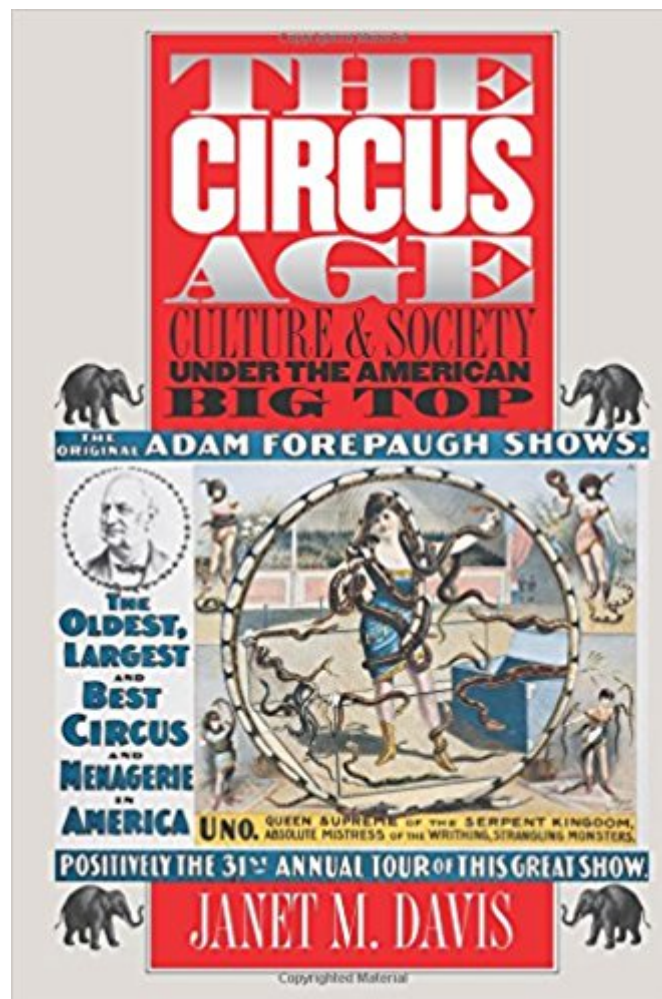




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# The Circus Age: Culture And Society Under The American Big Top



## 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

The sight of trains pulling in and circus tents being set up was the highlight of the year for many American towns at the turn of the century; schools and stores closed and everyday life stood still. In 1903, 98 circuses and menageries the highest number in U.S. history traveled the nation. In this fascinating, provocative history of a democratic form of public entertainment, Davis, an American studies professor at the University of Texas at Austin, elucidates the enormous cultural impact of the

railroad circus and how it became a "powerful cultural icon" and a concrete representation "of racial diversity, gender difference, bodily variety, animalized human beings, and humanized animals" as well as a "celebration of America's emerging role as a global power." Davis presents her theoretical material carefully, but the profuse illustrations of her theses make the book compulsively readable. By meticulously scrutinizing individual circus acts and exhibits e.g., "statue girls," near-naked women covered in white greasepaint to resemble art, challenged concepts of femininity; "learned pigs" questioned the concept of human intelligence; clowns and strongmen became the visible manifestations of public discussions about masculinity she shows how circuses provided a vibrant, visceral forum for the era's cultural changes. Arguing that circuses "helped catapult a 'nation of loosely connected islands' into a modern nation-state with an increasingly shared national culture," Davis traces how this continues today, in different forms, in places like Disneyland and Las Vegas. Smart and impressively researched, this is an important contribution to the literature of popular culture and U.S. cultural history. Color and b&w illus. (Sept. 23) Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

~f~•~ ~ fascinating, provocative history of a democratic form of public entertainment. ("Publishers Weekly") [A] fascinating, provocative history of a democratic form of public entertainment. ("Publishers Weekly")

It helped me understand the culture and society of the circus.

