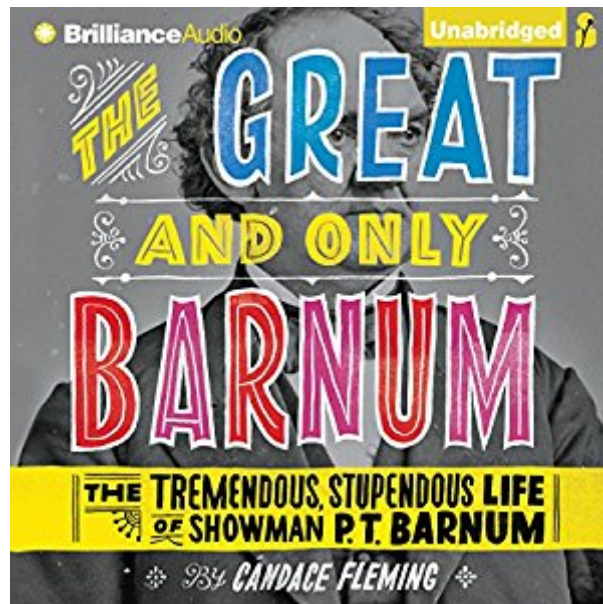


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The Great And Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life Of Showman P. T. Barnum



Synopsis

Come one, come all to this larger-than-life biography of P. T. Barnum, showman and founder of the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Visit Barnum's American Museum, established in only four weeks! Meet Madame Josephine Clofulia, the Swiss Bearded Lady. Get to know Tom Thumb, a miniature man (only twenty-five inches tall), and his tiny bride (32 inches). Watch as the circus parade goes by, elephants tail to trunk, costumed performers waving, lions yawning. Then, under the big top, as Barnum steps into the spotlight, cast your eyes on the center ring and prepare to be amazed. Drawing on old circus posters, photographs, etchings, ticket stubs, playbills, award-winning author Candace Fleming presents history as it's never been experienced before - a stupendous, tremendous, showstopping event!

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I'm trying to work out why exactly this is the only children's biography of P.T. Barnum I remember having seen before. I'm sure there are others. If I could just lift my lazy fingers high enough to type in "P.T. Barnum" into my library's catalog system I'm sure I'd find a couple. But why only a couple? Why isn't Barnum as popular a topic as, say, Houdini? Both spent their lives bamboozling people, one way or another. But where Houdini got off looking like a star, people are awfully mixed on Barnum. Which, I suppose, answers my own question. Why aren't there that many children's bios of Mr. B? Probably because he wasn't a very good man or a very bad man. He was just a very talented man with a fair amount of problems. The kind of guy who loved children... and was, for a time, an alcoholic who would leave his wife to faint in public. Who fought for the right for blacks to

vote... and owned a slave. Multifaceted people don't end up in children's biographies all that often because it takes a dedicated author to have the guts to show the bad alongside the good. Guts like Candace Fleming's got. Guts like what you'd find in *The Great and Only Barnum*. It's nice when a life has a defining moment in it. P.T. Barnum's apparently came when, as a kid, he discovered that his inheritance from his practical joker of a grandfather was a swampy snake-infested spit of land. Meant to humble young Tale and turn him into a hard worker, the plan backfired. Instead the lad fell in love with bamboozling and practical jokes. Born in 1810, young Tale had already learned that he wasn't much for manual labor. Nor, for that matter, was he cut out to work in shops or behind desks. If it bored him, he wasn't interested. Maybe that's why he got into the business of showmanship. He started out by exhibiting a woman he claimed had been George Washington's nursemaid. From there he went on to build two magnificent museums of wonder and buffoonery, tour the 19th century pop star Jenny Lind, serve on the Connecticut state legislature, and help to create the greatest show on earth, the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Love him or hate him, there's no denying that Barnum was a uniquely American character, with a truly interesting life. An extensive Bibliography (including websites), and Source Notes are included. The book is told in a straightforward manner, generally telling Barnum's tale chronologically. Considering the subject matter, however, Fleming is free to indulge in some enjoyable elements. For example, at one point the book is laid out in a manner similar to Barnum's museum itself. Readers step into each saloon and hear about what one could find there. Those of us familiar with the musical *Barnum* (yay, Jim Dale!) would even be able to recite the things one found from The Museum Song ("Quite a lotta Roman terra cotta . . .). Of course the modern reader may feel superior to their historical brethren, but Barnum's Museum was just an ancestor of today's Ripley's Believe It Or Not Museum or the "educational" Bodies... The Exhibition which travels the country. Say what you will about Barnum, while he may have taxidermied people's pets while they waited, he never went so far as to do the same for actual human beings. So why are we even reading about this guy? Because he's fascinating. A guy who had his good and bad points. To watch Fleming do the dance of explaining the man, not covering up his lesser qualities, and still presenting him as a kind of charming cad is mesmerizing. She's writing for kids and teens as her primary audience, yes? Then that means putting in some rather adult materials, without going into the delicate details. Barnum had a good friend in a Phoebe Cary, with whom he remained close for twenty years while married, until she died. On that subject we would only be able to speculate anyway. Fleming does not delve or suppose. Just the fact, ma'am. Is she an apologist for Barnum? I struggled with that question all through the book. When explaining that Barnum only claimed to be renting Ms. Joice Heth from her

