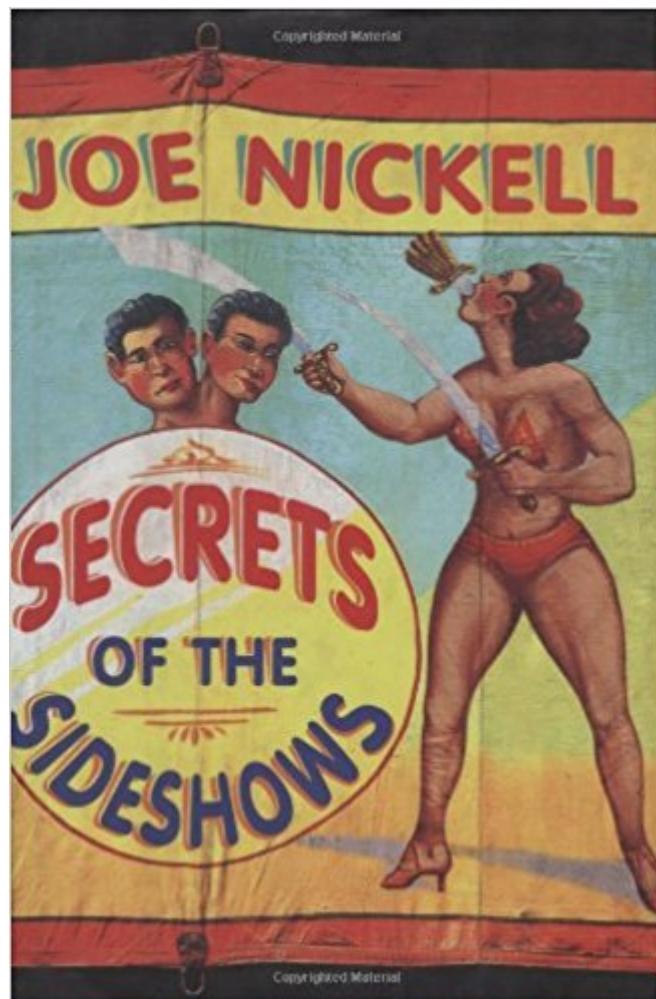


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# Secrets Of The Sideshows



## Synopsis

The carnival sideshows of the past have left behind a fascinating legacy of mystery and intrigue. The secrets behind such daring feats as fire-eating and sword swallowing and bizarre exhibitions of human oddities as "Alligator Boys" and "Gorilla Girls" still remain, only grudgingly if ever given up by performers and carnival professionals. Working alongside the performers, Joe Nickell blows the lid off these mysteries of the midway. The author reveals the structure of the shows, specific methods behind the performances, and the showmen's tactics for recruiting performers and attracting crowds. He also traces the history of such spectacles, from ancient Egyptian magic and street fairs to the golden age of P.T. Barnum's sideshows. With revealing insight into the personal lives of the men and women billed as freaks, Nickell unfolds the captivating story of the midway show.

## Book Information

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"Using history, real carnny language, stories from former sideshow workers and owners, and from Nickell's own archives, *Secrets of the Sideshows* is a wealth of information for circus fans or anyone who's wondered how those seemingly-impossible illusions are created." •Algona Upper Desmoines (IA), Brookings (SD) Register, Lake Country (WI), Marco I "Using history, real carnny language, stories from former sideshow workers and owners, and from Nickell's own archives, *Secrets of the Sideshows* is a wealth of information for circus fans or anyone who's wondered how those seemingly-impossible illusions are created." •Brookings (SD) Register "Nickell offers first a history of sideshows . . . then presents a comprehensive analysis of sideshow performers, skills, and illusions. . . . Recommended." •Choice "An illustrated book for large popular-culture collections.

