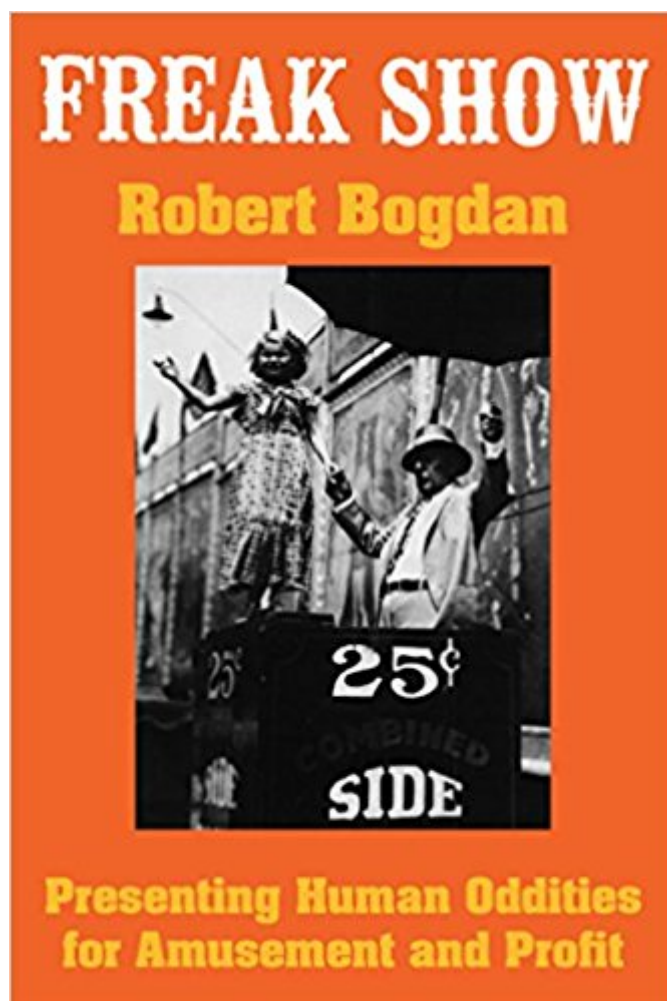


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# Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities For Amusement And Profit



## Synopsis

From 1840 until 1940, freak shows by the hundreds crisscrossed the United States, from the smallest towns to the largest cities, exhibiting their casts of dwarfs, giants, Siamese twins, bearded ladies, savages, snake charmers, fire eaters, and other oddities. By today's standards such displays would be considered cruel and exploitative—the pornography of disability. Yet for one hundred years the freak show was widely accepted as one of America's most popular forms of entertainment. Robert Bogdan's fascinating social history brings to life the world of the freak show and explores the culture that nurtured and, later, abandoned it. In uncovering this neglected chapter of show business, he describes in detail the flimflam artistry behind the shows, the promoters and the audiences, and the gradual evolution of public opinion from awe to embarrassment. Freaks were not born, Bogdan reveals; they were manufactured by the amusement world, usually with the active participation of the freaks themselves. Many of the "human curiosities" found fame and fortune, becoming the celebrities of their time, until the ascent of professional medicine transformed them from marvels into pathological specimens.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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This harks back to the days when people were honestly curious and allowed those with deformities to make an honest living. The circus, the stage and the side show required imagination and thought to appreciate. Today we have blatant exploitation of the unfortunate by so called help organisations. One cannot enjoy evening TV without ads featuring human misery by: The Shriners, Disabled American Veterans, Wounded Warriors, and St. Jude's Hospital. They often double or triple up on these ads. They never change them. P.T. Barnum at least varied the fare. I would rather have my deformities viewed by a dozen rubes, than have them displayed in millions of homes. The Barnums paid a fair wage. Some of these so called help organizations pass along less than 10% of the take. It is interesting to read about these stars of yesteryear. Perhaps someone will do a book on the limbless and scarred people used in begging TV ads.

One does not need to be a fan of the circuses or amusements along those lines to be intrigued by Robert Bogdan's examination of freak shows. In "Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit," Bogdan traces the roots and heyday of freak shows with alacrity, intelligence, and respect. This thoroughly researched work is filled with pictures and artifacts (some rather gruesome in their subject) that furthers Bogdan's examination of freak show history. Beginning in the mid-1800s to around 1940, freak shows were a staple of amusement in the United States. At a time when strange creatures and humans from foreign countries were unknown to those in other countries it was easy to startle and entertain with these fascinating exhibits. Who now can imagine what it would be like to live in a world where a giraffe was an unknown, fascinatingly strange creature. It is so common to us today that at times it is hard to conceive how people could be taken in by some of the fabricated freaks (or gaffs as they were known as). The lack of scientific and medical knowledge allowed freak shows to prosper, especially those that featured people we now know as mentally handicapped, because their conditions were unidentified at the time. True, real oddities existed - the super-tall or super-small, the armless or legless wonders, the Siamese twins - but freak shows also cast their lot in created freaks - fake "savages" from foreign lands, "wild" children, island cannibals, and tattooed marvels in a day and age when tattooing was not common, but rather a sure sign of savage heathens. Bogdan covers the real as well as the fake, those who

made themselves feaks and those who were forced to be labled as freaks. Knowing what we do today, it is incredible to think that this was allowed to happen, but humans are so curious and so struck by differences that we find it hard not to gawk at these oddities, whether they are on stage or passing us on the street. At times Bogdan's work reads a lot like a thesis and it is a little redundant and recursive at times, but that is likely due to the fact that the author had a lot of ground to cover. It is evident that Bogdan is not attempting anything like exploitation of his topic, for he treats it with profound respect and honestly, even assessing the freak show's ancestors of today. It is an interesting, although sometimes dry, read about a fascinating topic even for someone who has no interest in the circus whatsoever.

I have been using *Freak Show* in my Introduction to Sociology class since it has been published. I find the book to be a great way to introduce students to a qualitative approach to the sociology of deviance. Bogdan's fresh approach to the material makes the experiences of the so-called "freaks" come alive. Discussion that ensues covers the range from the construction of disabilities, how non-white "races" were constructed as "inferior," and the way modern-day "Freak shows" live on in TV-talk shows. I have frequently cast about for a newer supplemental reading to offer my students, but have always come back to *Freak Show*. And for all you non-professors out there, I recommend the book as a great read!

Just a quick review (more of a vote really), I read this a couple years ago and really enjoyed it and felt I learned a lot. It contains much well researched material on not just the history of "freak shows," but also on related subjects like the history of museums and the history of scientifically classifying different kinds of humans. I thought it was great.

I was afraid that this was going to be one of those hand-wringing tsk-tsk-tsk books with pretenses to sociology. Not a bit of it! It's a well-researched and pleasant history of just what we all want to read about and see at the sideshow. It is particularly uplifting to know that many of these "freaks" are equanimous about their condition, and don't consider themselves particularly ill-treated. The belief that they are sad creatures whom fate has done poorly by, is simply our own condescension.

The author did an excellent job of writing about freak shows in their historical context. Even though written as sociological qualitative research, the lay person can read and enjoy this book. I am buying it for my mother who is not involved in the world of academia. It is well written and provides the

reader with an appreciation of the history. I would recommend it.

This book is a book that tells you about the ins and outs of how the freakshows started and profited. I had no idea that it was a social book. I thought that it would be a a book about "freaks". I was wrong. It is a good book though. I enjoy reading about oddities and liked learning about how they were brought about into the public eye. It's worth taking a look at.

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