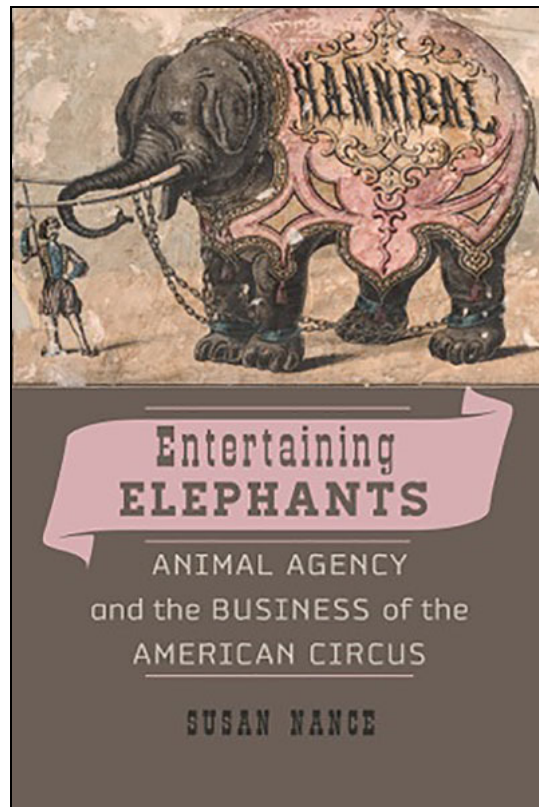


Reviews

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History from the Howdah: A New Methodology for Animal History

Susan Nance, *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 294 pp. \$55.00 hb.



Through *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus*, historian Susan Nance “presents a cultural and management history of elephant use in American entertainment” over the course of the nineteenth century (13). This history is an atypical one. By “turning the history of the circus inside out,” Nance authors an “elephant-centered history of the show trade” (9). In so doing, she not only directs new

and gargantuan figures into the center ring of her history, but she also raises timely questions about how historians should approach the past. Indeed, this book lives up to its title, for entertaining and dramatic stories about elephants fill its pages. Readers will need to hold onto their howdahs as they peer into circus history from the backs of elephants like Hannibal, Hercules, Hebe, and Horatio. These elephantine tales capture the reader's attention, making for a lively (although saddening) reading experience. This book is an untold history of circus elephants in America that should be viewed as a must-read for scholars interested in the American entertainment industry. Most significantly, though, it articulates and then confronts colossal methodological and theoretical problems with locating nonhuman agency in the past. Historians currently engaged with this issue must also add *Entertaining Elephants* to their reading lists.

Entertaining Elephants advances a straightforward and two-part historical argument about circus elephants in America. First, nineteenth-century circuses needed elephants to succeed. Therefore, elephants stood as symbols of and for the American circus. Second, throughout the intertwined histories of elephants and circuses, elephants remained "historical beings" (6). They were individuals "who acted on their environments in their own interests as they understood them" (13). Elephants always played an important role in determining their own history within the circus. Nance argues this thesis convincingly, and the seven chapters of this book outline the major moments in the history of elephants and circuses between 1796 (when an elephant, Betsy, first stepped foot onto United States soil) and 1907 (when the first American-born elephant, Columbia, was executed by strangling).

Chapter One tells the story of the first two elephants displayed in American history. This duo, both oddly known by the names "Betsy" and "Old Bet," arrived in the period of the Early Republic. Together, these two elephants set the precedent for future elephant "actors" in American show business. Chapter Two examines the creation of the elephant "actor" in the antebellum period. This important chapter demonstrates how "showmen named and promoted individual elephants as noted entertainers" (45). Generally, antebellum circus leaders transformed the elephant into a "consumer-friendly animal with a biography, noted individual habits, human friends, and a desire to travel around America for the audience's enjoyment" (41). Elephants were further cast as "sagacious," possessing human-like intelligence that enabled them to "adapt to human surroundings and to please people" (55). Then, Chapter Three takes a behind-the-scenes look into how trainers actually conditioned circus elephants to play their "sagacious" roles. This chapter, possibly the most engaging of the book, resurrects the human-elephant "contact zone" (Haraway, 2008) that undergirded elephant-training,

explaining how elephants learned to stand on their heads, step over humans, salute their trunks, and perform skits with clowns. Within the “social space” of elephant-training sessions, humans and elephants communicated with each other (95). Nonetheless, the elephant hook and the pitchfork, used for negatively reinforcing elephant behaviors, functions as the reigning symbol of this chapter.

