

Anna Kérchy, Andrea Zittlau, eds.. *Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and 'Enfreakment'*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. Illustrations. 297 pp. \$75.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4438-4134-4.



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Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and "Enfreakment," edited by Anna Kérchy and Andrea Zittlau, is a welcome addition to the study of freakery, which was launched as a valid topic of sociological inquiry in the 1980s by Robert Bogdan (*Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* [1990]) and others, and solidified in the 1990s as a significant aspect of disability studies by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, especially with her 1996 edited collection, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. With a few exceptions, investigations of freak show narratives, however well done, have been limited to recent U.S. history; the very existence of this study of freakery in its earlier and European manifestations makes this volume worthwhile. Because this collection is skillfully edited and full of well-written and insightful analyses, the book is indispensable to anyone interested in freakery and disability studies and, more broadly, in the history of the body, intellect, medicine, and science. Most of the essays will also engage the general reader. For most of

the authors, English is not their first language. Their collective multilingual skill has effected close readings of important and scientific scholarship and vernacular writing in Dutch, French, German, and Polish—material that has been overlooked until now. None of the writers were trained at a U.S. university, as is evident in some fresh perspectives and new approaches to a topic that has become, for better or worse, standardized.

The book begins with an introduction coauthored by Kérchy and Zittlau, followed by thirteen single-authored essays including one by each of the coeditors. Some of the essays are more heavily referenced than others: Idikó Sz. Kristóf's essay on Jesuit records of American Indians in Hungary is excellent, but appears to have as many endnotes as text. The illustrations, all black-and-white, are intriguing and appropriate; their reproduction is adequate but they deserve higher quality.

The volume meets and surpasses the goal of its editors: to demonstrate that freakery and enf-

reakment was not, and is not, an Anglo-American phenomenon. Grounding new material in established discourse, this volume has indeed expanded the boundaries of freakery beyond British and American borders. The coauthored introduction includes a very competent literature review of freakery, from the predecessors of Bogdan and Garland-Thomson to the “dismodernism” of Lennard Davis’s *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* (2002). The essays are organized by chronology, beginning with leprous bodies in the Western Middle Ages and ending with 2011 television programming in the United Kingdom.

The book has the usual problems inherent to edited collections. Disability historians will notice that the essays draw unevenly on disability studies scholarship. Some transitions are awkward, such as that between Susan Small’s fascinating and straightforward account of an eighteenth-century French “Wild Girl” to Dóra Székési’s sharp literary analysis of Denis Diderot’s theory of the monstrous; this is impossible to avoid, no matter how broad the common theme. Other transitions, such as Birgit Stammberger’s analysis of Richard Virchow (1821-1902) to Zittlau’s commentary on German displays of pathology, are nearly seamless. With such a wide-ranging set of topics, such a collection is bound to be a bit uneven in style and coverage.

The collection is not uneven in quality: every essay makes an important contribution and has its merits. The narrative flows easily, not always the case with a volume of work by scholars who are not writing in their first—or second or third—language. There are a few inconsistencies, e.g., “hairyness” (p. 5) and “hairiness” (p. 9) are used interchangeably, and some phrases are unwieldy, although unconventional turns of phrase, such as “plenty of ravishing visual material” (p. 16), are usually charming rather than disconcerting. Even the book jacket, showing David Caines’s paintings of “freakish figures” is refreshing, in contrast to

jacket illustrations that seem to be unrelated afterthoughts. The editors even explain their careful choice of contributions in (albeit unwieldy) commentary: the paintings track “the blurring of the scientific objectification and the aestheticizing fantastification of the Other-uncategorizable within the self-same” (p. 17).

All of the authors are acquainted with the corpus of disability studies and enfreakment, and some of the essays further the field by challenging long-held standard approaches. Lucie Storcková, for example, in “Normalizing Bodily Difference in Autobiographical Narratives of the Central European Armless Wonders Carl Hermann Unthan and Franti” examines the autobiographies of two European “armless wonders.” While recognizing such phenomena as disabled masculinity and the “supercrip” trope, she speculates about the motives behind the writings of the men who “shared public ideologies of bodily difference” (p. 172). The witty responses of Carl Hermann Unthan to the tiresome questions about activities of daily life transcend relief offered to nondisabled people about bodily difference; she sees them also as methods of self-defense and self-affirmation. In addition, while fitting all the criteria of the “supercrip,” Unthan himself emphasized his physical fitness and health, and “neutralized his bodily differences by means of autobiographical writing” (p. 182).

The volume is an important contribution to disability studies in general and, it is hoped, will encourage the study of enfreakment beyond European history in a similar collected volume. Filip Herza’s “‘Tiny Artists in the Big World’: The Rhetoric of Representing Extraordinary Bodies during Singer Midgets’ 1928 Tour in Prague,” Kérchy’s comparative narration of “dwarf” families in Nazi concentration camps, and Catriona McAra’s essay, subtitled “Little People and the Ideological Colonization of the European Fantasy Genre,” are valuable contributions in themselves, and they bring to mind investigative expansions

into, for example, the “dwarf village” in contemporary China.

This fruit of well-grounded research should receive wide attention. *Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and “Enfreakment”* is inspirational for broadening study not only beyond the United States but also beyond Europe. It will be of interest to scholars of the many disciplines on which it draws—from anthropology to zoology—and the entire work, or portions from it, could be incorporated with ease into any university-level course. With its engaging style, alluring illustrations, and elegant insights, this enticing and experimental collection will also be of interest to any general reader interested in the human condition.

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