



The Circus and Victorian Society (Victorian Literature and Culture Series)

Brenda Assael

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It was during the Victorian era that the circus, whose origins lay in the fairground world, emerged as a commercialized entertainment that we would recognize today. This development was intricately tied to a widespread demand for circus acts by a broad range of classes. In *The Circus and Victorian Society*, Brenda Assael examines this interest in the circus as an artistic form within the context of a vibrant, and sometimes not so respectable, consumer market. In doing so, she provides not only the first scholarly history of the Victorian circus but also a new view of nineteenth-century popular culture, which has usually been seen as the preserve only of the working class.

The Victorian circus ring was a showcase for equestrian battle scenes, Chinese jugglers, clowns, female acrobats, and child performers. In addition to their wondrous qualities, unabashed displays of physical power, and sometimes subversive humor, however, Assael reveals how such acts were also rendered as grotesque, lewd, or dangerous.

The consuming public's desire to see the very kinds of displays that reformers wished to regulate put the circus establishment in a difficult position. Wishing to create a respectable reputation for itself while also functioning as a profitable business, the industry was engaged in a struggle that required the appeasement of both the regulator and the consumer. This conflict informs us not only of the complicated role that the circus played in Victorian society but also provides a unique view into a collective psyche fraught by contradiction and anxiety.

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