

Remember the excited anticipation you felt when you were a kid and you knew something big and marvelous -- The Circus!!! -- was coming to town? That is the kind of anticipation you will feel when you see this book. Because, even before you open it, even before you are 10 feet away from it, you will know that something marvelous is about to reveal itself to you.

Why? Because this book is LARGE!!. We're talking huge, larger than over-sized. More Jumbo than Jumbo. At eighteen inches tall and three inches thick, it is easily the largest book I have ever seen. But it is not just the sheer weight of this book that will make you want to keep it on your lap forever - it is all the marvels inside that will rivet you.

The book covers the golden age of the American Circus from 1870 to 1950. The circus, during that time, was much more than just a show - it was a way of life, a cultural institution, a whole world unto itself, a reflection of and promoter of the political, social, global, and industrial forces of each age. The strength of this book is how it looks deeply into all of these aspects. For example:

- Photographs are not just standard show and publicity shots, but include never-before-seen snapshots from performers scrap books.
- The influences of the agrarian economy of the 1700s, the industrial age of the 1800s, and the cinema and television developments of the 1900s, are all expounded on.
- In one large chapter, and woven throughout the book, are vivid descriptions of life behind the scenes on the back lot. The life of the circus leaps off each page.
- The book brings forth the delicate balancing act of the circus to not run afoul of presiding ethics of the time, portraying itself as an ethical and even educational institution while simultaneously always hinting at the exotic, the erotic, and the forbidden.
- As a beacon of freedom, the circus, as this book ably describes, was far ahead of its time in allowing equality of women, employment for minorities, and respect and a bona fide community for workers of all classes.

Even if you have been reading circus books for decades, this book will shed new light on the phenomenon of the circus, and give you a deeper respect and appreciation for the artists that lived the circus life.

Each precious page of this astonishing book is a sheer delight, and I turned each page with same rapt anticipation as a 12 year old Kansas farmboy about to enter the Big Top and see things never seen or dreamed of before. Because the circus in its hey day was larger than life, it deserves a book that is equally so. This book succeeds gloriously in reaching this apex.

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