



The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P. T. Barnum

Candace Fleming , Ray Fenwick (Illustrator)

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Discover the true story of P.T. Barnum, the man who created the world-famous Barnum & Bailey Circus, as featured in the movie *The Greatest Showman*!

*The award-winning author of *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary, Amelia Lost, and Our Eleanor* brings us the larger-than-life biography of showman P. T. Barnum. Known far and wide for his jumbo elephants, midgets, and three-ring circuses, here's a complete and captivating look at the man behind the Greatest Show on Earth. Readers can visit Barnum's American Museum; meet Tom Thumb, the miniature man (only 39 inches tall) and his tinier bride (32 inches); experience the thrill Barnum must have felt when, at age 60, he joined the circus; and discover Barnum's legacy to the 19th century and beyond. Drawing on old circus posters, photographs, etchings, ticket stubs--and with incredible decorative art by Ray Fenwick--this book presents history as it's never been experienced before--a show-stopping event!*

The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P. T. Barnum Details

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From Reader Review The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P. T. Barnum for online ebook

Louise says

I am not a fan of PT Barnum which is heresy when you've lived in Bridgeport, CT.

I understand my sensibilities about the commercialization of the unfortunates and his out and out frauds (George Washington's nanny for one) are "modern" and that the times were different. I understand that he provided work for many that others would not in an era with no safety net programs. He was a far sighted entrepreneur, bouncing back after losses to build the iconic American Circus; he even built his own railroad cars to bring the circus to far flung communities. He is still to "too" for me to celebrate.

While I don't gravitate to Barnum literature, I wanted to how he would be interpreted for contemporary young adult readers.

Fleming presents Barnum's subjects with respect. You draw your own conclusions about how exploited they were. There is a picture of his long suffering wife, Charity Barnum. The facts of how he wed so soon after her death and kept it a secret are not hidden from today's youth as they might have been a generation ago.

I haven't see Fleming's other books, but I like the scrap book approach. It's a great way to get young people interested in history.

Chris Heffernan says

I loved everything about this biography. The information provided wasn't overly detailed and unnecessary, it simply tells the story of a great showman.

Bekka says

Really good book! Candace Fleming is a fantastic historian and writer for kids, and she does a masterful job in relating the story of Barnum's life for her audience. I liked that she doesn't shy away from the controversial aspects of his life, and that she presents a nuance, balanced picture of a complicated man of his times. This is a great book to read, particularly if you've enjoyed the recent film "The Greatest Showman," which is less than historically accurate. It would be a fun classroom discussion to compare the two, and open up conversation on the more controversial aspects of Barnum's life.

Becki says

So after watching The Greatest Showman, I wanted to learn more about P.T. Barnum. This middle grades

biography is the only thing my library had to offer. But it ended up being really good. Just enough information on most of the areas I wanted to learn more about/compare movie vs. fact. It was very readable, well organized, and contained great pictures.

Danna says

I thoroughly enjoyed this quick, entertaining read. It was incredible to learn P.T. Barnum's history, from growing up with a prankster grandfather through his opening of the American Museum, tours of Europe with Tom Thumb, and his grand finale of the Greatest Show on Earth. Barnum raked in the dough fooling America's citizens and seemed to enjoy every minute of it - as did the citizens! No one seemed to mind his "humbuggery" a bit. One of the facts I found most interesting was, during the beginning of the circus, the SPCA filed claim against Barnum for abuse of animals. Barnum, aghast, countered the gentleman head-on, to prove that contrary to popular belief, the animals were loved and cared for as best as possible. In fact, many zoologists and caretakers of exotic animals contacted Barnum for the best way to take care of these beasts! Barnum, in his quest to convince the SPCA of his altruistic mission, proved himself. He became close friends with the crusader, and eventually came to sit on the board himself donating large sums of money to the organization in order to help care for animals that were mistreated. I don't know how well the treatment of circus animals has been kept up, but it is certainly a fascinating tidbit considering the crowds of protesters outside many performances of the Circus today!

We can thank Barnum for today's paparazzi-craze: his introduction of Swedish singer Lind to the US brought on the first media frenzy over celebrity (which he created single-handed by paying the reporters!). Her name was the first ever whose celebrity status was used to endorse products and services.

Overall, this book was fun, with great facts about the many performers, the historical background of show business, and the different means of public media. It's only about 140 pages of large print with photos, so it would also make an excellent coffee table book. If you're into entertaining, light nonfiction, I definitely recommend.

