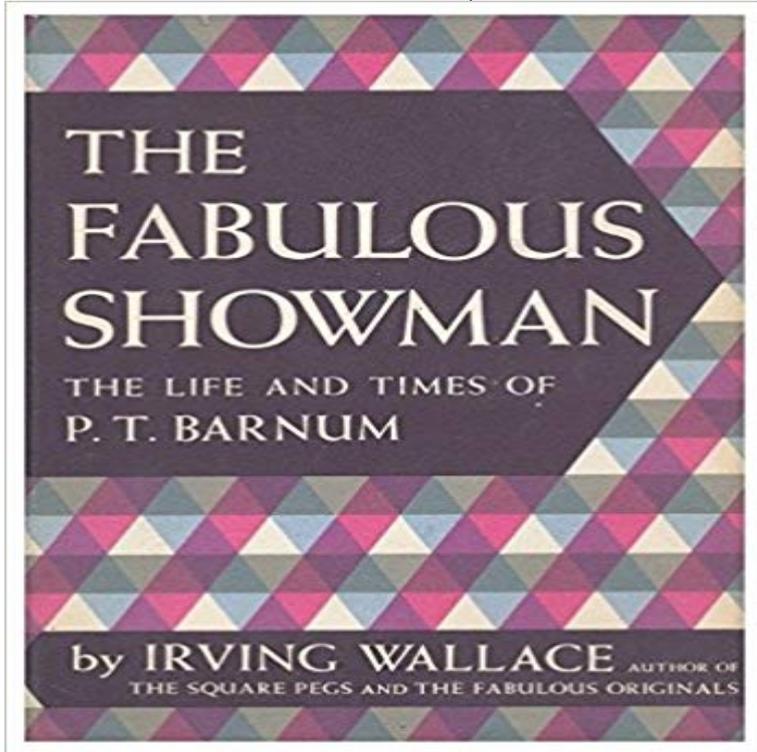


The fabulous showman; the life and times of P. T. Barnum



Wallace lists an extensive bibliography of books and periodicals from the 19th and 20th centuries. Much of the book is organized around the most famous exhibitions: the 161-year-old woman; Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale; General Tom Thumb; Chang and Eng, the Siamese Twins; and of course the one and only elephant Jumbo. Each of these sections is rich with research on their exploitation. What made Barnum tick? Wallace writes, Barnum was attracted to showmanship because...he was seeking a means to combat those forces of religion, government, and commerce which made life drab. (p. 44) Born in 1810 in a harshly Puritan New England town, he came under the early influence of his grandfather whose Universalism led to a much lighter view of life. After the chapter on Barnums childhood, there is little mention--and no analysis--of his religion and its role in Barnums approach. Nor does he shed much light on Barnums family life. These omissions knock a star off what is otherwise an entertaining and apparently well-researched biography. Barnum made a fortune exhibiting oddities and fanning the publics desire for them with high-pressure advertising. Wallaces book is replete with details of the many ventures and adventures of Barnums long public life. Though he was a man of his age, he stands in a long line of showmen adept at feeding public appetites; this wider context is missing. There are other more recent biographies of Barnum that may focus more on the private man and on his context in the public psychology. Barnum himself published an extensive autobiography. Some of these may be more rewarding to the reader who wants to understand what really made the fabulous showman tick.

This book is a fast-paced, carefully documented, and rich biography of Barnum, the greatest showman of all time, the

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