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Secrets Of The Sideshows



Synopsis

The carnival sideshows of the past have left behind a fascinating legacy of mystery and intrigue. The secrets behind such daring feats as fire-eating and sword swallowing and bizarre exhibitions of human oddities as "Alligator Boys" and "Gorilla Girls" still remain, only grudgingly if ever given up by performers and carnival professionals. Working alongside the performers, Joe Nickell blows the lid off these mysteries of the midway. The author reveals the structure of the shows, specific methods behind the performances, and the showmen's tactics for recruiting performers and attracting crowds. He also traces the history of such spectacles, from ancient Egyptian magic and street fairs to the golden age of P.T. Barnum's sideshows. With revealing insight into the personal lives of the men and women billed as freaks, Nickell unfolds the captivating story of the midway show.

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Customer Reviews

For centuries, millions of people have enjoyed looking at commercial exhibits of the odd and curious. Joe Nickell is one of those people. Growing up in Kentucky, he never missed the carnivals and circuses that had human and animal oddities on display as sideshows. Nickell is well known for investigating frauds and hoaxes for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, but it doesn't matter to him that many sideshow acts were bogus or at least grossly exaggerated on the banners outside the shows. He obviously loves the now-disappearing shows, and in *Secrets of the Sideshows* (University Press of Kentucky), that affection is made plain. To be sure, he gives plenty of secrets away here, most of them open secrets, but the book works best

as a tribute to the imagination of the performers and organizers of the exhibits which were meant to provoke and satisfy that admirable old human characteristic, curiosity. The book provokes and satisfies in the same way. Nickell notes that "sideshow" means an adjunct to the main show. The "midway" where these shows were located was midway between the entrance and the main attraction. He briefly recounts early history, and then goes into their heyday starting in the early 1900s. Sideshows featured magic performances, often with one big trick like sawing the woman in half or the escape from a chained box. The way these sorts of tricks are done is explained here, but the explanations would not ruin the fun of a good performance. Fire-eating and sword-swallowing are explained, as is how to eat glass or walk barefoot on it, or how to walk barefoot up a ladder of swords. The explanations are enough to show how the tricks are done, but few readers are going to be tempted to try them.

Joe Nickell's latest book, *Secrets of the Sideshow* is a thoroughly researched tome that is worth the cover price for the pictures alone. The cover effectively uses a 'banner art' style with 'Frog Boy' charmingly gracing the spine. The title is a little misleading, it is not a revelatory guide or 'masked magician' type of book at all. More of a scholarly attempt to document a lost part of American theatre. Mr. Nickell's previous works were largely concerned with his role as editor of the *Skeptical Enquirer*. So deal with the Shroud of Turin, Bigfoot etc. Not having read any of those I cannot comment, but suffice to say that this history of bringing a scientific mind to apparent miracles may have impacted the choice of title. What is apparent is that he has a real love of this subject. He has worked the midway at various fairs as a magician and obviously the carnival world got into his blood. Relying heavily on interviews with carnival legends Ward Hall, Chris Christ and Bobby Reynolds the author details the history of this unique piece of Americana. Bobby Reynolds' contributions are fairly ascerbic with a certain bitterness when compared to Ward Hall's more agreeable approach. No attempt appears to have been made to edit any of these contributions. There are copious references to other works, Ricky Jay, Daniel Mannix and Al Stencell are quoted liberally and these authors works would make excellent companion reads. As one goes through the book the reader does learn how effects are achieved, the use of gaffs, fakery and general deception are discussed. However, this remains a secondary facet of this work. It is much more of a historical encyclopedia and includes a thorough list of references and detailed index.

Although Joe Nickell pulls a couple of his punches, probably in the interests of decorum, his "Secrets of the Sideshows" is virtually an encyclopedia of that nearly extinct form of entertainment.

Or is it nearly extinct? Of the late evolution of the classic sideshow, only Sideshows by the Seashore, operating summers at Coney Island, survives, and this only by turning itself into a non-profit and taking students. The old-fashioned traveling exhibition is, indeed, gone. Nickell has worked as a sideshow talker (not barker, he insists) and magician, and interviewed the last of the old-time managers, Chris Christ, Ward Hall and Bobby Reynolds, before they closed their tents for good around 2002-2004, so he has the background. He notes, amusingly, that Christ, when he started at age 19, was the youngest exhibitor in the business, and 35 years later "he was still the youngest." The first 80 pages, which trace the history of the public displays that evolved into the sideshow (culminating in 1893 at the Chicago Worlds Fair, with its Midway Plaisance, which gave the name to the American outdoor entertainment zone, and, by the way, to its somewhat disreputable appendix, the "sideshow") is rather slow going. Nickell rightly places London's Bartholomew Fair at the crux of the evolution of a kind of entertainment that goes back as far as history tells, but he fails to exploit the rich literature of that fair (which ended in 1855) as represented by, for example, Ned Ward's "London Spy." Nor does he do much better with the equally rich trove of stories swirling around P.T. Barnum in the 19th century. Nevertheless, the basic information is here, with plenty of references.

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