real "owner" Ms. Fleming answers more honestly than the man himself in saying, "But even if he didn't technically own Joice, he still acted like her master. He displayed the tired old woman before the public. And she had no choice but to submit." She never damns him directly. Never says, "Here is a bad man for such n' such a reason." She could many times over if she wanted to. His museum only let in blacks on specific days and times. His animals died in a variety of ways. You could villainize him or saint him depending on your mood. Fleming does neither. She simply displays him, warts and all, to the child readers and allows them to make up their own mind on the matter. Why do we like him? I dunno. Maybe it was the good-natured quality of his pranks. How do you help but smile when you hear how for the opening of his museum he placed the worst possible musicians on his roof so that people could only flee the sound by going INTO the museum. He paid his "Human Curiosities" a generous salary. He said of them that when people met them in his museum, "I want folks to say 'what an amazing person' not 'there but for the grace of God go I.'" His menagerie "was not well cared for" but he was so well informed about animals for his time period that folks from the American Museum of Natural History would actually ask him for advice regarding animals. Fleming has done her research too. Readers are left with very few questions by the end of her tale. There was really only one moment when I was left hankering for more facts. Early in his career and without a penny to his name, Barnum hit upon the idea of creating his infamous Museum. To buy it on credit he put up his worthless spit of land, Ivy Island. That's all well and good, but then he filled the museum to brimming with people, animals, exhibits, you name it. He even went so far as to cover the museum in painted plaques, flags from numerous countries, premier New York's first spotlight, and hire a brass band on its opening day. So how on earth did a man without much in the way of money get all of this? Credit? If so, Barnum was as savvy a businessman as you could ever hope to find in American history. But it's a mystery that remains unanswered here. Mark Twain despised him. People loved him. He fooled men, women, and children alike. One minute he was bringing his circus to small children. The next he was attempting to buy the American side of Niagara Falls so that he could build a fence to prevent one side from seeing it without paying. He insisted that blacks be given the right to vote because "A human soul is not to be trifled with," then turned around and exhibited the Chiefs of the Nine [Indian:] Nations along with other "Human Curiosities". He is repugnant and compelling by our modern standards and he has left his mark on the American landscape, for good or ill. Children's biographies are not always about saintly people. Once in a great while they are about complex characters. And as you will find, they don't get much more complex than Phineas Taylor Barnum, King of the Humbugs.

This is the most fun I've had reading history in years. The stories are told with gusto. The book's design is delightful. And the photographs?! What kid (especially a boy) won't be drawn into its pages by bearded ladies and dog-faced boys. Better yet, the history IS important. I discovered that PT Barnum is more than a circus guy. His innovations in the art of marketing, advertising, celebrity are still with us today. An amazing book, all the way around!

