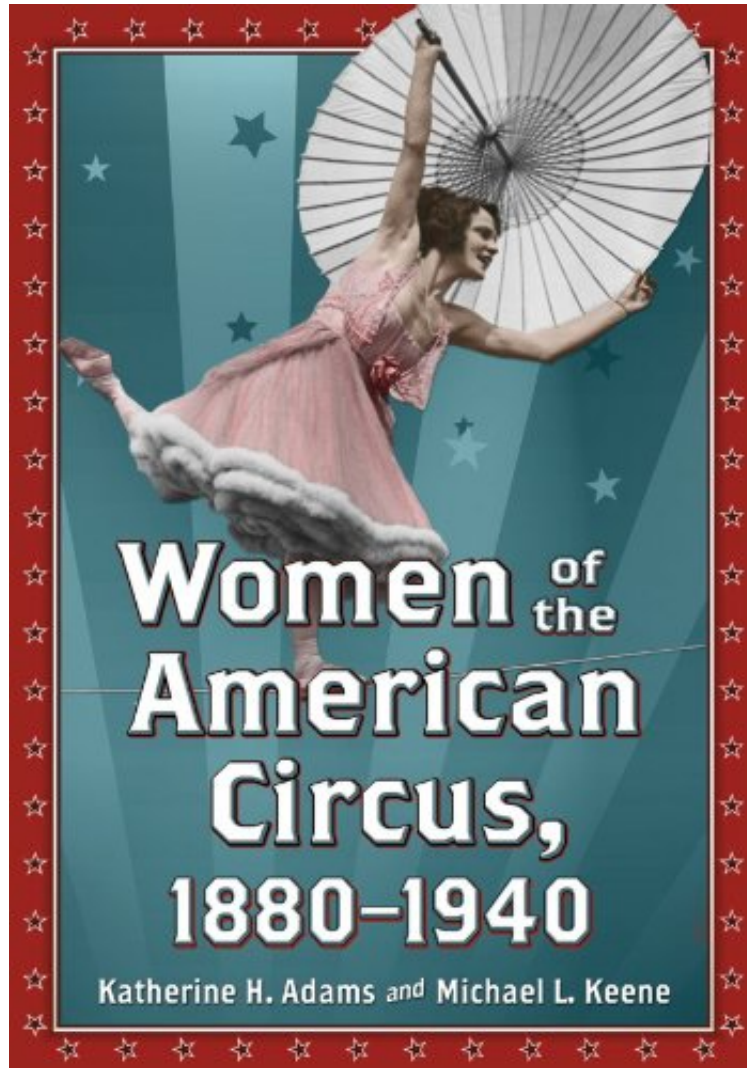


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Women of the American Circus, 1880ndash;1940

Katherine H. Adams, Michael L. Keene
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Katherine H. Adams, Michael L. Keene : Women of the American Circus, 1880ndash;1940 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Women of the American Circus, 1880ndash;1940:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Challenging Gender Roles from inside the Big TopBy Kelly GarbatoFrom 1880 through 1940, the circus was the main form of entertainment in America, and the most common live form of entertainment. The circus brought the exotic and transgressive to big cities and small towns alike, exposing Americans to the strange, unusual, and death-defying: trapeze artists and tightrope walkers, equestrians and lion tamers, clowns and magicians, strong men and tattoo artists - and scores of women who challenged gender roles on multiple fronts. Sometimes these subversive acts proved as simple as displaying one's "freakish" body in public;

