



# Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination

*Rachel Adams*

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## **Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination** Rachel Adams

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*

## **Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination Details**

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Author : Rachel Adams

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# **From Reader Review Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination for online ebook**

## **Stevi Costa says**

Adams produces a cultural investigation of the freakshow, as well as the factors that lead to its decline and its revolutionary/counterculture recapitulations in the 1960s and beyond. Her history is capably done and compelling, but what's most striking is the way in which she blends this history with criticism. A sideshow aficionado myself, I can't say that Adams historical work on freakshows, her readings of freak photography, or the use of the camera/narrative in Tod Browning's *Freaks* were all that revelatory to me, but I'm sure they'd be particularly enlightening to readers without the historical background. (They're very good chapters, and particularly attentive to racial freakishness.)

Her best chapter by far is her intriguing reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which sites a critically ignored trip to the carnival as a means through which to read the remainder of the novel. I'm particularly impressed by this reading because it mirrors the kind of work I like to do in my own literary studies. (Adams and I shared a thesis advisor at UCSB in two wildly different stages of our careers, so I am both surprised and unsurprised at our similar ways of thinking and obvious mutual interest in freakshows.) I look forward to reading much more of Adams work.

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## **Tracey says**

I requested this book thru ILL and got a copy from the IUPUI library.

Adams approaches the concept of "freaks" from a variety of angles, combining true stories with literary and cinematic portrayals and interpretations of the freak world. The writing style is academic, yet still engaging. Each chapter is written almost in the style of a formal paper, with a thesis, supporting materials, and concluding paragraphs. Her Notes and Bibliography sections are substantial (20 & 15 pages respectively) and the index seems thorough as well.

Adams opens the book with stories of Oto Benga and Ishi, men who as representations of their cultural groups (African pygmy and a Native American tribe) were put on display in the early 1900's, Oto in an orangutan cage and Ishi at the Hearst Museum of Anthropology. She also briefly touches on other famous performers, such as Chang & Eng, the Hilton Sisters and Barnum's "What Is It?" - too briefly, perhaps, for those new to the history of sideshows and freaks. Photos of performers from the heyday of sideshows are included, as well as contemporary photos from the revival of the freakshow, starting in the late 1990's.

Cultural views of this world are also examined, with discussions of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*, Tod Browning's movie *Freaks* and the photography of Diane Arbus - as well as the counterculture movement of the 1960's and its embrace of the word "freak". Adams spends an entire chapter on Carson McCullers' novels, and her use of the freak/queer concept regarding gender roles.

The final section looks at the revival of the live freak show, particularly in the New York area. These shows focus primarily on performances and stunts - the third of the traditional freak categories: race, disability and unusual talents. Jennifer Miller, a bearded lady, uses her situation as feminist platform.

While I was somewhat surprised that the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia got no mention at all; otherwise, I

found this book to be a very thorough look at the cultural influence of freaks & sideshows in recent American history. Recommended to anyone with an interest in this area.

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### **Sezín Koehler says**

Adams explores the history of the word and world of freaks, from the sideshow to the streets, as the term and existence of freaks changes through the times.

I took a number of breaks while reading this since it is an academic study and the language can be a bit exhausting if you're not used to reading gender studies, literary criticism and queer theory, so while reading this book I also read "Beloved", "The Wizard of Oz", and "How To Make An American Quilt", which was interesting since themes from all these books, including "Sideshow USA" overlapped in a really interesting way. The intersection of gender, race and class and the carnival were apparent in all these stories, making for a very nuanced reading.

I also found it interesting that in the changing contexts of the word "freak", we are seeing a new meaning emerging through Lady Gaga's coinage: At the beginning of her current show she screams, "I've locked the doors and the freaks are all outside!" When explaining this statement she said that while people may think she's a freak and her fans are freaks, when under her embrace they are the "normal" ones and everyone else becomes weird. In a lot of ways this is almost a re-taking of the original meaning of the word freak, which referred to people who were physically, sexually and racially different. Fascinating.

I will certainly be referring to this book often as I write about issues of identity and I will likely draw parallels from this study to the "Third Culture Kids" book by Ruth van Reken.

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### **j says**

used this book to conduct research and write a paper on the urban performativity of tattoo.  
also, i love anything related to freaks/hows. academic but still kickass.

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### **Zara says**

I particularly liked the chapter on Tod Browning's Freaks.

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### **Jessica says**

brilliant

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### **Susan says**

Very good book, covering the movie "Freaks", Carson McCullers' writing, Diane Arbus' photos. It's definitely worth reading, but I'm looking more for history right now.

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