

## Book Reviews

**Title:** *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*  
**Editor:** Marlene Tromp  
**Publisher:** Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2008  
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**Reviewer:** Charles Folk

The freak shows of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in the United States and Great Britain are stark reminders of the change in western societal perceptions of human differences. The so-called 'freak' is often recalled as an unfortunate individual, usually with a severe disability, who through exploitation by the unscrupulous, was subjected to ridicule and mockery in feeding the public's voracious insensitive curiosity. The emergent sub-field of Freak Studies reconsiders this phenomenon using current thought on disability, gender, race, ethnicity, and societal norms. *Victorian Freaks*, a collection of twelve essays edited by Marlene Tromp, is a substantial new contribution to this sub-field.

These essays reveal the social process of "enfreakment" whereby those possessing unusual bodies, abilities, and disabilities were recreated as spectacles for consumption. By drawing on a variety of compelling historical sources and documents, each essay attempts to situate these spectacles in the context of the social tensions in Great Britain as it underwent extensive economic, political, scientific and social changes. In "Poor Hoo Loo" by Meegan Kennedy, the botched and ultimately fatal operation to remove a large tumor in the genital area of a Chinese man became a spectacle for the medical establishment striving for a new standard of clinical objectivity, and the society's concern at the "unnatural growth" in the British Empire. Another essay, "Our Bear Women, Ourselves" by Rebecca Stern, convincingly argues that Julia Pastrana, whose face and body were covered with long hair, presented a challenge to Victorian categories of femininity and the erotic, and inflamed Victorian anxieties about class, race, and particularly gender.

The issue of personal agency repeatedly arises in these essays. Hoo Loo apparently faced a forced choice of either going to London for an operation thereby unknowingly subjecting himself to the spectacle his life and death became, or resigning himself to staying in China, where doctors refused to operate. Joyce L. Huff's "Freaklore" describes the career of Daniel Lambert, who exhibited himself at fairs and theatres and accepted fees from curious visitors to his home to offset the expense of having his furniture and clothing custom made to fit his unusually large size. The aforementioned Pastrana seems to have collaborated quite cleverly with her husband/promoter, though she did not likely contribute to the decision to be embalmed and displayed posthumously along with the newborn who only briefly survived her. Each of these individuals made choices from a limited set of options based on the information, qualities, and skills they possessed, in the hope that their circumstances might be improved.

While these are academic essays, any student or scholar of the humanities or social sciences will be quite familiar with the jargon and theoretical frameworks employed, and the forward by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and introduction by Marlene Tromp offer an adequate

grounding in the foundations of Freak Studies. The overlap between the collection's subject and that of Disability Studies is considerable, and where there is difference in focus, as with questions of race and gender, there exists a useful space for mutual engagement. *Victorian Freaks* is a valuable contribution to scholarship in the areas of disability, race, gender, and class, and offers an interesting perspective for understanding the social history of Victorian Britain.

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