Two summers ago I traveled across the country to attend the tie dye-attired Gathering of the Vibes music festival at Seaside Park in Bridgeport, Connecticut. While wandering about the Park that weekend, I came upon an imposing statue of showman P. T. Barnum and also noticed a Park road named in his honor. I wondered what that was all about. Now I know. When P. T. Barnum was born in Connecticut in 1810, the U.S. was comprised of 17 states and Lewis and Clark had only recently completed their death-defying expedition to the Pacific coast and back. When Barnum died in 1891, the nation had expanded to 43 states and he was sending mile-long trainloads of circus people, animals, and tents into those once-distant regions of the country to entertain millions and generations of Americans. By the time the paradoxical showman and impresario died, he was also the best-known American in the world, and he had forever changed our world -- for better or for worse -- by giving birth to modern day concepts and processes of celebrity, hype, and publicity machines. Tale learned two lessons that he remembered all his life. The first was 'learning how to call an adversary's bluff with a threat that cannot be ignored.' The second was 'When entertaining the public, it is best to have an elephant.' "Writing and reading about many of the Founding Fathers is forever complicated by the long, dark shadow cast by their ownership of slaves and their treatment of women. In a similar fashion, Candace Fleming's fascinating and thought-provoking biography of Phineas Taylor Barnum compels one to reflect upon his treatment of people and animal performers, his outrageous distortions and hoaxes, and his seduction and subversion of the media." "A fortune was made with a bit of good-natured deception," said Barnum. "On one hand, it was horrible that Barnum placed people with physical disabilities on public display to enrich himself. On the other hand, these were people with no prospects for work outside of what he offered, and he gave them a sense of belonging and paid many of them princely sums. On one hand, he was forever lying to and defrauding his audiences. On the other, people really seemed to relish it. "First Mr. Barnum humbugs them, and then they pay to hear him tell how he did it." "My own reflections on the showman's career primarily involve his popularizing wild animal acts. Barnum actually won over the founder of the SPCA who admired Barnum's caring of and about the circus animals. And, yet, we can assume that his trainers employed physical pain and coercion on a daily basis to train those

animals, a practice that has generally been the case since those days."The fact is, animals do not naturally ride bicycles, stand on their heads, balance on balls, or jump through rings of fire. To force them to perform these confusing and physically uncomfortable tricks, trainers use whips, tight collars, muzzles, electric prods, bullhooks, and other painful tools of the trade." -- PETA (which provides graphic undercover videos online)But it is also a reality that if the average American child is to become emotionally invested in the future survival of lions, elephants, giraffes, hippos, etc., they need to be afforded face to face opportunities to know the world's greatest creatures. I know that I would not have experienced quite the same emotional reaction to the scenes with Peter and the elephant in Kate DiCamillo's upcoming THE MAGICIAN'S ELEPHANT, if it were not for cherished memories of having gotten to be up close to an elephant many years ago when I would drive my then-young children to Marine World-Africa U.S.A. Through his museums and circuses, P. T. Barnum provided those in-person experiences to so many Americans. There is certainly no question that so much of what has constituted entertainment for the average person over the course of my lifetime has deep roots in the wildly successful career of P. T. Barnum. For example, I thought that nothing like the Beatles coming to America had ever happened before. But I sure was wrong! When Barnum -- more than a century before the Beatles -- decided to contract with European singing sensation Jenny Lind to come to America and perform for \$1,000 a night, he found that virtually nobody in America knew who she was. Undaunted, he churned up a publicity whirlwind so immense that by the time her ship arrived in New York "a mob of people -- forty thousand in all -- was waiting for her" and he proceeded to sell out her concerts night after night after night. As always, Candace Fleming does a stupendous research job and then knows exactly what content and presentation of that information will make for a tremendously entertaining book from which you can gain a whole mess of media literacy, American history, and ethics without ever once realizing that you are immersed in learning. From one end to the other, Barnum's life is an amazing story. Again and again, Fleming enhances her telling of that story through the use of memorable anecdotes, scores of photographs, and images from newspapers of the day. I'll be heading back to Seaside Park -- given to the city of Bridgeport by Barnum -- for Gathering of the Vibes again this summer and, thanks to Fleming's THE GREAT AND ONLY BARNUM, I have a lot to think about when I again encounter that statue overlooking the Sound.

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