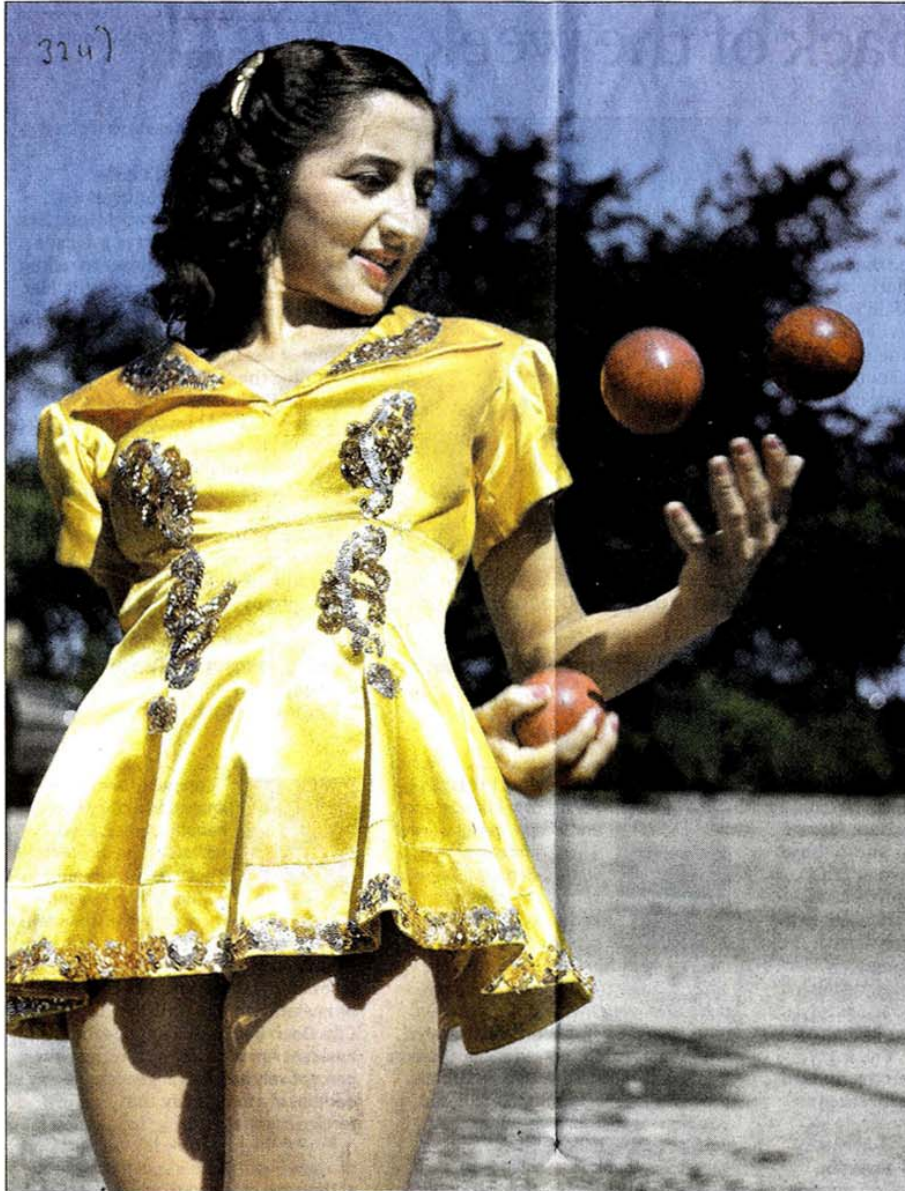


[ PHOTOGRAPHY ]



Celebrated juggler  
Lottie Brunn of the  
Ringling Bros and  
Barnum & Bailey  
Circus, 1949.  
Illinois State  
University,  
Milner Library  
Special Collections

## Talk about the clown jewels...

### The Circus

Noel Daniel  
Taschen £120, pp670

For anyone who spent their childhood dreaming of running away to join the circus, perhaps as a sword swallower or a daredevil trapeze artist, this beautifully produced, ginormous book will represent sawdust-and-spangles nirvana. Rest assured, the price is more than matched by the elephantine size: at almost 2ft long, *The Circus* is less coffee-table book than actual coffee table.

It's clearly the fruit of Herculean labours. Editor Noel Daniel scoured the photo albums and archives of a host of former performers and circus

historians, selecting 900 images from a hoard of 300,000, most of them previously unpublished. Kitsch, faintly disturbing vintage posters depicting rollerskating bears and four-legged girls wielding tennis rackets jostle alongside evocative photographs from the Forties and Fifties, the glory days of the great American circus. Knowledgeable, chatty essays by Linda Granfield open each chapter and help to render the section on circus freaks a little more palatable. As she is at pains to explain, for bearded ladies and Siamese twins, work in a circus offered a rare chance for an independent life.

Best of all, though, are the photographs of off-duty circus

people, snapped peeling potatoes or wading through oceans of mud. Clown Charlie Bell paints his face in front of a washing line strung with pink leotards; a snake charmer in a flowered frock beams at the camera, two pythons draped casually about her neck. And, on page 299, is the embodiment of all my childish fantasies in the comely form of aerialist Toni Martin, clad in a red sequined bikini, a lion cub sprawled on her lap. Only one question remains unanswered: are Barnum & Bailey still hiring? OLIVIA LAING

To order *The Circus* for £108 with free UK p&p, go to [observer.co.uk/bookshop](http://observer.co.uk/bookshop) or call 0870 836 0885