



The Wonders Lifting the Curtain on the Freak Show, Circus and Victorian Age

John Woolf

Keynote

The untold story of the Victorian freak show and circus, and the remarkable cast of characters who performed in them. *The Wonders* will chart some of the great transformations of the age: the birth of celebrity, of showbusiness, of advertising, of 'alternative facts'.

Description

'A promising young historian with a taste for the exotic.' Stephen Fry

The Wonders is a radical new history of the Victorian age: meet the forgotten and extraordinary freak performers whose talents and disabilities helped define an era.

On 23 March, 1844, General Tom Thumb, at 25 inches tall, entered the Picture Gallery at Buckingham Palace and bowed low to Queen Victoria. On both sides of the Atlantic, this meeting marked a tipping point in the nineteenth century – the age of the freak was born.

Bewitching all levels of society, it was a world of astonishing spectacle – of dwarfs, giants, bearded ladies, Siamese twins and swaggering showmen – and one that has since inspired countless novels, films and musicals. But the real stories (human dramas that so often eclipsed the fantasy presented on the stage), of the performing men, women and children, have been forgotten or marginalized in the histories of the very people who exploited them.

In this richly evocative account, Dr John Woolf uses a wealth of recently discovered material to bring to life the sometimes tragic, sometimes triumphant, always extraordinary stories of people who used their (dis)abilities and difference to become some of the first international celebrities. And through their lives we discover afresh some of the great transformations of the age: the birth of showbusiness, of celebrity, of advertising, of 'alternative facts'; while also exploring the tensions between the power of fame, the impact of exploitation and our fascination with 'otherness'.

Sales Points

- A never-before-told story, using newly discovered materials e.g. 700 letters written by P. T. Barnum, accounts from performers' family members, journals etc
- *The Wonders* gives a voice to the voiceless, wrestling the story from the 'great men' of history, and reveals the true story behind the hit film *The Greatest Showman*
- For the first time reveals Queen Victoria's love of freaks and how her endorsement was key to their phenomenal success
- Published in time for the 200th anniversary of Queen Victoria's birth (May 2019)
- Winner of the Biographers Club Tony Lothian Prize 2017 – the best proposal for an uncommissioned first biography
- Expected endorsements from Dr Woolf's colleagues, including Stephen Fry and A. N. Wilson, as well as current 'freak' performers
- Dr John Woolf has been conducting research into the book for four years and is an acknowledged expert, with his work informing TV, radio and print media; he will be available for PR
- Praise for the bestselling *Victorian Secrets*, cowritten with Stephen Fry: 'The murky truth behind glorious Victoriana ... told with delicious relish.' *Guardian*
'Fantastic.' BBC Radio 4

Reviews

- 'A promising young historian with a taste for the exotic.' - Stephen Fry
- 'A personality-driven history of the 'freak' show... alive and informative.' - *The Spectator*
- 'Nuanced and complex, Woolf deftly shows there are stories of empowerment alongside those of exploitation. Woolf gives these marginalised performers a voice - a voice that was rarely heard in life' - *BBC History Magazine*
- 'Fascinating and thought-provoking. A marvellously researched account of the freak industry - an extraordinary side of Victorian life which has been ignored for too long.' - *Jane Ridley, author of Bertie*

Author Biography

Dr John Woolf is a researcher, writer and historian specializing in nineteenth-century cultural history. Having read history at the University of Cambridge, he went on to obtain a PhD on Victorian freak shows and currently works across TV, radio and film. He has most recently co-written the bestselling Audible book *Stephen Fry's Victorian Secrets* and has developed and featured in a number of BBC series and documentaries on freak performers and the Victorian period.

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In 2017, *The Wonders* was awarded the Biographers' Club Tony Lothian Prize for the best proposal for an uncommissioned first biography.

Sales Office: Michael O'Mara Books, 9 Lion Yard, Tremadoc Road, London, SW4 7NQ
Tel: 02077208643

Orders to: Hely Hutchinson Centre, Milton Road, Didcot, OX11 7HH
Tel: 01235 759 555
International Tel: +44 1235 759 555