

P. T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman

By Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III, Peter W. Kunhardt

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If Abraham Lincoln was the great moral force of his age, Phineas Taylor Barnum was its great provider of joy. As one of the earliest practitioners of "the show business," Barnum dedicated his long career to alleviating the "severe and drudging practicalness" he considered the chief defect of American civilization. His remedy? A prodigious swarm of divas, minstrels, circuses, museums of curiosities, beauty pageants, sideshows, fat-baby and poultry contests – whatever it took to entertain his fellow citizens while making him one of his country's first millionaires.

With P.T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman, the Messrs Kunhardt rediscover the genius and vision of an unmatched impresario and entrepreneur. In vivid words and spellbinding pictures (more than 500 photographs, engravings, and color lithographs from 41 different archives), we meet a man of complex motives, a master of merchandise, an inveterate self-promoter often reviled for his opportunism. We meet the man who did NOT say "There's a sucker born every minute"; whose best friends were clergymen; whose autobiography sold more than a million copies; who took a public leap through a flaming hoop to prove to the ASPCA that his performing horses were in no danger; who (allegedly) plotted with Samuel Clemens to lease a comet's tail to take a million passengers on a guided tour of outer space. We meet the man who built his reputation – and his fortune – largely on the exoticism of others, but whose crowning moment as a member of the Connecticut state legislature came in a speech in favor of the constitutional amendment to abolish slavery: "A human soul is not to be trifled with. It may inhabit the body of a Chinaman, a Turk, an Arab or a Hotentot – it is still an immortal spirit!"

There is no denying Barnum's abiding influence, more than a century after his death, on our popular culture. For better AND for worse, we owe America's irrepressible infatuation with show biz largely to him.

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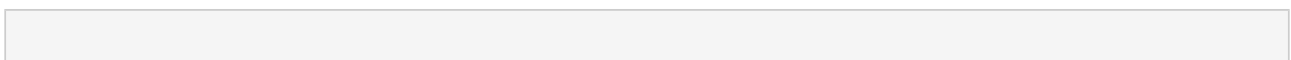
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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

There is no denying Barnum's abiding influence, more than a century later, on our popular culture. For better and worse, we owe our irrepressible infatuation with show biz to the prodigious swarm of divas, minstrels, circuses, museums, curiosities, beauty pageants, sideshows, fat-baby and poultry contests that he unleashed, making himself one of America's first millionaires. This amply illustrated, all-encompassing biography leaves no stone unturned, no curiosity unrevealed.

From Publishers Weekly

Show-biz pioneer Barnum (1810-1891) was not just the "most famous and recognizable man" of his time, he was its "great liberating force," argue the authors (Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography). Here they combine numerous short but deft essays and a rich lode of illustrations to tell Barnum's story and chronicle his huge effect on his country. He began with humbug, touting such frauds as an ancient slave and a "wooly horse," believing nonetheless that he had to give the public its money's worth in entertainment. Proprietor of his American Museum in New York City, Barnum went on to promote an array of amaze-ments: the midget Tom Thumb, the Swedish singer Jenny Lind, bearded ladies, Siamese twins, the first hippopotamus in America. After his museum was destroyed by fire, Barnum resurrected it in the 1870s via a circus, eventually acquiring the famous elephant, Jumbo. Though admiring their subject, the authors acknowledge he reflected the racism of his times, exhibiting examples of "savage and barbarous tribes." The book might have been enriched had they discussed how Barnum's spirit lives on today.

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From Library Journal

This highly approachable, lavishly illustrated, and wholly entertaining biography of the famous entertainment entrepreneur is neither adulatory tribute nor expose. Drawing on dozens of private and public archives and more than 1000 unpublished letters, the authors present a straightforward, chronological life of the American businessman who had a boundless talent for predicting and manipulating the public's curiosity. A father writing with his two sons, the Kunhardts (Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography, LJ 9/15/92) pay special attention to Barnum's American Museum days in New York City and his personal and financial fluctuations. They have compiled a vast amount of photographic and printed ephemera, much of it extremely rare, that will attract many casual readers and bring new revelations to Barnum enthusiasts. But the just-the-facts writing style, along with the brevity of the chapters, at times impedes the narrative's flow and seems incongruous with the subject's flamboyance. On the other hand, Barnum's autobiographical works leave much to be desired in terms of objectivity. Thus, this work deserves a place alongside A.H. Saxson's acclaimed P.T. Barnum (LJ 8/89). Highly recommended. ?Douglas McClemont, New York

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Jay Blanchard:

This P. T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman book is not really ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you will get by reading this book is actually information inside this e-

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Deanna Reed:

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