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

canvasmen 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. The creation of the tented city was a thrilling physical feat in which human labor functioned as a seemingly seamless, corporate body."--"Immediately after the circus trains arrived at the show grounds, the boss canvasman, who directed the erection of the tents, scouted out the lot, which occupied ten acres or so. He first decided where the big top should stand, which determined the position of the other eleven tents. A group of canvasmen used iron rods to mark the positions of the five center poles, which would be the tent's center of gravity, and then mapped the perimeter of Barnum & Bailey's 1894 big top - 440 feet by 180 feet - with more rods, topped with little flags, color-coded red or blue to identify each tent site. Next, the boss canvasman and his crew marked the placement of the menagerie tent, which was connected to the big top by a neck of canvas. The perimeter of the menagerie - 360 feet by 160 feet - was identified by rods topped by white flags. This process was completed in just eight minutes from start to finish. The crew then quickly mapped out the placement of the dressing-room tent, two horse tents, the wardrobe tents, the sideshow tent, the freaks' dressing-room tent, and several smaller tents for the blacksmith shop, the repair shop, and so on. The canvasmen finished this whole job in half an hour."--"Next, the boss canvasman directed the unloading of the stake and chain wagons, the pole wagons, the canvas wagons, and other baggage wagons, each drawn by four or six horses. He divided the eighty-five muscular men who composed the 'big top gang' into two groups, of which one laid the stakes into the ground and the other handled the sledges. Each stake was four to five feet long and two or three inches thick, and three-fourths of its length had to be hammered into the ground. Using sledges with three-foot handles and heads that weighed seventeen pounds, groups of about seven men stood in a circle and took turns hammering each stake into the ground, singing rhythmically as they worked. Each group had a leader who initially tapped the stake into position. Meanwhile, groups of pole riggers placed the tents center poles into position. Within forty-five minutes a whistle signaled that the stake drivers and pole riggers had finished, and summoned additional groups of workingmen to help raise the poles. The center poles (as well as the linchpin 'king' pole) were raised with heavy ropes attached to the stakes. In the middle of this process, other workers started joining sections of canvas that would form the tent's roof and side walls. They lifted the canvas using horses, pulley blocks, and a complex array of small

side poles. By this time three huge cook wagons had arrived at the site of their tent, and butchers began chopping 500 pounds of meat into individual cutlets, while cooks prepared coffee and eggs. The workingmen raised all twelve tents by six o'clock in the morning -- just two and a half hours after they had typically arrived. At that moment, a loud bell or whistle alerted every circus worker that the dining tent was now open. Now all wagons were stationed at their proper places. The empty field had been transformed into a temporary canvas city."My only quibble is that the book, while very in depth on the classic age of the big railroad circuses and wild-west shows from the late 1800's through the 1950's, gives only brief attention to the earlier age of the smaller overland wagon circus and to the post-railroad circus of the last fifty years. It is understandable given the focus of Davis' book, but it does keep it from being perhaps the ultimate work on the American circus in general. And while most of the book flows quite well, every now and then Davis lapses into grad-student thesis-paper speak which distracts rather than enlightens (it was obvious by the end of the book that "fin de siecle" is absolutely Davis' favorite word).But all in all, this book is both a good read and an extremely valuable one for anyone interested in the era of the classic American circus and its context in American culture and society during that age. Highly recommended.

I was very disappointed when I started reading this book and realized that it's a history of social change in America that incidentally uses the circus to illustrate its points. It is not primarily a history of the circus. The book is based on a scholarly sociology dissertation, and hence, it has long sections that aren't really even circus-related, such as one on orientalism and another on gender issues. The promotional materials and the book's cover are highly misleading in this regard. I stopped reading about half way through.

Excellent, well researched and written book with good examples throughout. I enjoyed it very much.

Coming from a family with a circus background I thought this book gave an accurate depiction of how the circus followed the trends of American society and the cast system in the circus family.Ronald Wallenda Bartosch

I had wished for more illustrations (in color), but as it is, I am glad I have the book. There are probably ca. 5 pictures in color anyhow. You can keep me on the list for Circus Illustration.Thank you. Ingrid Mueller

After a surprisingly interesting visit to the Ringling Museum in Sarasota I was anxious to know more about this unsung chapter of American History. This book was everything I wanted and more. Full of well researched facts, insightful conclusions and fascinating details, it reads like a dream. If I could give it 6 stars I would! Well done Janet M. Davis.

I was very satisfied with this product. There were no markings in the book and it was in very good condition. There was a slight bend in the lower right hand corner of the cover, but that was of little consequence. All the pages were clean, there were no scratches, and it looked almost brand new. I was very satisfied with the condition of the book.

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