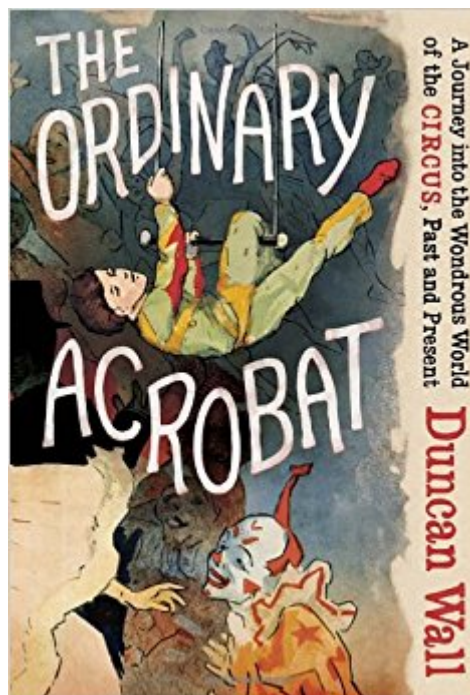




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# The Ordinary Acrobat: A Journey Into The Wondrous World Of The Circus, Past And Present



## Synopsis

The extraordinary story of a young man who plunges into the unique and wonderful world of the circus—taking readers deep into circus history and its renaissance as a contemporary art form, and behind the (tented) walls of France's most prestigious circus school. When Duncan Wall visited his first *nouveau cirque* as a college student in Paris, everything about it—the monochromatic costumes, the acrobat singing Simon and Garfunkel, the juggler reciting Proust—was captivating. Soon he was waiting outside stage doors, eagerly chatting with the stars, and attending circuses two or three nights a week. So great was his enthusiasm that a year later he applied on a whim to the training program at the École Nationale des Arts du Cirque—and was, to his surprise, accepted. Sometimes scary and often funny, *The Ordinary Acrobat* follows the (occasionally literal) collision of one American novice and a host of gifted international students in a rigorous regimen of tumbling, trapeze, juggling, and clowning. Along the way, Wall introduces readers to all the ambition, beauty, and thrills of the circus's long history: from hardscrabble beginnings to Gilded Age treasures, and from twentieth-century artistic and economic struggles to its brilliant reemergence in the form of contemporary circus (most prominently through Cirque du Soleil). Readers meet figures past—the father of the circus, Philip Astley; the larger-than-life P. T. Barnum—and present, as Wall seeks lessons from innovative masters including juggler Jérôme Thomas and clown André Riot-Sarcey. As Wall learns, not everyone is destined to run away with the circus—but the institution fascinates just the same. Brimming with surprises, outsized personalities, and plenty of charm, *The Ordinary Acrobat* delivers all the excitement and pleasure of the circus ring itself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Wall had the great fortune of realizing the archetypal childhood dream of running away to join the circus when he secured a Fulbright fellowship to do just that. After visiting the nouveau cirque as a college student in Paris, Wall was intrigued by the high cultural regard the French held for the circus as performance art. Wall spent a year in the intensive Ecole Nationale des Arts du Cirque, learning the skills of juggling, tumbling, and clowning. He also researched the origins of the disparate circus arts, from ancient Chinese culture through the Romans until 1798, when a British cavalier pulled together the circus of human and animal feats. The appeal of traditional circus had been on the wane until Cirque du Soleil dropped the animal acts and focused on choreography and human dexterity with spectacle worthy of Las Vegas. Wall chronicles his year of discovery of the history and future of the circus as well as the dramatic personalities and grueling physical training in this behind-the-scenes look at the evolving art of the circus. --Vanessa Bush

“Lovely”  
There is plenty in *The Ordinary Acrobat* to set circusphile and circus-skeptic alike to dreaming.  
•The Washington Post  
“An exquisite exposition  
Proving himself even more adroit verbally than physically, Wall offers a revelatory love letter to the simultaneously ancient and contemporary art of acrobatics, the circus, and its denizens.  
•Library Journal  
“In this enchanting memoir sprinkled with historical anecdotes, Wall pulls the reader into the world of circus, past and present  
his captivating journey of discovery may lead others to consider running away to join one.  
•Publisher’s Weekly  
“Wall is a charming guide  
[his] appreciation of the circus is deepened by his understanding of its long and distinct history.  
•The New Republic  
“Blending cultural history with biography, memoir and travelogue, Wall’s carefully balanced book is, in itself, a successful tightrope traverse.  
•Kirkus Reviews  
“If ever you have the urge to run away and join the circus, you can save yourself the trip and still have the thrill of it all by reading *The Ordinary Acrobat*. Duncan Wall’s adventures as a novice in a Parisian circus school are wonderfully entertaining. A beautifully written account of life past and present under the big top.  
•Eric Lax, author of *Woody Allen: A Biography*  
“The Ordinary Acrobat is an incandescent odyssey  
•personally and historically  
into the captivating

transnational world of the circus. A fascinating, funny, effervescent story told with great affection. — Janet M. Davis, author of *Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* — “Wall [does] an admirable job of pursuing the circus’s road-show mysteries and endlessly winding paths — it isn’t a conventional memoir, but the circus isn’t a conventional subject, either. — NPR — “Wall is intoxicated and obsessed with the circus, and — it’s infectious. — “Biographile — “Lively and wide-ranging — Wall’s eye for anecdote, in both past and present, is sharp. — “The Seattle Times — “Meticulously researched, intensely reported and brightly written, *The Ordinary Acrobat* — [is] an entertaining, artistic several-hour act that leaves indelible impressions. — “The Minneapolis Star Tribune

Why do I love this book? Why have I sent copies to 7 different young people I know who are professional circus artists? Because of PERSPECTIVE. This book details the fascinating history, traditions and evolution of the circus arts in an interesting, highly-readable and ultimately inspiring narrative by a writer who has lived his story. Modern circus is well known to millions around the world largely through familiarity with Cirque du Soleil performances, but few know the story behind the highly refined disciplines we watch with awe inside the tent or theatre. Reading this book gives valuable insight into the past, present and future of circus, and opens a window for spectator and performer alike to appreciate these demanding arts which continue to fascinate and inspire. Highly recommended!

Absolutely adored this book! I highly recommend it to both circus and non-circus lovers alike, or anyone who likes to read. I found the mixture of memoir and history kept the book spinning and always interesting. An over all illumination of circus arts. Many thanks to the author!

What an entertaining read! Well written, fascinating history, first person experiences - the chapter on being on the trapeze is worth the price of the whole book, lots of circus lore and just plain fun to read! Great memories for those who have been to a circus, and for those who haven’t, it will make you want to go.

Duncan Wall knows the circus from the inside out. His perspective on the history and the potential of the art form is meticulously examined using both current and historical references. Well worth the

time for both serious historians and casual readers.

I really liked this book. The author manages to blend history, anecdote and a charming self deprecation into a really easy read.

The Ordinary Acrobat is a great book that made me discover how the "New Circus" is nothing new. Duncan Wall has both an impressive erudition and a physical experience of the circus which make the history very lively.

Wall's book is a fine mix of slice of life and history, showing how the circus is and how it was. A nice sourcebook for learning to love the circus... IT'S ALL ON THE INSIDE!

I found this book very well written. It reads more like an historical novel than a non fiction. Highly recommend.

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