



Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women

Ricky Jay

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A cult classic and a work of remarkable scholarship, this title is an investigation into the inspired world of side shows, circuses, and singularly talented performers. Jay's unparalleled collection of books, posters, photographs, programs, broadsides, and data about unjustifiably forgotten entertainers all over the world made this unique book possible.

Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women Details

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Author : Ricky Jay

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From Reader Review Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women for online ebook

Chuk says

This book must have taken a huge amount of research, especially in the pre-internet days. There are a few personal anecdotes from the author as well, and lots of reproduced old handbills/ads/posters. Very interesting and almost unbelievable feats from lots of these performers, thoroughly documented for the most part.

ALLEN says

Ricky Jay is a pretty amazing man. He is known as perhaps the country's greatest sleight-of-hand artist and even wrote a book about how to turn ordinary playing cards into weapons. He has appeared in small roles in numerous movies, most notably as a card sharp in David Mamet's *HOUSE OF CARDS* and in two Paul Thomas Anderson movies, *BOOGIE NIGHTS* and *MAGNOLIA*. For this book, he dons an academic's hat and gives a learned yet thoroughly entertaining account of some of the acts that enlived big tops and side shows and traveling shows between the mid-Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. In addition to the title oddities, Jay discusses, among other strange acts, men who hold amazing stores of data between their ears, "pig faced" women (usually billed as Irish or German for the British market), people who eat stones and snakes and crawl into tiny spaces, and my favorite, a *Pétomane* (for lack of a better term, a "Fart-iste"), who was famous all over his native France and beyond.

Jay's 1986 book is no longer in print, but I wish it were. Both paperback and hardcover versions are available used.

Image: Joseph Pujol, *Le Pétomane*, ca. 1890:

Thomas Pluck says

An exhaustive exploration that will captivate you if you have the interest. We've enjoyed being tricked for a long time.

Kay says

Ricky Jay is one of the world's most accomplished showmen, a world-renowned magician and sleight-of-hand artist, particularly famed for his card-throwing stunts. (He is the author of *Cards as Weapons*.) In this affectionate and entertaining book, Jay presents a mind-boggling array of oddball performers, everything from calculating horses to armless artists. Jay's style has a trace of the academic to it, but he wears his mantle of scholarship in a rakish manner. One can imagine a twinkle in Jay's eye as he writes of these "pioneers or

refiners of peculiar performance," particularly in the chapter devoted to the 19th century Parisian performer, "Le Pétoman," who gave musical performances by, well, farting. Ah, to hear "Au clair de la lune" thus rendered!

I couldn't help but think, as I was reading Jay's droll description of Le Pétoman's performances and the enthusiastic reception he received that, really, present-day moralists who "humph!" over the degradation of society and such things as "South Park" or pro wrestling need to take a chill pill.

And, yeah, my mom was right - each one of us *does* have a special talent, just waiting to be discovered.

Risto Pakarinen says

Just as good as I expected. A true classic of the genre, an incredible collection of amazing stories of people who lived in the twilight zone. Not for everyone but if you like magic and sideshows, you'll like this one. In fact, I may just re-read it right away.

Elizabeth says

A small bit of personal trivia to kick this mini-review off: I've actually had this book sitting on my shelf for a few years. Early in our relationship, my now-husband & I were both totally obsessed with the TV show *Deadwood*. Within a few months, we both ended up giving the other books by Ricky Jay, who was in the first season. (I gave him Jay's *Journal of Anomalies*; he gave me this book. We're darling, aren't we?) It wasn't until we recently watched the documentary *Deceptive Practice: The Mysteries and Mentors of Ricky Jay* that I finally decided to read the book instead of just skimming through its varied histories & lingering over the color plates.

Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women is a cultural survey of performers that earned a living on vaudevillian or quasi-spiritual circuits. But, far from being a dry collection of bios, Jay outlines these histories as "sketchily explained secrets" (to borrow his own description of a similar compendium) with wit & a distinct, charming style. Each section focuses on a certain kind of talent (sword-swallowing, fire-walking, reading minds) and reveals just enough to cast any doubt on supernatural prowess while still allowing a reader to appreciate how an effect could be constructed. After recounting these wonders, Jay also ends up stating the fates of these performers. Doing so is practical & correct since our author is diligently preserving these histories. But closing each story with the performers' deaths grounds the fantastical stories in a moving way. A trick ends & a life finishes with a satisfying sense of closure.

There is something old-world about this book as well. I don't use that adjective simply because of the European backgrounds of some of these personalities. The thorough histories stand in contrast to our constant American interest in the new, the novel, & the youthful. Learned Pigs is not too unlike Montaigne's equally comprehensive essays. The Acknowledgements in the back of the book lists many citations & collections for curious readers to use in their own research. As for me, Learned Pigs has at least convinced me to pick up Augustine's *City of God*, because I need to read that quote from the last chapter myself in order to believe it. And to maybe not let books like Mr. Jay's sit on my shelf unread for so long.

Damian says

This is probably one of my favorite books of all time. Filled with amazing historical accounts of marvelous people. Do yourself a favor, and devour this book

Ron says

A history of weird "entertainments," mostly in Europe and America. I guess it could be seen as a compendium of how sharkers and con men, quacks and mountebanks found a living bamboozling audiences – despite the efforts of sane skeptics to unmask their deceptions. The tricks behind horses that can count and pigs that can read minds, behind people who claim to be able to drink boiling oil and corrosive chemicals without injury, have been known for a long time, but new generations keep wanting to be fooled. There are some who came to bizarre performances out of necessity – those born without arms, who had to learn to use their feet to write, draw, and shoot bows and arrows. But most are fast-buck artists, who find all kinds of ways to avoid confronting skeptics who try to debunk the hucksters.

