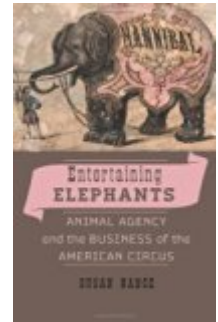


Susan Nance. *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus.* Animals, History, Culture Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. Illustrations. viii + 294 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-0829-3.



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Commissioned by Donna Sinclair (Central Michigan University)

Susan Nance's study *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus* is an example of how pleasing a mix of cultural history and animal studies is when an author combines them well. Until rather recently, most scholars have viewed animals as entities lacking agency or as extensions of their human owners who provided them with some limited amount of historical significance. *Entertaining Elephants* joins a growing number of studies that buck this trend by putting elephants in the role of actors rather than in the place of objects.

By using studies on animal welfare, health, and cognition, Nance creates a methodology that allows her to bring a fresh view to the historical record. She argues that animal experiences are a vital part of understanding the cultural history of the circus. In so doing, she brings a fresh understanding to human-animal relationships.

Entertaining Elephants illustrates that there are multiple sides to cultural history. Scholars have long recognized both the public face and the

behind-the-scenes aspects. Nance does an ideal job covering both while adding in the experience of the main attractions. She never claims that elephants understood their roles in advertising, generating a profit, and bringing joy to circus guests. Nevertheless, she notes, they were a vital part of the experience. Furthermore, she argues, the elephants found their experience defined through their interactions with each other, trainers, other animals, and the circus environment.

Entertaining Elephants shows a convincing consideration its readers by providing just enough evidence to illustrate its points without overburdening them with unnecessary text. This work includes an introduction, seven chapters, Nance's notes, a short essay on her sources, and a well-organized index. An informative and enjoyable selection of illustrations helps to round out the work.

In the introduction, Nance makes a compelling argument that circuses comprised the "largest entertainment companies" Americans in-

teracted with during the nineteenth century (p. 3). Central to this experience, she argues, was the elephant that acted as the circus's "ambassador" by advertising "fun and novelty" (p. 1). However, as she shows, the experiences of the elephants and their trainers were not always pleasurable for these performers, leading to confrontations between the two.

The first half of the book looks at how Americans became accustomed to the elephant as a form of entertainment. Chapter 1 asks the question of why the public liked the elephants so much during the early American Republic. As an answer, Nance looks at how the animal provided an exotic encounter for a society that was not acquainted with the species. The next chapter follows the rise of elephants as attractions in the first half of the nineteenth century. Chapter 3 examines the growth of elephant training and explains how elephants became the predominant act within animal theater.

The second half of the book focuses more on the experience that elephants underwent as animal actors. The fourth and fifth chapters address the methods circuses used to punish bull elephants and their management of large elephant groups. Chapter 6 asks the important questions of how elephants dealt with their experiences and why circuses killed or sold off those that did not take to circus life in an agreeable fashion.

In her conclusion, Nance looks at the changes the circus experienced in the face of modernity by exploring such topics as animal welfare and the growth of other forms of show business. In this context, she considers how the experiences of today's elephants have changed from that of their ancestors. She leaves the reader with a question: are performing elephants "a sign of cruel folly or honorable artistic tradition" (p. 234)?

While the book's consideration of the business and cultural aspects of the circus experience is solid, this work is at its height when Nance considers the animal experience. Readers may only

wish that she provided more examples of these remarkable subjects. Finally, while it is only a small criticism, readers may also wonder why Nance does not spend more time on the connection between early animal rights activism in the 1800s and modern animal rights.

Overall, *Entertaining Elephants* is an enjoyable work that should appeal to those who are interested in cultural or animal history. It will also fit well into any animal or American studies class. However, it will provide most use to scholars who are looking for insightful studies that give agency to those that the historical record too often forgets.

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