



The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity

Ashley Montagu , Trent Angers (Editor)

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The Elephant Man is a 138-page softcover book whose first edition inspired the movie and the Tony Award-winning play by the same name. This fascinating story, which has touched the hearts of readers throughout the world for over a century, is now complete with the publication of this, the Third Edition. Illustrated with photos and drawings of The Elephant Man.

The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity Details

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Judy says

I read The Elephant Man sometime in the '70s. I don't know which version I read, but it was before the movie appeared. The book was painful to read. But fascinating because I knew very little about neurofibromatosis or other similar genetic conditions. He had especially disfiguring symptoms, which would make life difficult in any era. I wonder what happened to my book. Maybe I lent it to someone who didn't return it.

Tony says

I want to add a caveat to my rating for this one. The excerpt of The Elephant Man written by Sir Frederick Treves was excellent. 5 stars. By all means, get this book and read those 30 pages. The remaining 100 pages, however, is a lot of very dubious "science" and speculation on the part of Montagu and reads like a low C quality research paper for psych 101.

Kalliope says

Really, truly fascinating. Contains much fact about Joseph Merrick's life, as well as intricate theories regarding his psychology. I can't get enough of Merrick, and this book is a must read for anyone who feels the same.

K.T. says

I found the book interesting right up until Montagu started pontificating his theories on the importance of mother-love in early childhood development and how they practically define Joseph Merrick and his life choices. I mean, just look at how bitter Alexander Pope was! Surely the difference between the two men had to do with the exact number of hugs each received from their mothers as infants. ...Feeling lost by that last bit of "logic?" So was I, my friend. So was I.

While it was nice to get a bit more background on the life and times of Joseph Merrick, beyond the fanciful remembrances of Frederick Treve's time-dimmed memories, Montagu seemed a bit too eager to use The Elephant Man's life as a springboard for some of his pet theories on nature vs. nurture and the importance of love on the forming of an infant's personality. It isn't that I haven't heard those theories before, or that I discount entirely their validity. Really, though, with the scant amount of information available about Merrick's life, it seemed completely inappropriate to extrapolate these assumptions about the man.

In short, there are far better sources out there on Merrick's life. Ones without outdated psychobabble thrown in as "fact." If you're interested in the man, I highly suggest finding another source to glean your information from.

David Brown says

I checked this book out from the library because I'm going to be watching The Elephant Man by David Lynch and according to IMDB the film is partly based on this book.

The writing so far is a bit droll, and the author goes off for several very long paragraphs detailing the life and career of a man who has no part in the book other than that he taught Frederick Treves in school. Not a good sign.

Kim says

The story of Joseph Merrick is inspiring. He was such a gentle soul despite his terrible disfigurement. This book also delved into the psychology of the situation which was a bit boring.

Rafael Castillo says

I read this book a few decades ago (1978, 79 or so) and was totally engrossed in it. It is a fascinating exploration of Joseph Merrick's, a.k.a, The Elephant Man, character and why, despite being severely deformed and cruelly mistreated throughout his life remained a caring and loving man. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu includes the personal journal entry of Doctor Frederick Treves pertaining to his meeting and care of Mr. Merrick. In addition to discussing Mr. Merrick, Ashley Montagu juxtaposes that story with another person, a deformed dwarf who, if I recall, was an author and/or poet and who also was mistreated due to his deformities. However, unlike Joseph Merrick, this man was very bitter and angry all his life.

Ashley Montagu compares them and explores what was it that may have caused them to be this way. I highly recommend this book. I have composed this review without having reread it and I should read it again.

Cindy says

I enjoyed the story of Joseph Merrick itself with Montagu's updated information. I found the information about the neurofibromatosis which caused Merrick's deformities interesting and can't imagine living that way myself.

Rhianon O'Halloran says

Having always been curious about this story, I could not resist reading this book. Many people today would not even know Joseph Merrick by his real name, but they have heard of The Elephant Man. Regretfully, they associate him with the Disney version of the Hunchback, rather than a real person who suffered from a terrible disorder, not to mention at a time in history when humankind was not very understanding or

compassionate.

The story of Joseph Merrick is fascinating because of who he was and how he dealt with the terrible things he had to face from people due to the way he looked. Very few chose to get to know him as a person because they could not get past his terrible appearance. He was a humble and kind person who did not allow himself to become bitter or angry, regardless of how he was treated.

Unfortunately, this book centers more on the heroism of the doctor who took in Joseph Merrick and showed him the only kindness he'd ever known up to that point. Of course, very little was known of Merrick's life before he was rescued by this doctor, most of it only assumptions. But what is important is that Joseph overcame his hardships and managed to be happy in the last years of his life, and he could be a lesson to many people.

Kaye says

Good background about Joseph Merrick, but the last few chapters were kind of superfluous and unconvincing (ie, mother love and trying to draw parallels with Alexander Pope).

Erin says

John Merrick's story fascinates me both as a soon-to-be medical student and as a student of anthropology. And, of course, as a human being. The fact that he could be sweet and gentle while having lived a life of darkness and despair astounds me. It speaks volumes on the capacity for human goodness in the face of real evil; I wish more of us could learn to see the world through Merrick's eyes.

Stephanie says

Such an interesting story, especially from a physician's perspective. I'm using the David Lynch film in a class I'm teaching on Medical Narrative, and this was the only text about the case in our school library. I would like to read some of the more recent nonfiction about Merrick--I know this isn't completely accurate. But I had forgotten how much I like Ashley Montague's perspective.

Beverly says

I read the book shortly after the movie came out. After seeing the photos and drawings in the book, I realized what an amazing job the movie-makers had done making up John Hurt to look like Joseph Merrick. The book, of course, has more details than the movie did, but both were very emotionally affecting.

Kathy Kattenburg says

What a fascinating, moving, inspiring book. John Merrick, the so-called "Elephant Man," had what we now know is neurofibromatosis, an inherited condition, in his case caused by a genetic mutation. He died when he was only 27, and all but the last few years of that life were an unceasing nightmare of physical and emotional torment. In his early 20s, he came to the attention -- purely by chance -- of a surgeon, Dr. William Treves. Treves basically rescued Merrick from a horrendous existence in which he was publicly exhibited as a freak of nature, treated cruelly and as though he were a beast, not a human being. Treves set him up in the London Hospital, where he lived for the remainder of his life in physical comfort and surrounded by loving, caring people.

What makes Merrick so compelling was not his tragic condition so much as his response to it. Treves described him as unfailingly gentle, sweet, uncomplaining, and intelligent, someone who loved books and reading -- a beautiful soul trapped in a monstrously deformed body. Ashley Montagu, the well-known sociologist and anthropologist who wrote this book, contrasts Merrick's temperament with that of Alexander Pope, who also suffered from physical deformity (he was a dwarf with a misshapen body), although nowhere near as severe as Merrick's. Pope -- although he had economic, social, and intellectual advantages that Merrick could only dream of -- was a bitter, angry man who keenly felt the contrast between his golden profession as one of England's most celebrated poets, and his bodily abnormality.

Montagu explores the possible explanations for this -- and in general, why two people can respond so differently to the same or very similar misfortunes. He also includes Treves' report on his discovery of Merrick, and his life both before and after that event. As well, the book begins with a brief biography of Treves, and concludes with a chapter going into the biology of Merrick's disorder.

Wax says

having oversized bits does not always find you love.