other times they involved highly skilled and dangerous stunts which required years of training to perfect. Bearded women, tall women, fat ladies, and other "born freaks" challenged traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, while daredevil performers such as female equestrians, sharpshooters, animal trainers, hot rod tricksters, and human cannonballs claimed masculine realms as their own. Likewise, skeletal and short men - particularly when paired with their feminine opposites - also toyed with viewers' perceptions of masculinity. "Manly" women were sometimes presented as the logical conclusion of feminism (i.e., women with facial hair are the next step in the evolution of the New Woman). As women began to make up more and more of the circus audience after the Civil War, their roles in the circus changed, becoming more frequent, visible, and varied. Unlike actors, circus performers lived their roles; it was who they were. Women often got to "play the hero" - a role not usually open to them in the larger world. In many ways, a life in the circus afforded women greater independence and more opportunities for self-expression than women could find in the outside world. By 1910, women made up 1/3 to 1/2 of circus acts; as early as 1880, female aerialists earned more on average than men. Many of these were family affairs, with family acts immigrating to the U.S. to join more prestigious outfits. In this way, the circus was truly a microcosm of the "American Dream." Yet, neither was the circus a progressive feminist utopia for its female employees. Many of the jobs open to women, such as ballet girls, tableaux artists, and magician's assistants, entailed nothing more than standing around and looking pretty. Even more skilled performers had to field demands for increasingly sexy and skimpy outfits. Some acts were more or less closed to women altogether: for example, there were so few female clowns during this time that some historians overlook them altogether. (Female clowning was sometimes presented as a shocking feminist choice, since clowns engage in copious displays of self-deprecation - the assumption being that women are too vain for such public, exaggerated self-mockery. In reality, the public just wasn't ready to accept women as "open satirizers of American traditions.") While women were eventually allowed to work with trained animal acts, it remained a well-kept secret that the women trained the animals themselves (rather than simply appearing onstage and striking a pose with them). Additionally, definitions of freakishness were often gendered; one very rarely saw a female skeleton, for instance, because women could never be "too thin." Perhaps most egregiously, women had to submit to more onerous contracts than did their male costars. With morality clauses that prohibited women from, among other things, divorcing their husbands during the circus's run; appearing in public without a male chaperone; staying out past curfew; engaging in "flirting and boisterous conduct"; and entertaining male companions, even when not on duty, these contracts governed the most private aspects of women's lives. Remember that the criminalization of spousal rape didn't occur in the United States until the mid-1970s; only in 1993 did it become a crime in all 50 states. In order to obtain and keep a job in the circus, then, many women were forced to endure unhappy marriages, in which their husbands could violate them with impunity (although allegations of rape, if it did occur, do not appear here).

In *WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN CIRCUS, 1880-1940*, Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene (both English professors) examine the role of women in the circus, as well as how circus women were portrayed in popular culture. This is an extension of their previous work: "In four earlier books [...] we have explored the interaction between the visible culture of the United States in the critical period of 1880 to 1940 and the available and emerging roles for women at that time. [...] We generally ask 'what images of women are available?' and 'how are they evolving and changing?'" Part One explores the stories told in the media (newspapers, press clippings, children's books, novels for men and women, and film) about circus people. In Part Two, the focus shifts to the circus performers themselves; how did they characterize their experiences working in the circus? Part Three concerns the unfolding of the circus narrative as it arrives in town; among other things, the authors consider advance posters, the unloading of the caravan, the opening of the parade, and the stories told under the big top and in the sideshows. Last but not least, Part Four involves the circus women, "ranked and seen" - from no-/low-skill jobs such as ballet girls and "stationary freaks" to more skilled performers, the authors offer an overview of the positions open to female performers in the circus. The result is a mostly-enjoyable read that's sometimes lacking in detail. At just 206 pages, *WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN CIRCUS* is a rather slim volume, especially considering the amount of ground covered. Many of the sections feel unnecessarily brief. Part Four (my favorite), in particular, could easily generate its own book. On the positive side, *WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN CIRCUS* is academic but largely accessible to lay readers, with the jargon mostly kept to a minimum. I appreciate the authors' feminist perspective, which resulted in a discussion of both the pros and cons of circus life for women. Still, readers interested in a more detailed book about female circus performers should look elsewhere; this is more of a general cultural studies volume. Another, more specific critique I have is the authors' failure to distinguish between the experience of more skilled performers - those who passionately wanted to pursue a career in the circus, and endured years of grueling training to do so - and some of those "born freaks" who ended up in the circus because they had few other options. Some of these individuals were even considered circus property - slaves, if you will. Most likely they viewed their time in the circus quite differently than those who actively sought to become a part of the community. Also, as someone who cares deeply about nonhuman animals, the sections on animal acts were especially hard to stomach - particularly as the authors paid little attention to their welfare, let alone the larger ethics of animal acts (though a series of quotations from big cat trainer Mabel Stark does allude to her male colleagues' more aggressive and violent training styles). To be fair, this was hardly the focus of their study - and yet I couldn't help but