Chapter Four describes rhetorical valences of elephants deemphasized in the preceding chapters. Even though the “sagacious elephant” served as the predominant trope for circus elephants during the antebellum period, these animals were also always seen as “treacherous beasts striving to compete with man” (137). This chapter focuses on the challenges posed by bull elephants. Male elephants proved particularly difficult to manage because when they reached sexual maturity they experienced “periods of physical discomfort, irritability, and aggression known as musth” (111). Bull elephants helped bring about a second elephant trope that became popular in the Gilded Age—the “unruly elephant” (118-119). Also, born alongside this *unruly* image of the “elephant of war” (105) was the figure of the “elephant man,” or “superintendent of animals,” who employed hyper-masculine strength and courage to subdue violent bulls (120). The fact that elephants could be both “sagacious” and “unruly” made them all the more complex in the eyes of Americans. Chapter Five takes a broader look at circus elephants in the Gilded Age, as the rise of rail circuses increased their numbers throughout the nation. The motto of this era was “[T]he more elephants the better” (144). This chapter details various aspects of elephant behavior (such as elephant weaving), elephant management, and the intensification of elephant advocacy by reformers concerned with cruelty against animals. Chapter Six continues in the vein of Chapter Four, again emphasizing the capriciousness of elephants, but this time positing that female elephants also asserted themselves. This chapter discusses the image of the “mad elephant,” appropriated to the female pachyderm of the 1880s — “a villain like her male counterpart, but seemingly more deceptive and vengeful” (176). Last, Chapter Seven functions as a conclusion. By looking at the first decade of the twentieth century, it discusses elephants during “the height of the circus business and the peak of human-elephant conflict in the United States” (222). Then, it briefly explores how and why both circuses and circus elephants became less popular by the 1990s.

Together, these chapters form a monograph with a chronologically-organized narrative about the rise and fall of circus elephants in American history. Of course, this book will

prove priceless to historians of the American circus. Although circuses have a vast and old historiography, *Entertaining Elephants* should appear on bookshelves, next to Greg Renoff's *The Big Tent* and Helen Stoddart's *Rings of Desire*, as a new and innovative approach to a very old topic in cultural history. Yet with a constant eye to the business of entertainment, Nance also has made *Entertaining Elephants* relevant to scholars interested in nineteenth-century business, management, labor, and advertising. This book's widest appeal, however, will be to scholars of the burgeoning field of animal history.

Nance maintains that the recent authors of "transspecies histories" have been "too cautious in the questions they ask" (8). In her view, these historians "tend to restrict analysis to unconscious animal acts (such as succumbing to disease), to animals taken as anonymous members of broad populations (necessary when this is all that the primary sources permit, to be sure), or as a side note to activities of people deemed famous or important (biographies of pets of noted Americans)" (8). Nance, though, challenges historians to make animals the "primary focus of the inquiry," to view animals as "unique individuals," and to research histories that are "equally nonhuman and human" (8). And Nance tries to live up to this challenge. Four central questions guided her research: "How did elephants shape the showman's work of developing and selling animal celebrity as entertainment product and abstract cultural concept? More broadly, are elephants crucial factors of historical causation? How might we document this? That is, does animal experience matter in history" (8)? Addressing these questions, Nance seeks to write a true "elephant-centered history," where elephants are not simply studied as objects of human interest, but where they are also analyzed as volitive subjects of historical change. Nance attempts to "take elephants *as elephants*" (10).

