild animal trainers, acrobats, jugglers, fire throwers, and other ring leaders who found it thrilling and satisfying to be appreciated and rewarded for their free-spirited dedication. Perhaps the most moving section of this extraordinary account of circus lives is the documentation of the disabled and/or marginalized performers' experiences, challenges, self-doubts, and setbacks. The author notes that their particular desire to rise above "disparaging terms" such as "abnormal, freak, or oddity" confirmed their self-esteem, self-affirmation, intelligence, politeness, and "uncommon dignity." People with a "defect" were declared as "favored by nature" and social organizations became dedicated to their "elevated life." As "physical marvels" on a quest for improving their circumstances, inspirational and defiant "prodigies" of strength and courage established themselves as extraordinary individuals. They inspired new ways of thinking and accepting a "different" person. According to the author, criticisms of circus life and lifestyle did not "detract from the allure and metaphorical power" of its glowing legacy. Over the course of its 100-year history, audiences and performers have collaborated together in the enjoyment of what the circus could provide. Circuses as the "antidote" to the routine of everyday life had tremendous success throughout 19th century America, Britain, and France. Philip Astley opened the first circus in England in 1768. Later, circuses and circus performances evolved into an increasingly complex demonstration of skill, dedicated staff, ambitious national and international publicity, and greater independence and innovation in presentations. P.T. Barnum's transformative and entrepreneurial ideas of 1871 were expanded to exceed audience expectations. The Barnum Circus had 30 additional competitors and rivals during this time period. They included James Bailey's Great London Circus as well as the famous Ringling Brothers Circus. In 1918, all 3 popular circus entertainments merged as the "Big One", the most popular circus attraction of the time. Historically and as an ever-popular art form, the circus grants the possibility to "see what the world contains beside yourself." Circus life can be a liberating and positive source of self-identity for all who chose to become associated with it. This book asks us to further investigate, "what the circus has meant in the past, what it means for us now." Linda Simon admirably documents and illuminates the history, experience, and validity of this unique entertainment. She does so with

greater dedication than has ever been done before.

This book's information will be adequate for the research I'm doing for a small fiction work. However, do not consider imitating its actual writing style. The sentence structure is choppy at times, and random quotes that don't have too much to do with the current content are thrown in like the writer can't think of anything else to fill in there.

The 'A' in the subtitle of this book is more relevant after reading than it might seem at first glance. This is a history that is told through the lens of other artists, and how the evolving circus has impacted on visual arts and literature. Major plot points in the development of the form are laid out, and have some nice detail, all interspersed with quoted passages from famous writers and the related stories of painters who picked the circus as their subject. The book is laid out simply and is in a very accessible and engaging style, although some of the time jumps between the tales of Western Europe and America (which the book doesn't step outside) are a little confusing. The illustrations, photographs, paintings and circus posters, are excellent.

Beautiful book.

BOOK WAS INFORMATIVE BUT READ TOO MUCH LIKE A TEXTBOOK. Did cover the history and origins of the circus well.

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