Recommended for all levels."•Choice"To find out how it's done, and other carnival minutiae, browse Nickell's comprehensive *Secrets of the Sideshows* ."•Entertainment Weekly"A widely researched and splendidly illustrated history of the bizarre world of the exhibited abnormal and the demonstrated impossible."•Foreword Magazine"If there's a more incredibly thorough Â-or more thoroughly incredible bookout there on the past, present and future of the midway, I don't know it. Blessed are all we rubes that Joe Nickell's *Secrets of the Sideshows* is outin the world."•James Taylor, author of *James Taylor's Shocked and Amazed: On & Off theMidw*"A book that gives you the straight lowdown on the acts and the people behindthem. A clear-eyed look into a vanishing bit of Americana. Intriguing andunique."•Joe R. Lansdale, Edgar Award winning author of *The Bottoms and Freezer Burn*"The author, lifting up the back flap of the tent show, reveals, informs, and presents a range of human oddities from the 'real' to the 'created.'"•Linking Ring"Ever since I saw Penn and Teller 'eat' fire and pontificate on the circus sideshow, I have been curious to learn more about it, not only the history and culture of the sideshow, but the secrets themselves! Nickell delivers brilliantly."•Michael Shermer, author of *Why People Believe Weird Things*"Simultaneously provides an insider's glimpse of that world on the skirts of the main event and an excursion into a vanishing feature of North American life."•PsycCritiques"An enjoyable read. . . . Nickell has encyclopedic knowledge of sideshow history"•Roanoke (VA) Times"Nickell takes us inside the world of fire-eaters, sword-swallowers, jugglers, snake-handlers, and magicians to explain the illusions and oddities we may have puzzled over but never fully understood."•Robert A. Baker, author of *They Call It Hypnosis*"To be sure, he gives plenty of secrets away here, most of them open secrets, but the book works best as a tribute to the imagination of the performers and organizers of the exhibits which were meant to provoke and satisfy that admirable old human characteristic, curiosity. . . . If you want the lowdown on sideshows, step right up, ladies and gentlemen, Joe Nickell presents the best show on the midway."•Times of Acadiana"An exciting experience of the mostly American phenomenon of carnys, sideshows, freaks, and carnivals."•UFO Aktuell"For an entertaining book on a rapidly fading culture that was once a thriving part of old America, be sure and pick up "The Secret of the Sideshows."•Jarrid Deaton, The Floyd County Times

Joe Nickell, senior research fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), writes the "Investigative Files" column for *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine.

Although Joe Nickell pulls a couple of his punches, probably in the interests of decorum, his

"Secrets of the Sideshows" is virtually an encyclopedia of that nearly extinct form of entertainment. Or is it nearly extinct? Of the late evolution of the classic sideshow, only Sideshows by the Seashore, operating summers at Coney Island, survives, and this only by turning itself into a non-profit and taking students. The old-fashioned traveling exhibition is, indeed, gone. Nickell has worked as a sideshow talker (not barker, he insists) and magician, and interviewed the last of the old-time managers, Chris Christ, Ward Hall and Bobby Reynolds, before they closed their tents for good around 2002-2004, so he has the background. He notes, amusingly, that Christ, when he started at age 19, was the youngest exhibitor in the business, and 35 years later "he was still the youngest." The first 80 pages, which trace the history of the public displays that evolved into the sideshow (culminating in 1893 at the Chicago Worlds Fair, with its Midway Plaisance, which gave the name to the American outdoor entertainment zone, and, by the way, to its somewhat disreputable appendix, the "sideshow") is rather slow going. Nickell rightly places London's Bartholomew Fair at the crux of the evolution of a kind of entertainment that goes back as far as history tells, but he fails to exploit the rich literature of that fair (which ended in 1855) as represented by, for example, Ned Ward's "London Spy." Nor does he do much better with the equally rich trove of stories swirling around P.T. Barnum in the 19th century. Nevertheless, the basic information is here, with plenty of references. "Secrets of the Sideshows" begins to roll in Chapter 4, "Human Oddities: Large and Small," and continues with his survey of most (but not quite all) of the varieties of cheap fun that hucksters and mountebanks have brought to the metropolises and hamlets over the centuries. Nickell knows and likes carnies, and it shows. The book is fully illustrated, although unfortunately many of the pictures are just snapshots that Nickell took while working at or visiting fairs. It is useful to think of Nickell's book as a survey. More detail about the acts, especially the monsters, is available in the many books by Jan Bondeson; and Bondeson - although his focus is on Europe - does a better job than Nickell of explaining how sideshows (and similar exhibits of freaks) worked to fit aberrations into society. The shameless, sometime brutal, expositions were, says Bondeson, still better treatment than misshapen people would likely have gotten had they tried to live in the greater society. Grim as the sideshow could be, it was a sheltered workshop compared to the outside world. Sideshows are not very grim in Nickell's depiction, though. The battles between carnies and townies (signaled by the cry, "Hey, Rube!") are barely whispered about. Just as soft a mention is made of the practice of selling sex in the sideshows (when the sheriff could be bribed). In Nickell's version, the exhibits all have a certain quality. Even the gaffed (fake) exhibits usually showed a degree of pride in the fakery. His carnies show only "real fakes." Out on the sawdust trail, that was not so apparent. I recall an exhibit of "outer space aliens" at the North Carolina State Fair

about 1964 that comprised two obese, hairless, suppurating dachsunds in a box. Nickell concludes by saying that although the kind of sideshow that decorated the big top shows and state and county fairs is dead, "intrepid performers are seeking new audiences at Renaissance fairs, trade shows, the university circuit, nightclubs and other venues . . . perhaps it is not yet time to fold the last tent."