To do this, she employs a multidisciplinary approach. First, she relies upon standard primary sources of cultural history — diaries, newspaper reports, memoirs, and other materials discovered in various circus archival collections. Nance especially makes great use of circus press notices. Second, Nance draws consistently upon the secondary literatures of animal studies, natural history, behavioral ecology, cultural history, and business history to help contextualize specific elephants in specific moments in time. Third, and most creatively, Nance uses ethological and animal welfare science research (AWS) done "on contemporary elephants to ... infer about the acts and experiences of their historical counterparts" (10). About her enlistment of ethology and AWS, Nance states the following:

Like all scientific work, the ethological and AWS research on elephants is a product of particular political and cultural contexts that yield different kinds of humans and nonhumans. Indeed, there is no “natural” or static ideal elephant, African or Asian, across time and space. Like all species, elephants are product of genetics, environment, and experience. However, they have evolved to survive in certain ways in certain places. Although they may over generations adapt (or not) to environmental change or human pressures, they nonetheless come with certain hardwired needs and abilities that are always non-negotiable, such as the need to constantly move and forage or to abide by modes of social organization developed by elephants over the centuries to promote peaceful group cohesion and reproduction. So, this book does take free populations of elephants as more normative than captive populations simply because they are self-sustaining. (12)

Entertaining Elephants, as the synopsis on the back cover states, “is the first account of animals that uses research on animal welfare, health, and cognition to interpret the historical record.” If for no other reason, animal and environmental historians should read *Entertaining Elephants* for this reason.

Nance’s use of AWS allows her to locate expressions of “agency” in her elephants that standard readings of primary sources would have overlooked. For example, AWS enables Nance to make the glands of bull elephants historically relevant (111). It enables her to understand the importance of consistent routines in giving captive elephants a feeling of control over their environments (172). It enables her to explore exactly how elephants utilized their “long-term, extensive spatial-temporal and social memory” to learn circus acts (93). And it enables her to examine the role of “neurotheological compromise” in producing the “elephant breakdowns” endemic to circuses (197). Nance’s careful use of ethology and animal welfare science research adds texture to her book. It frequently allows her to discover “real” and “sentient” elephants in the past, “beings who responded to a context or some internal motivation to produce events and effects that mattered” (9).

To this reviewer, *Entertaining Elephants* is important because it takes animals seriously, and does so in novel ways. All historians of animals should consider Nance’s challenge

to ask bolder questions of past creatures. And these historians certainly should not be afraid to integrate ethology and AWS, as well as other methodologies based around the study of animals, into their own methodological toolkits. *Entertaining Elephants* is well-researched. *Entertaining Elephants* is bustling with intriguing stories and dramatic images. *Entertaining Elephants* encourages readers to ponder their own ethical stances about animal welfare without employing a biased tone. *Entertaining Elephants* offers bibliographic essays regarding "Primary Sources," "Circus Histories," "Business and Cultural History of Nineteenth-Century Entertainment," "Elephants and History," "Ethological/Ethical/Animal Welfare Research on Elephants," "Animal Histories," "Animal Studies/Histories of Animal Representation and Use," "Animals and Capitalism," and "Animals on Stage" that will prove helpful for researchers in many fields. Finally, *Entertaining Elephants* is generally a thought-provoking, entertaining, informative, and lively read. Yet, it is not always an easy one. Unfortunately, choppy sentences, unorganized asides, overuse of certain words (like "patter," "elephantine," and "interspecific," for example), repetition and verbosity, and occasional typos distract from the book's engaging content.

Nonetheless, *Entertaining Elephants* raises pressing theoretical questions about the agency of animals and essential methodological questions about how to capture, so to speak, this agency. Those interested in animal history should read this book for themselves to determine whether Nance produced a history that is equally human and nonhuman, for no criteria exists that can measure such an accomplishment. Some might even argue that such a history is inherently impossible since "the human" remains always entangled with "the nonhuman." Nance's book invites speculation over the possibilities and purposes of animal history, the problems embedded in the idea of "agency," as well as the power of anthropocentrism in both the past and present. *Entertaining Elephants* also sparks curiosity about the substantial subject of historic elephants. *How did the experience of zoo elephants differ from circus elephants? How did museum-goers think about elephants? How did naturalists, biologists, and zoologists? How did elephants appear in popular literature? How did elephants direct the attention of animal advocates to the plight of exotic animals?* These are some of the "elephantine" questions that this book just begins to address. In the opinion of this reviewer, though, a good book should raise more questions than it answers. Looking at animals should always make us curious and humble.

Works Cited

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