

*The New York Times***Arts****ON WRITERS AND WRITING; The Sideshow Must Go On**

By Margo Jefferson  
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Why does the common reader pick up a scholarly book? We all have our scholar-fan passions: military history; this or that ancient civilization; Monk, Messaien or Monteverdi. Still, life is short and these books are often long. Why take a chance outside of your chosen limits?

Passionate scholarship lets you surprise yourself. Which is what happened to me when I picked up "Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination," by Rachel Adams. Why not, I thought? And I was hooked, back in the 19th century with all those suckers born every minute who crowded into P. T. Barnum's American Museum. They could watch Tom Thumb and his midget bride, Lavinia Warren. They could go to the "What Is It?" cage and study William Henry Johnson, a black man passing as part human, part orangutan. (The ad read, "It is beyond dispute THE MOST MARVELOUS CREATURE LIVING.")

The more intellectually inclined could go to the University of California's Hearst Museum and shake hands with Ishi, believed to be the sole surviving member of the American Indian Yahi tribe. He let anthropologists study his language, did janitorial work and in 1911 attended a vaudeville show with a journalist determined to introduce the "uncontaminated man" to "the silvery-voiced and fascinating Orpheum headliner, Lily Lena of the London music halls." Ishi's face, the writer claimed, was drawn. "His fingers . . . trembled visibly, and his first cigar, which he had been puffing with pretended sangfroid, now slowly grew cold and dropped from his teeth." There's a phallic symbol born every minute too.

Freaks violated whatever historical, racial, physical or social norms prevailed at a given time. A man with no arms and no legs qualified, but in the 19th century so did a man with tattoos. There were Chang and Eng, the Siamese twins, and their Anglo-Saxon equivalents, the Hilton sisters. But an ordinary woman with exceptionally long hair could also do. Turning some kind of freakishness into a performance -- a job, not a condition -- was how a lot of otherwise unemployable people made their livings. (It strikes me that a lot of the acts that freaks used to put on have been taken over now by everyday people on reality television shows, who eat cockroaches, cover themselves with garbage and so on.)

Adams divides her book into three "acts," as traditional sideshows did. Act I: the old order of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when freak shows gave people thrills and reassurance. Many who crowded the fairs and circuses were immigrants and poor working people, whom respectable society deemed less than normal. To watch "deviants" perform was to feel superior. Or was it? As Adams writes: "The figures of the half man-half woman, the dog-faced boy, or conjoined twins confront us with their refusal of the apparently primal distinctions between man and woman, human and animal, self and other."

Act I ends with the only film that recreated a sideshow using professional freaks, Tod Browning's notorious and mesmerizing "Freaks" (1932). The whole idea was unsettling. When F. Scott Fitzgerald found himself sharing a lunch table at the MGM commissary with the conjoined Hilton sisters, he ran outside and threw up.

By the postwar years of Act II the real thing -- sweltering heat, the smells of popcorn and animal dung, abusive exchanges between carnies, freaks and customers" -- was disappearing. So metaphor stepped in. Artists turned the freak into a double -- the alienated self with unacceptable desires. Hippies and Yippies transformed the freak into a badge of counterculture identity.

Do you remember what you felt when you first saw Diane Arbus's art photographs of freaks? "A Young Man in Curlers," "A Jewish Giant at Home With His Parents"? Were you excited? Embarrassed? Relieved that since these were pictures, you could just go on staring? And if you haven't read (or reread ) Carson McCullers's "Member of the Wedding" (1946) it's worth doing. McCullers has been called sentimental, too eager to flaunt the desolate oddness of Southern homosexuals, blacks and young people. Her lyricism can be flagrant. But what Southern writer isn't flagrant about something? And she is acrid too; each scene is alive with the small pungent details that turn myths back into lives.

A real scholar sets your own associations loose. Reading Adams on McCullers -- and her readings are layered, not a bit sentimental -- sent me back to "The Circus," a story by Katherine Anne Porter. There, in miniature, are the elements McCullers would use to her own ends in "Wedding." Miranda, a little girl who's been frightened by a clown on a high wire, has to be hustled out of the circus by Dicey, the black housekeeper. A dwarf stands at the tent entrance.

Porter writes: "Miranda almost touched him before she saw him, her distorted face with its open mouth and glistening tears almost level with his. He leaned forward and peered at her with kind, not-human golden eyes, like a nearsighted dog: then made a horrid grimace at her, imitating her own face. Miranda struck at him in sheer ill temper, screaming. Dicey drew her away quickly, but not before Miranda had seen in his face, suddenly, a look of haughty, remote displeasure, a true grown-up look. She knew it well. It chilled her with a new kind of fear: she had not believed he was really human." I'd never fully linked the dwarf's confined anger to Dicey's. She's furious at leaving, she fusses under her breath. But in the end she must lie down with Miranda and say "in her usual warm being-good voice: 'Now you jes shut yo eyes and go to sleep. I ain't going to leave you. Dicey ain't mad at nobody. . . . nobody in the whole worl.' "

Act III brings us to the here and now, when phantasmic biology dominates our fiction: in Toni Morrison's "Beloved," the ex-slaves must expel freaks created by (and for) slavery; in Katherine Dunn's "Geek Love," freaks breed dynasties with the arrogance of aristocrats. But intellectual theory has also infiltrated performance. Freak shows are having a renaissance: cultural criticism is part of the act; so are political satire, cross-

...dressing and bawdy sex games. The Bearded Lady is a lesbian who knows exactly what gender gauntlet she is throwing down.

It seems clear that every age needs its own freaks, a new "them" to be declared immutably different from some hard-won "us." Thanks to cloning and artificial insemination, I suspect some people are studying apparently "normal" animals and children with growing anxiety, looking for signs of difference, sure that some mark of essential freakishness will erupt.

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