Roxanne says

I found this book at the Library and today I am going the movie about him. This is a wonderful about PT Barnum. He was a curious person and started out with opening different musuems with exhibits he thought people would love to see. He traveled the world with Tom Thumb. He did a small traveling circus himself before he hooked up with Mr Bailey. He was 60 years old when he got into the bigger circus and they made railcars just to fit their animals and gear. His vision was be a showman, and the Greatest Show on Earth delighted people all over the world. Later after his death the Ringling Bros joined up and they kept the circus going until 2017. When I was about 6 my grandpa took me to their circus at The Shrine In Los Angeles and I loved it. This is a delightful book about this great man who has gone in history as the Greatest Showman of All time.

Betsy says

I'm trying to work out why exactly this is the only children's biography of P.T. Barnum I remember having seen before. I'm sure there are others. If I could just lift my lazy fingers high enough to type in "P.T. Barnum" into my library's catalog system I'm sure I'd find a couple. But why only a couple? Why isn't

Barnum as popular a topic as, say, Houdini? Both spent their lives bamboozling people, one way or another. But where Houdini got off looking like a star, people are awfully mixed on Barnum. Which, I suppose, answers my own question. Why aren't there that many children's bios of Mr. B? Probably because he wasn't a very good man or a very bad man. He was just a very talented man with a fair amount of problems. The kind of guy who loved children... and was, for a time, an alcoholic who would leave his wife to faint in public. Who fought for the right for blacks to vote... and owned a slave. Multifaceted people don't end up in children's biographies all that often because it takes a dedicated author to have the guts to show the bad alongside the good. Guts like Candace Fleming's got. Guts like what you'd find in *The Great and Only Barnum*.

It's nice when a life has a defining moment in it. P.T. Barnum's apparently came when, as a kid, he discovered that his inheritance from his practical joker of a grandfather was a swampy snake-infested spit of land. Meant to humble young Tale and turn him into a hard worker, the plan backfired. Instead the lad fell in love with bamboozling and practical jokes. Born in 1810, young Tale had already learned that he wasn't much for manual labor. Nor, for that matter, was he cut out to work in shops or behind desks. If it bored him, he wasn't interested. Maybe that's why he got into the business of showmanship. He started out by exhibiting a woman he claimed had been George Washington's nursemaid. From there he went on to build two magnificent museums of wonder and buffoonery, tour the 19th century pop star Jenny Lind, serve on the Connecticut state legislature, and help to create the greatest show on earth, the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Love him or hate him, there's no denying that Barnum was a uniquely American character, with a truly interesting life. An extensive Bibliography (including websites), and Source Notes are included.

The book is told in a straightforward manner, generally telling Barnum's tale chronologically. Considering the subject matter, however, Fleming is free to indulge in some enjoyable elements. For example, at one point the book is laid out in a manner similar to Barnum's museum itself. Readers step into each saloon and hear about what one could find there. Those of us familiar with the musical *Barnum* (yay, Jim Dale!) would even be able to recite the things one found from The Museum Song ("Quite a lotta Roman terra cotta . . ."). Of course the modern reader may feel superior to their historical brethren, but Barnum's Museum was just an ancestor of today's Ripley's Believe It Or Not Museum or the "educational" Bodies... The Exhibition which travels the country. Say what you will about Barnum, while he may have taxidermied people's pets while they waited, he never went so far as to do the same for actual human beings.

So why are we even reading about this guy? Because he's fascinating. A guy who had his good and bad points. To watch Fleming do the dance of explaining the man, not covering up his lesser qualities, and still presenting him as a kind of charming cad is mesmerizing. She's writing for kids and teens as her primary audience, yes? Then that means putting in some rather adult materials, without going into the delicate details. Barnum had a good friend in a Phoebe Cary, with whom he remained close for twenty years while married, until she died. On that subject we would only be able to speculate anyway. Fleming does not delve or suppose. Just the fact, ma'am.

Is she an apologist for Barnum? I struggled with that question all through the book. When explaining that Barnum only claimed to be renting Ms. Joice Heth from her real "owner" Ms. Fleming answers more honestly than the man himself in saying, "But even if he didn't technically own Joice, he still acted like her master. He displayed the tired old woman before the public. And she had no choice but to submit." She never damns him directly. Never says, "Here is a bad man for such n' such a reason." She could many times over if she wanted to. His museum only let in blacks on specific days and times. His animals died in a variety of ways. You could villainize him or saint him depending on your mood. Fleming does neither. She simply displays him, warts and all, to the child readers and allows them to make up their own mind on the matter.

Why do we like him? I dunno. Maybe it was the good-natured quality of his pranks. How do you help but smile when you hear how for the opening of his museum he placed the worst possible musicians on his roof so that people could only flee the sound by going INTO the museum. He paid his “Human Curiosities” a generous salary. He said of them that when people met them in his museum, “I want folks to say ‘what an amazing person’ not ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’” His menagerie “was not well cared for” but he was so well informed about animals for his time period that folks from the American Museum of Natural History would actually ask him for advice regarding animals.