A disappointing read, written very mundanely, organized poorly, with bad reproductions of old photographs and theater handbills. Not much to read, really; a skim, with stops here and there to pursue things that look interesting (but turn out not to be all that so).

I will remember the jerks who claim to be able to eat all kinds of indigestible stuff: live animals, parts of machinery, thistles and nails and.... enough.

Batgrl (Book Data Kept Elsewhere) says

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Ensiform says

A look at some of the freaks, wonders, curiosities and con men of the past. From mentalists like Harry Kahne to limbless marvels like Matthew Buchinger and Sarah Biffin, from water spouters to growers, from learned animals of all types to Max Petomane the farting impressionist, there's quite a lot to wonder at.

Some of the acts get only the briefest of mentions, which left me a bit dissatisfied, more questions arising than facts presented. When Jay deigns to write a lengthier investigation, complete with a little information as to how a trick is done (for example, Laroche, who went up a spiral ramp inside a large sphere), it's a much more enjoyable book. The illustrations, mostly old photos and playbills, are extremely illuminating.

Michael says

The best story in this great, invaluable collection of magic, carnival and curiosity stories is the one about Johnny Eck, a man with just a torso for a body who was featured in Tod Browning's cult movie *Freaks*. Eck's identical twin brother was recruited by a magician to be the chosen member of the audience to undergo the classic sawed-in-half-in-a-box trick. Unbeknownst to the audience, the twin was substituted onstage with a "man" comprise of Eck and a dwarf who wore a pair of pants from head to toe. Pretending to be the twin, Eck and the dwarf departed the stage appearing as a whole person, but in the process of returning to the proper seat separated and ran around the room like a chicken with its head cut off. Shouts, fainting, and rushes toward the exit ensued en masse. The prank was so shocking it was never performed again.

James says

If there were any doubt that I am my father's son, the progressive ossification of my OCD tendencies with each passing year would definitively remove it. I've been on something of a Ricky Jay jag since viewing *Deceptive Practice* on *American Masters* a couple of weeks ago. In this instance, at least, my compulsive interest is satisfyingly fitting. Master conjuror and rare books maven Ricky Jay is an obsessive's obsessive.* I find his astonishing erudition in historical arcana from the less reputable avenues of show business, in combination with his glib carny's prolixity, irresistible.

Which is why I was a little disappointed in *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women*. Jay has a distinctive voice and an undeniably impressive fund of knowledge about an inherently interesting subject, so I didn't expect to find this book as periodically dry as I did. As another Goodreads reviewer pointed out, the occasional catalogue-y quality can probably be ascribed to the leanness of some of the source material. I think if Jay had been a little less inclusive - a little less indulgent of his collector's vanity - it might have improved the parts of the book that sagged.

Definitely glad to have read it, though, and I'm sure I'll be back to the well.

*I once read a profile of the magician Teller in *The New Yorker* wherein his partner Penn Jillette declared something along the lines of, "You show me someone who can do card tricks and I'll show you someone who

didn't have a date in high school."

Neven says

A well-written book on a fascinating subject. While it's not Ricky Jay's fault that the sources on stories included herein are scarce and untrustworthy, it does make for a frustrating read. The catalog nature of the book means there's little depth, and often a dry breadth to the list of individuals, acts, and events presented.

Kurt says

Ricky Jay has such an established reputation as a smooth customer quick with the tossed off patter and legendary prestidigitation, that you feel like you are enjoying his book more than you are. It's a nice trick. There is value to this compendium of historical entertainment oddities. Otherwise lost to the footlight footnotes, Ricky Jay affectionately brings to renewed life those who entertained and fascinated the world mostly prior to 1900 by being mind readers, fireproof, brilliant pigs, flying horses, escape artists, enterartists, all knowing and able swallow stones or acids or swords. They were headliners in their heyday but were they around today given modern tastes they would likely be relegated to the sideshow. Much of this book feels like a trip to the side show. Marvelous as many of these stories are, there just isn't enough known about most of these folks to bring them to life for more than mere moments. They flicker briefly then burn out which also happens to the reader if you read too much at one sitting. The book itself became a sideshow to whatever else I was reading. I enjoyed it a chapter or two at a time and that's how I'd suggest reading it. There are many things here that I will not forget but just like the dead magician who's skull collapsed when the mortician tried to comb his hair...the book is a little thin on top and on the inside too.

Linda says

I REALLY like this book but it wasn't amazing! I wish there were a 4 1/2 rating. Ricky Jay, apparently a well-known magician has written a book on the extremely interesting offbeat "stars" of the past vaudeville-type entertainment. His style is extremely good and very easy to read and he includes some great humor. This book was one of the bases for the book Pyg which I reviewed elsewhere. But it also deals with several armless and/or legless wonders who could paint (the armless woman, Miss Biffin who was actually commissioned by several of Britain's royalty), a mind reader who probably was actually killed because he was a catalytic and after one performance he had a fit, a man who used to jump off high places with a noose around his neck (which was actually rubber inside so that when he hit the end, he bounced back up enough to take the noose off (however, he met HIS end when the trick didn't work once....). Anyway, the stories are fascinating and the book is a quick read (mainly because the stories are so good). Read it and be amazed.
