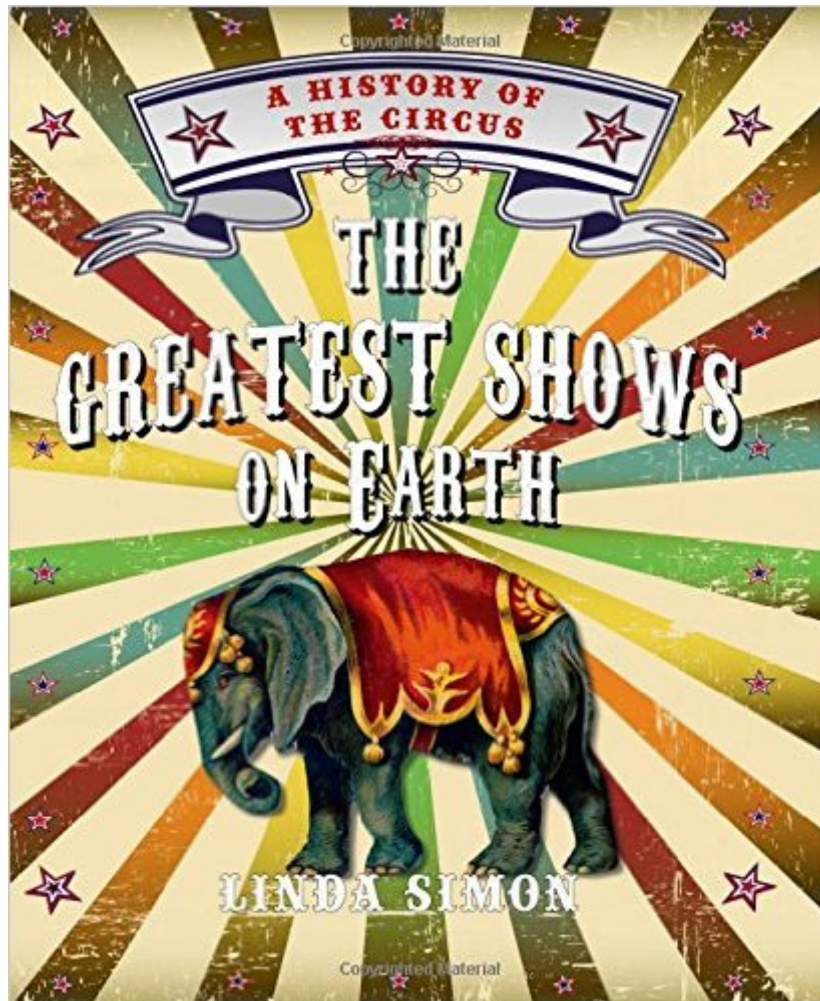


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The Greatest Shows On Earth: A History Of The Circus



Synopsis

Step right up! • and buy a ticket to the Greatest Show on Earth; the Big Top, containing death-defying stunts, dancing bears, roaring tigers, and trumpeting elephants. The circus has always been home to the dazzling and the exotic, the improbable and the impossible; a place of myth and romance, of reinvention, rebirth, second acts, and new identities. Asking why we long to soar on flying trapezes, ride bareback on spangled horses, and parade through the streets in costumes of glitter and gold, this captivating book illuminates the history of the circus and the claim it has on the imaginations of artists, writers, and people around the world.

Traveling back to the circus's early days, Linda Simon takes us to eighteenth-century hippodromes in Great Britain and intimate one-ring circuses in nineteenth-century Paris, where Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso became enchanted with aerialists and clowns. She introduces us to P. T. Barnum, James Bailey, and the enterprising Ringling Brothers and reveals how they created the golden age of American circuses. Moving forward to the whimsical Circus Oz in Australia and to New York City's Big Apple Circus and the grand spectacle of Cirque du Soleil, she shows how the circus has transformed in recent years. At the center of the story are the people; trick riders and tightrope walkers, sword swallowers and animal trainers, contortionists and clowns; that created the sensational, raucous, and sometimes titillating world of the circus.

Beautifully illustrated and filled with rich historical detail and colorful anecdotes, *The Greatest Shows on Earth* is a vibrant history for all those who have ever dreamed of running away to the circus.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

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.

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