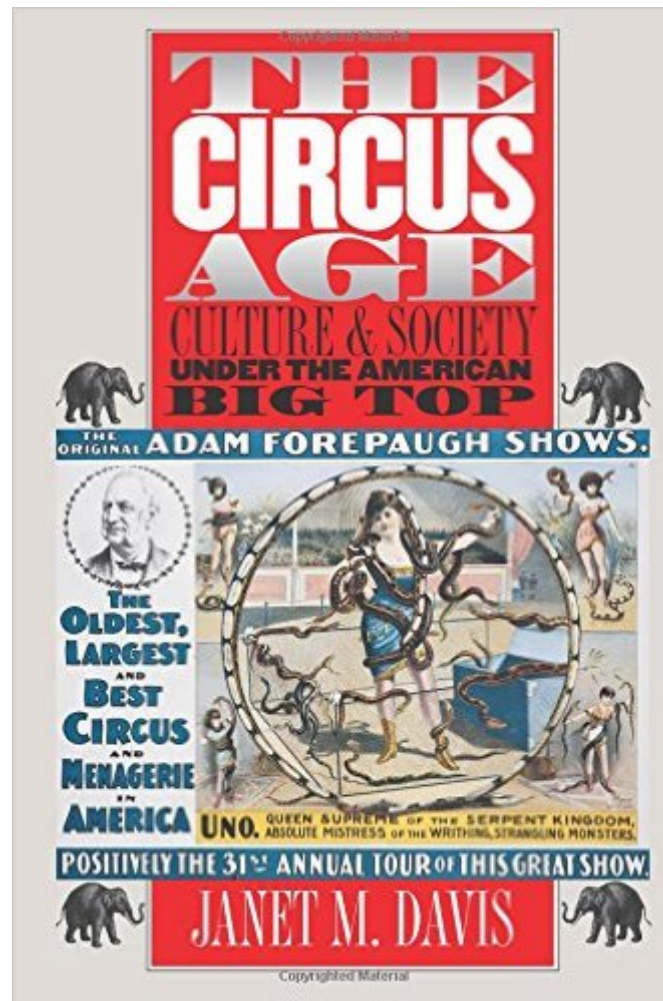


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The Circus Age: Culture And Society Under The American Big Top



Synopsis

A century ago, daily life ground to a halt when the circus rolled into town. Across America, banks closed, schools canceled classes, farmers left their fields, and factories shut down so that everyone could go to the show. In this entertaining and provocative book, Janet Davis links the flowering of the early-twentieth-century American railroad circus to such broader historical developments as the rise of big business, the breakdown of separate spheres for men and women, and the genesis of the United States' overseas empire. In the process, she casts the circus as a powerful force in consolidating the nation's identity as a modern industrial society and world power. Davis explores the multiple "shows" that took place under the big top, from scripted performances to exhibitions of laborers assembling and tearing down tents to impromptu spectacles of audiences brawling, acrobats falling, and animals rampaging. Turning Victorian notions of gender, race, and nationhood topsy-turvy, the circus brought its vision of a rapidly changing world to spectators--rural as well as urban--across the nation. Even today, Davis contends, the influence of the circus continues to resonate in popular representations of gender, race, and the wider world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Janet Davis' *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under The American Big Top* is a very valuable book for anyone wanting to learn about the history of the American circus and the role it played in culture and society during the classic circus age back when the big circuses traversed the country by railroad and performed under canvas. Davis has done a remarkable amount of research, including finding and interviewing people whose tales about the circus give the reader real insight

into what circus life was like and what the circus meant to people back when "Circus Day" was often the biggest event of the year. The book is fairly well illustrated with photographs of circus life and with the posters used to promote the various acts and spectacles the circus would bring to town. Among the wealth of information about the circus are the author's accounts of how extremely organized circuses were, particularly in the setting up and tearing down of the circus 'city' when it came and left town, a necessity born of using the tightly scheduled trains to travel the country. The following is a good example of the useful details Davis brings out in her book: "The 'army' of canvassmen who erected and tore down the billowing canvas tents was a crucial part of the total labor show. Audience members traveled in horse-drawn wagons over miles of bumpy dirt road in predawn darkness just to observe how circus workers (aided by horses and elephants) created a magical, moveable city on an empty lot. At the turn of the century... human and animal labor still performed virtually all the on-site jobs, before gasoline-engine stake-drivers and other motorized machines began replacing some of the human labor in 1910-1920.

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