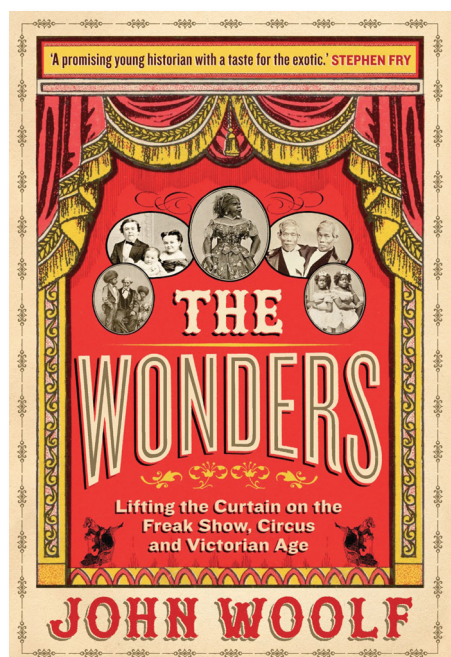


'A promising young historian with a taste for the exotic.'

STEPHEN FRY



# THE WONDERS

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

JOHN WOOLF

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A radical new history of the Victorian age: discover the truth behind *The Greatest Showman* and meet the forgotten and extraordinary freak performers whose talents and disabilities helped define an era.

On 23rd 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 event 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 of the performing men, women and children, have been forgotten or marginalised in the histories of the very people who exploited them.

In this richly evocative account, Dr John Woolf uses a wealth of newly discovered materials to bring to life the often tragic, sometimes triumphant but always extraordinary stories of people who used their disabilities and difference to become some of the first international celebrities.

Giving a voice to the voiceless, *The Wonders* uncovers the birth of showbusiness, celebrity, advertising and 'alternative facts', and explores the tensions between the power of fame, the impact of exploitation and our fascination with 'otherness'.

Dr John Woolf is a historian and researcher. He has recently co-written the bestselling audiobook *Stephen Fry's Victorian Secrets*. Having read history at the University of Cambridge, John went on to obtain a PhD on nineteenth-century freak shows. Since then John has developed the BBC4 series *The Real Tom Thumb: History's Smallest Superstar*, has featured on the BBC4 documentary *Dwarfs in Art* and was Assistant Producer for *Queen Victoria's Letters: A Monarch Unveiled*. In 2017, *The Wonders* was awarded the Biographers' Club Tony Lothian Prize for the best proposal for an uncommissioned first biography.

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

**JOHN WOOLF**

‘A promising young historian with a taste for the exotic.’ **Stephen Fry**

‘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***

‘A wonderfully rich, compassionate and pungent potpourri of the extraordinary, the unusual and the rare. Turns our notions of Victorian prudery, propriety and voyeurism upside down. Brilliantly researched and written with great verve.’

**Neil McKenna, author of *Fanny and Stella* and *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde***

‘John Woolf’s book will dazzle you with details of extraordinary lives, long underestimated by history.’

**Matthew Sweet, broadcaster and author of *Inventing the Victorians***

‘Highly readable. The life stories of those paid to be gazed at and ridiculed have been deftly teased from the archives, providing a sympathetic account of these amazing individuals.’

**Sarah Wise, author of *Inconvenient People* and *The Blackest Streets***

‘As an actor and writer who has also performed in contemporary freak shows for many years, I find this book a refreshingly integrated and balanced account of these amazing lives.’

**Mat Fraser, writer, disability artist and actor in *American Horror Story: Freak Show***

‘A remarkable book. Painstakingly researched, and beautifully written, John Woolf tells a brilliant and vibrant history. By illuminating a world which we have done our best, as a society, to forget, *The Wonders* contextualises our current obsession with celebrity and the lives of others.’

**Katharine Norbury, author of *The Fish Ladder***

‘There is so much to see at the Freak Show which Woolf provides his readers; and he makes it clear that it does the memory of these amazing artists a disservice to avert your eyes.’

**Therese Oneill, author of *Unmentionable***

‘Explores with subtlety and consideration the many facets of humanity’s strangeness. A really excellent book and an important study of the physically marginalized and neglected.’

**Clive Bloom, author of *Victoria’s Madmen***

‘Exceptional. *The Wonders* shines a bright light on the real human experiences behind Victorian freak spectacles. With carefully-researched historical detail and a knack for storytelling, Woolf’s style is impressive.’

**Lillian Craton, author of *The Victoria Freak Show***

‘An intriguing and fascinating look into the world of “freaks”. Beautifully researched and well written.’

**Richard Butchins, award-winning artist and disabled filmmaker**