Fleming has done her research too. Readers are left with very few questions by the end of her tale. There was really only one moment when I was left hankering for more facts. Early in his career and without a penny to his name, Barnum hit upon the idea of creating his infamous Museum. To buy it on credit he put up his worthless spit of land, Ivy Island. That’s all well and good, but then he filled the museum to brimming with people, animals, exhibits, you name it. He even went so far as to cover the museum in painted plaques, flags from numerous countries, premier New York’s first spotlight, and hire a brass band on its opening day. So how on earth did a man without much in the way of money get all of this? Credit? If so, Barnum was as savvy a businessman as you could ever hope to find in American history. But it’s a mystery that remains unanswered here.

Mark Twain despised him. People loved him. He fooled men, women, and children alike. One minute he was bringing his circus to small children. The next he was attempting to buy the American side of Niagara Falls so that he could build a fence to prevent one side from seeing it without paying. He insisted that blacks be given the right to vote because “A human soul is not to be trifled with,” then turned around and exhibited the Chiefs of the Nine [Indian:] Nations along with other “Human Curiosities”. He is repugnant and compelling by our modern standards and he has left his mark on the American landscape, for good or ill. Children’s biographies are not always about saintly people. Once in a great while they are about complex characters. And as you will find, they don’t get much more complex than Phineas Taylor Barnum, King of the Humbugs.

Ages 10 and up.

Jana Eichhorn says

Interesting look at a morally questionable man.

Jessika Santulli says

“Love God and be merry.”

—P.T. Barnum’s motto which he had painted on the wall of his home

I read this after seeing the musical *The Greatest Showman* which left me hungry for all things Barnum. Reading about the showman’s actual life was almost as exciting as the wonderful film. I could not put this book down! I had things to do but it didn’t matter; I kept right on reading.

Barnum was not a perfect person, but he was exceptional in many areas: business, showmanship, vision, imagination. Reading about his life was like going on a wild rollercoaster ride. The author is very talented at

making readers feel like they are actually walking through the American Museum in 1840s New York City. She details every stage of Barnum's life, as well as his comrades, coworkers, friends, and enemies.

Barnum experienced so much and truly changed the entertainment industry as well as people's lives. He gave people labeled "oddities" a well-paying job and a chance to educate the world about their conditions. He re-invented the idea of a museum, and made traveling circuses more efficient. He made the public happy, but sometimes abandoned his family in process. He got bored in retirement and never stopped working until the end. There is just so much to learn about him. I never knew that someone could have so many properties burn down in a lifetime. But, hey, it was the 1800s; anything could happen.

So come one, come all! This book will entice, thrill, and wow readers both young and old. Sit back and enjoy learning about the showman who was P.T. Barnum.

Joanne Kelleher says

Trickery or entertainment?

A loving family man or a single-minded entrepreneur?

An animal lover or cruel ringmaster?

Candace Fleming presents well-researched facts, documents, and photographs to reveal the life of P.T. Barnum, allowing the reader to come to their own decision.

A middle grade reader might pick this for a biography report or if they are interested in oddities and/or the circus.

McKenna says

I typically do not enjoy biographies but this was a wonderful read. At first I did not think Barnum was a good person but in the end I was convinced otherwise. If you are looking for a good biography to read this is a great choice.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

I loved this book! What a fascinating person Barnum was! Felt sorry for his wife, though, who looks sooo depressed in the photo on page 76. It's a darn shame that his two museums burned down. Fleming makes you feel as if you're touring through his first museum in chapter 4, proceeding from the entrance into each "saloon," as he called his exhibit rooms, and the theatre ("moral lecture hall") and finally out onto the street. Barnum was a master selling things and ideas to people, even when it was all "humbug." I wish I could go back in time and visit some of his exhibits and view some of his acts. I'd also love to travel to Bridgeport, Connecticut, to see the Barnum Museum there.

The profuse illustrations/photos by Ray Fenwick were a perfect accompaniment to the text, which was printed in a font reminiscent of books in the late 19th century. I found the book so interesting that I hated to see it end. Now I've got to read Barnum's autobiography. Highly recommended!

Taylor Lara says

I loved the layout of this beautiful book. The amazing historical photographs and lively illustrations were balanced perfectly with well written paragraphs full of fascinating stories about the greatest showman on earth. Made me very upset that his beloved circus is no longer running....

Kate says

Interesting how people's fascination with shams and the absurd continues even today. I believe Barnum would have had a field day producing reality TV shows.

Vivian says

The recent film (bio-pic) *The Greatest Showman* piqued my curiosity about this man, which led me to this 142 page biography replete with photographs and sidebar commentary.

What I learned is that the bio-pic is very much a fictional story inspired by the life of P.T. Barnum. Which is perfectly okay. However, I am very happy that it led me to learn more about this fascinating person and his life's output.

I highly recommend both the book and the film.
