

(Nearly) All Will Be Revealed: An Insider's View of Sideshow Acts, Past and Present

A review of



Secrets of the Sideshows

by Joe Nickell

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Reviewed by
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—Like many, I went to the circus as a kid, welcoming the exotic break from life in my small, midwestern town. I remember the clowns, the vendors, the menagerie and performances of exotic beasts, the trapeze artists. I don't recall the acts that surrounded the Big Top, those performers lacking the acrobatic skill, or gigantic elephants, to make it inside. As such, the first time I really thought about life in these sideshows was at a college film society screening of the cult classic *Freaks*, created by former circus contortionist Tod Browning (1932). Billed as a horror movie and following on the heels of his successful *Dracula* (Browning & Laemmle, 1931), this story of a beautiful trapeze artist who marries a dwarf for his money and plots with her lover, the circus strongman, to kill him used the chasm between the “respectable” Big Top performer and the sideshow “freak” as the fulcrum with which to leverage a creepy sort of terror out of its audience. The completely unique climax centered on the invocation “Make her one of us.” Moving from Bela Lugosi's iconic vampire to the margins of the sideshow world proved too much for mainstream audiences. For those who nonetheless want to better understand that hidden world, Joe Nickell's book *Secrets of the Sideshow* simultaneously provides an insider's glimpse of that world on the skirts of the main event and an excursion into a vanishing feature of North American life.

—In a very different, and possibly unintentional, way than *Freaks*, *Secrets of the Sideshow* made me acutely conscious of the relationship between the sideshow performer and us, the observers. Where *Freaks* highlighted the insularity and camaraderie of the tortured sideshow existence, *Secrets* highlights the variety. The seemingly infinite iterations of the sideshow exhibit raised many questions for me. What compels a “normal” person to pay a quarter or a couple of dollars to see the “alligator boy,” “largest woman in the world,” or “one-and-a-half” (an individual with some portion of a vestigial conjoined twin emerging from his or her body)? I found myself asking, who is the freak, the person with a facial deformity sitting in a tent awaiting the crowd or those queuing up to catch a glimpse of the man with two faces? Is this how sideshow performers make the audience “one of us?”

The Bally Talker

☞ Nickell's book focuses on a different set of questions, and he takes a discernible delight in guiding us through the when, what, who, and how of sideshow life. Nickell, billed on the jacket as “once a carnival pitchman [what we later come to call a bally talker], then a magician, private detective, and investigative reporter,” opens the book with a rather exhilarating tour through the multifarious origins of the sideshow, from ancient Egyptian times through the era of P. T. Barnum to the present day. By the time of the French Revolution, what we would recognize as the circus emerged in Europe. The initial focus of both the circus and the one-person shows that sprouted alongside them (hence, sideshow) was the skill of the performer, whether in horse riding, tightrope walking, or animal training. As the shows evolved and reached broader audiences, “curiosities” of all sorts began to be displayed. The development of the modern sideshow paralleled that of the circus, but it evolved along the margins.

☞ Readers might be struck by the parallels between the sideshow and today's reality television. Recent charges of vote rigging in the popular reality series *American Idol* did not appear to damage its clout in the ratings, where it was consistently watched by more Americans than the Torino Winter Olympics. Performers on reality shows often complain about how events (and their selves) were edited to appear to the viewer. Contrast that with this statement arising from observations originally contained in a book published in the late 1500s: “Even those who suspected trickery lined up anyway and paid the admission fee to satisfy their curiosity” (p. 4). Similarly, Nickell observes that in the 1830s the main shows (think the Big Three broadcast television stations in 2000) proclaimed their distinction from the sideshows (think Fox's *Temptation Island*), advertising that they never displayed the little people, giants, or bottled organisms that sideshows featured by this time. Similar questions about the appeal and function of the sideshow are raised when one ponders the devotion with which contemporary society follows the consumption of pickled entrails, hair-raising parenting techniques, or train-wreck dates on reality shows. I was hopeful that Nickell's lifelong engagement with sideshows would enable him to shed light on such questions. However, although it is generous with insider information on the sideshow, the book provides little insight.

☞ We are introduced at the beginning of the book to Nickell's delight in the lingo of the sideshow, with italicized words and quotations marks abounding. For example, Nickell reveals, very much in the spirit of his subjects, “a term never used before in public but reserved for those who are with it (in the know)” (p. 322). This term refers to “*baby shows* (aka *bottle shows*)” (p. 327), which feature preserved fetuses. The term he reveals conveys as much about the disposition of the sideshow worker as any other section in the book: matter of fact, cynical, imaginative, and gruesomely compelling. Nickell has a clear affection for his subject matter, and the book is replete with amateur photos from his own trips to “ten-in-ones” (sideshows with multiple acts), as well as “single-Os” (stand-alone shows) featuring tiny, living mermaids; baby shows; and “half” boys and girls (those born without legs). His stories about the people who populate these sideshows usually have an unassuming humanism to them, and I frequently found myself admiring the accomplishments of people like Eli Bowen, the “legless wonder”; P. T. Barnum's celebrated performer, General Tom Thumb, whose marriage was a national event; and the “Armless Fiddler,” Carl Unthan, who lectured to World War I amputees (one of the first motivational speakers?).