Joe Nickell's latest book, *Secrets of the Sideshow* is a thoroughly researched tome that is worth the cover price for the pictures alone. The cover effectively uses a 'banner art' style with 'Frog Boy' charmingly gracing the spine. The title is a little misleading, it is not a revelatory guide or 'masked magician' type of book at all. More of a scholarly attempt to document a lost part of American theatre. Mr. Nickell's previous works were largely concerned with his role as editor of the *Skeptical Enquirer*. So deal with the Shroud of Turin, Bigfoot etc. Not having read any of those I cannot comment, but suffice to say that this history of bringing a scientific mind to apparent miracles may have impacted the choice of title. What is apparent is that he has a real love of this subject. He has worked the midway at various fairs as a magician and obviously the carnival world got into his blood. Relying heavily on interviews with carnival legends Ward Hall, Chris Christ and Bobby Reynolds the author details the history of this unique piece of Americana. Bobby Reynold's contributions are fairly ascerbic with a certain bitterness when compared to Ward Hall's more agreeable approach. No attempt appears to have been made to edit any of these contributions. There are copious references to other works, Ricky Jay, Daniel Mannix and Al Stencell are quoted liberally and these authors works would make excellent companion reads. As one goes through the book the reader does learn how effects are achieved, the use of gaffs, fakery and general deception are discussed. However, this remains a secondary facet of this work. It is much more of a historical encyclopedia and includes a thorough list of references and detailed index. Overshadowing the mechanical 'How To' aspects of the book are the wonderful characters that one meets within its pages. Poobah the fire eating dwarf, Percilla the monkey girl, Doug Higley phantom of the midway and purveyor of Area 51 artifacts. [Of course they are real]. And numerous other fascinating people who often show more grace and dignity than the so called 'normal' specimens of the human family. The writing style is a mixture of academic investigation and whimsical fan. Despite his natural instincts for scientific rigor the author's joy in the subject and obvious sadness at the demise of the sideshow shine through. It ends on a positive and up to date note with a piece on the sideshow school at Coney Island, one of the last bastions of the traditional arts. I reccomend this book to anyone who ever thought about running away to the circus and I enjoyed reading it tremendously. PS. One small piece of pedantry. On page 214, Joe Nickell describes the turn of the

century magician Chung Ling Soo as an 'Englishman pretending to be a Chinaman'. In his excellent biography of Chung Ling Soo, *The Glorious Deception*, Jim Steinmeyer details Soo's life as an American who often pretended to be an Englishman, or more commonly a Scotsman pretending to be a Chinaman. Which goes to show that even a skeptical investigator can be confounded by a fellow conjurer, from beyond the grave to boot! My sense is that Mr. Nickell would be delighted.

Written by someone who respects the sideshow past and present. Doesn't feel like he is focused on the "oh my God look at that poor person" aspect but on their lives, history and ability to turn what some would think of as a disability into a career. The background and history of the sideshow was very informative.

If you love the sideshow (and what normal fun loving person does not?!! :-) then this is a MUST have book!!! Well researched.

I'm a huge fan of sideshows. Luckily, I'm a New Yorker so I can go to the Coney Island Sideshow for my fix. This book is an extremely in depth look at sideshows. The author explains the history and then explains each act/attraction in depth. He goes as far as speaking of individual performers who made their mark. I found the book interesting but maybe slightly slow moving. It read more like a textbook than a book for entertainment.

Very interesting book !!

I was looking for information about circus performers and how they perform these amazing acts, so naturally I turned to .com; I found Joe Nickell *Secrets Of The Sideshow* - and found what I was looking for and more. It arrived in great condition and when I was told it would arrive for a great price - Thanks .com

Good introduction to people and themes of historic sideshows, covering the different acts and types of performers. Great place to start if new to the topic.

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