



**Rachel Adams.** *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001. ix + 289 pp. \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-00539-3; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-00538-6.

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## Step Right Up

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*Sideshow U.S.A.* takes its place alongside Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show* and Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Freakery* (in which Adams has an essay) as a landmark analysis of the freak show through the lens of disability studies. This well researched study is cleverly organized not into an introduction and three parts, but an overture and three acts, followed by an epilogue.

The Overture, "Recovering Otis," picks up where Bogdan left off, with Otis Jordan, the Frog Man. In this first chapter, Adams highlights the plasticity of the category of "freak," points to cultural identity as a decision, and situates the freak as the centerpiece, not the side show, of our understanding of literary and visual culture.

"Act One" consists of two chapters. Chapter 2, "Freaks of Culture," examines the historical context of the institution. The freak show as we know it—that is, as a way to exhibit "national fantasies" (p. 27)—was born in the mid-nineteenth century. The chapter is divided into two "exhibits": Exhibit A is "The African Savage"; Exhibit B, "The Last Wild Indian." "Sideshow Cinema," the third chapter, is a thorough analysis of the 1932 film *Freaks*. Adams accepts the film as an ambiguous version of the freak show in which the actors can be seen as monstrous Other or as part of our concept of our normal selves. "Freaks are powerful symbols of a common anxiety that underneath the apparent normality of our bodies we are as divided as the conjoined twins, as fragmented as the human torso, as excessive as the fat person" (pp. 84-85).

The first chapter of "Act Two," chapter 4, is subtitled "The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers." Carson McCullers found commonalities with people who

did not fit readily into any category of identity. The ferment of the civil rights movement converges with McCullers's ideas of how physical marks of the outcaste shape and reflect identity. The following chapter, "Freak Photography," weaves together themes about the visual representation of physical difference. "The camera's paradoxical capacity to document reality and to deceive the eye made it an ideal device for the representation of freaks, creatures jointly born of biology, fantasy, and commerce" (p. 113). Adams focuses on the contrast between typical freak portraiture and Zoe Leonard's portrait of Jennifer Miller, a "bearded lady" who poses in classic pin-up girl style. Miller's pose suggests that "other types of freakishness have become ever more a matter of choice and style" (p. 136). "From Sideshow to the Streets," the concluding chapter of "Act Two," explores the semantics of the term "freak," including the noun and the verb as expressions of chosen identities and activities.

"Act Three" consists of chapters 7 and 8, "The Black Look" and "Maternal Impressions." Using Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a vehicle, Adams skillfully examines race, scapegoating, and hierarchies of physical appearance in chapter 7. "Maternal Impressions," an analysis of Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*, includes familiar material from Adams's essay in *Freakery*. Adams suggests that *Geek Love*, the merit of which has been contested among disability studies scholars and activists, "seems like an explicit attempt to rewrite" *Freaks*. Ultimately, she points out, becoming a freak is portrayed as a privilege.

The epilogue, "Live from New York," considers contemporary freak shows, including the attempts to resurrect traditional freak shows at Coney Island and the postmodern, radical artists' rendition of the freak show in Brooklyn. The highlight of this chapter is the

section on Jennifer Miller, “Bearded Lady and Revolutionary.”

Throughout the book, Adams deftly applies the tools of literary and film analysis to the freak show, yet does not pull her reader into the quicksand of jargon that so often accompanies such an approach. Adams’s writing is fresh and personable, and thus

her many important points are palatable and accessible. Beautifully illustrated with archival and other material, this book will be indispensable in disability studies classes. *Sideshow U.S.A* should be owned by every library, and should be in the personal collection of anyone interested in disability history or disability studies in general.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

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