Human Oddities and Working Acts

☞ Nickell leads us through the ins and outs of sideshow life, from their history and structure to the categorization, variety, and secrets of their various acts. One principal distinction is that between “human oddities,” those who are, or appear to be, physically different than the norm, and “working acts,” those who use, or appear to use, skill and talent to perform impressive feats. Although other, more ornate examples exist in the literature (e.g., Jay, 1998), Nickell's work is satisfying in terms of the sheer amount and variety of information he conveys—I am not sure the typical reader will find anything to be missing—and by the fact that he truly does reveal how several of the working acts and human gaffing (faking oddities or deceiving the audience) are accomplished. Some secrets led me to unsurprising conclusions (I'd rather tell fortunes than swallow acid); others were more surprising (I'd probably have an easier time pounding a screwdriver up my nose with a hammer than succeeding as a gaffed “half body in a swing”). Nickell also describes the rotation of many performers from oddity to working act or vice versa. Robertson Davies's (1975) luminous novel *World of Wonders* celebrates a bygone age of magic and traveling sideshows and incidentally describes the descent of a gifted working act (magician) to lowly geek (beastlike human who eats—or appears to eat—live animals) as a result of substance abuse. Nickell also describes such cases.

Elegy for the Sideshow

☞ The great age of sideshows is long past, and Nickell's book, in the end, is a historical document charting a decline from a time when sideshow performers could be national celebrities to his encounters with smaller and more dilapidated versions of what once used to be. Unsurprisingly, the few remaining sideshow operators attribute this decline to economics. Modern carnival operators must pay for expensive real estate and even more expensive rides. Whereas they make 100% profits from rides, which contemporary carnivals seem to prefer, they would have to share profits with sideshows. Surprisingly, none of the operators attribute this decline to political correctness. Although baby shows are now pitched as warnings about the horrors of drug abuse, rather than highlighting biological freakishness, the feeling we are left with is that audiences just seem to prefer bigger, noisier entertainments.

☞ What we are not led to understand is why sideshows existed in the first place. Why would people go to such lengths to perform in these shows? Fame? Certainly some achieved it long ago, but it is not probable nowadays, and performers' identities are often deliberately obscured. Reality television appearances, our modern analogue, are more likely to be motivated by fame. Money? Few ever became wealthy from sideshows. Basic survival? Nickell never really examines this possibility, that some performers joined the sideshow because it provided one of the few means of livelihood available to them. Someone with the physical control and skill to perform the famous swords-through-the-box trick (and here I mean the accomplice) surely has marketable skills. For those whose act centers on their physical being, it might be more difficult to find a niche in the economy, although our Internet- and phone-based economy seems to rest on the disembodied transaction. Lifestyle? One of the impressions Nickell leaves the reader with is the great camaraderie among sideshow denizens. Perhaps one who has been disfigured, or has developed a uniquely expendable skill, feels a sense of belonging in the sideshow. Why were there ever audiences for these shows? If we turn to the scant research literature, we find circuses characterized as prototypes of social behavior, potentially important for a child's development (Bouissac, 1981), with the sideshows as an outlet for unacceptable impulses (Dechant, Beresin,

& Bostic, 2002). Dechant et al. claim that the Jerry Springer-like talk shows have replaced the sideshow. Our national fascination with “real” people, with all their warts exposed, has stimulated only slightly more empirical investigation, but a recent article gives us some insight—those of us who watch more reality shows appear to have an elevated need to feel self-important (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004).

—In a critical way, Nickell recreates the sideshow experience. Without exploring why we want to “step right in,” he assumes we'd want to look at whatever he offers, much as a sideshow performer might assume that we'd want to see a woman with hair glued to her face and body or someone with no legs, a dermatological condition, or disfiguration. There is no investigation of the appeal, no explanation of why we should care, just the implicit assumption that we will. As an insider, he offers us a glimpse of performers as people, just like the guy down the road. He doesn't ask “Why did you join a sideshow?”; he doesn't probe motivations; he seems to operate under the assumption that this is what certain people do and that's all. To a psychologist, this is deeply unsatisfying, yet humanizing. Do we ask the long-haul trucker how she got started? Do we ask the bank teller why he does what he does? Similarly, there is no “why” these performers joined, chose their acts (self-explanatory in the case of some oddities), decided to stop, and so forth. What was life like outside the show for the giant who later became a steel worker? In a way, these are just jobs, but ones with which we used to be fascinated. Nonetheless, the questions remain. Why do they do what they do? Why do we look? What becomes of us when we do?

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