



The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus

Linda Simon

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“Step right up!” and buy a ticket to the Greatest Show on Earth—the Big Top, containing death-defying stunts, dancing bears, roaring tigers, and trumpeting elephants. The circus has always been home to the dazzling and the exotic, the improbable and the impossible—a place of myth and romance, of reinvention, rebirth, second acts, and new identities. Asking why we long to soar on flying trapezes, ride bareback on spangled horses, and parade through the streets in costumes of glitter and gold, this captivating book illuminates the history of the circus and the claim it has on the imaginations of artists, writers, and people around the world.

Traveling back to the circus’s early days, Linda Simon takes us to eighteenth-century hippodromes in Great Britain and intimate one-ring circuses in nineteenth-century Paris, where Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso became enchanted with aerialists and clowns. She introduces us to P. T. Barnum, James Bailey, and the enterprising Ringling Brothers and reveals how they created the golden age of American circuses. Moving forward to the whimsical Circus Oz in Australia and to New York City’s Big Apple Circus and the grand spectacle of Cirque du Soleil, she shows how the circus has transformed in recent years. At the center of the story are the people—trick riders and tightrope walkers, sword swallows and animal trainers, contortionists and clowns—that created the sensational, raucous, and sometimes titillating world of the circus.

Beautifully illustrated and filled with rich historical detail and colorful anecdotes, *The Greatest Shows on Earth* is a vibrant history for all those who have ever dreamed of running away to the circus.

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