Indeed, this period has been described by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson as the epoch of “consolidation” for freakery: an era of social change, enormously popular freak shows, and taxonomic frenzy. Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain, edited by Marlene Tromp, turns to that rich nexus, examining the struggle over definitions of “freakery” and the unstable and sometimes conflicting ways in which freakery was understood and deployed. As the first study centralizing British culture, this collection discusses figures as varied as Joseph Merrick, “The Elephant Man”; Daniel Lambert, “King of the Fat Men”; Julia Pastrana, “The Bear Woman”; and Laloo “The Marvellous Indian Boy” and his embedded, parasitic twin. The Victorian Freaks contributors examine Victorian culture through the lens of freakery, reading the production of the freak against the landscape of capitalist consumption, the medical community, and the politics of empire, sexuality, and art. Collectively, these essays ask how freakery engaged with notions of normalcy and with its Victorian cultural context.

“While there has been extensive work on American freak shows, less had been done on the significance of the freak in England. Scholars and students gain much insight from the essayists’ invocations of disability studies as a model for thinking about freakishness and freakishness as a model for contemplating disability. Victorian Freaks will therefore be a welcome addition to the growing body of works on freaks and disability studies from a literary perspective.”

—Elise Michie, associate professor of English, Louisiana State University

“Victorian Freaks is particularly noteworthy for its often-nuanced analysis of freakery. The figure of the freak is represented not simply as a victim of cultural prejudices, but as an agent who actively negotiates a version of subjectivity through the performance and manipulation of cultural codes regarding deviance and normalcy.”

—Tamar Heller, author of Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic

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