cringe when I read that, in the course of her suffrage efforts, one female circus performer led a procession with a baby elephant. "We are all part of a great sisterhood," indeed. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Enlightening But Not Entertaining . . . The Academic Circus By IsolaBlue The title - WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN CIRCUS - seduces the reader with the promise of colorful biographies of past circus performers. One imagines many photographs, intriguing stories, and little-known but fascinating information. The book, however, is basically an academic piece. It is well researched and has excellent citations (although they appear, irritatingly, within the text rather than as end notes or foot notes.) The writers are scholars; the subject is treated accordingly. Most readers will find WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN CIRCUS to be disappointingly dull, although a very good reference book for one's library. The plus side of Adams and Keene's book is that it provides a catalogue of circus careers open to women during a time period spanning fifty years and ending just prior to WWII. Who would have ever thought there were so many women employed by circuses? Who would have thought there were so many "career options" within them? Although most women didn't get to be aerial artists, sharpshooters, or animal handlers, the book is fair in that it gives equal coverage to the jobs the majority of women in circus life held: sideshow artists, ballet "girls," and tableaux artists. It also covers interesting jobs such as circus equestrians, magic act assistants, and clowns. When viewed as entertainment, WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN CIRCUS fails. It seems hard to believe that anything regarding the circus could be a bit ho-hum, but this book is definitely not casual reading. As history, however, it is solidly done research on not only the jobs women had within circuses, but also the lifestyle they led. Contracts, morals clauses, dress codes, life on the road (or railroad), as well as the rigors of circus life in general are covered. Once again, this book is not meant to entertain the reader but to educate and enlighten. It won't be climbing to the tops of any bestseller lists, but it should hold its place in Women's Studies as an accurate and well researched tribute to the women who dared to live outside of the mainstream. 1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Fluffy and unfocused By akoI'm not sure what to make of this book. I try not to be disparaging of most things (unless they're truly bad) but this one just doesn't really hit the mark. The material is interesting, but superficial. These are topics and examples better covered, and more in-depthly covered, in other books. Some of the "chapters" are only two pages long. The best part is the nice variety of images. For feminist and circus research, it's fluffy, skimming the surface of the topic just enough to provide salient details and interesting people and facts, with a few big, academic words thrown in for good measure, but just fluffy. Just when I got interested in a particular bit, it was over, like a high-school or middle-school level textbook. Sorry, but circus women deserve more. Mine it for interesting facts and then look up the originals.

During the years 1880 to 1940, the glory days of the American circus, a third to a half of the cast members were women—a large group of very visible American workers whose story needs telling. This book, using sources such as diaries, autobiographies, newspaper accounts, films, posters, and route books, first considers the popular media's presentation of these performers as unnatural and scandalous—as well as romantic and thrilling. Next are the stories told by circus women, which contradict and complicate other versions of their lives. Across America in those years an array of acts featured women, such as tableaux, freak shows, girlie shows, tiger acts, and aerial performances, all involving special skills and all detailed here. The book offers a unique and fascinating view of not just the circus but of what it meant to be an American woman at work.

"valuable...recommended"--Choice. From the Inside Flap During the years 1880 to 1940, the glory days of the American circus, a third to a half of the cast members were women—a large group of very visible American workers whose story needs telling. This book, using sources such as diaries, autobiographies, newspaper accounts, films, posters, and route books, first considers the popular media's presentation of these performers as unnatural and scandalous—as well as romantic and thrilling. Next are the stories told by circus women, which contradict and complicate other versions of their lives. Across America in those years an array of acts featured women, such as tableaux, freak shows, girlie shows, tiger acts, and aerial performances, all involving special skills and all detailed here. The book offers a unique and fascinating view of not just the circus but of what it meant to be an American woman at work. About the Author Katherine H. Adams is a Hutchinson Distinguished Professor and chair of the English department at Loyola University New Orleans. Michael L. Keene, the author or coauthor of fifteen books, is a professor of English at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, teaching courses in professional communication and rhetorical theory.