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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Spangles, Elephants, Violets & Me: The Circus Inside Out

Victoria B. Christiani Rossi
Victoria B. Cristiani Rossi
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Successful performance artists, such as actors, dancers, and musicians exude confidence on stage, even though they may be worried about when and if their next gig will materialize. Victoria Cristiani Rossi, a third-generation member of an Italian-American circus family, knows this concern well.

Her grandparents, father, aunts, and uncles enjoyed acclaim in Europe before coming to the United States in 1934 to join the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. They later formed a circus of their own. In her memoir, *Spangles, Elephants, Violets & Me*, Rossi reveals the triumphs and disappointments the Cristiani family experienced as bareback performers. Family members perfected their acts while nurturing and training sons and daughters to become circus stars, traveling by train and later truck to present their big-top show in communities throughout the United States.

Rossi lived the circus life from the time of her birth in 1940. Her father taught her to ride his beloved elephants, and she gleaned practical knowledge about them: “If I’ve learned one lesson, it’s this: a cranky expression, even on an elephant, is not to be dismissed.”

Sideshow curiosities provided a vital link to customers, capturing their attention until the big show began. Few stopped to think that these human amusements might lead satisfying lives as part of the circus community. The author writes, “They were known to have far greater empathy for people in general than those myriad individuals who examined them in disgust.”

She presents a candid view of an extended family that embraced life passionately but suffered from alcoholism, infidelities and divorce, betrayals from erstwhile business partners. Siblings engaged in bitter feuds, fueled by pride and ambition, but never failed to reconcile in times of illness or financial crisis. “From my unique perch, I had been offered a wild ride by virtue of birth,” Rossi writes.

The author’s use of superlatives reflects the language of circus posters to good effect but, in some passages, these exaggerated words detract from her heartfelt story. A more attentive final edit would have added professional polish to this personal memoir.

The book contains numerous photographs from the Cristiani family archives that enrich the author’s story. Circus enthusiasts of a certain age will enjoy this insider’s view of a life that captured their childhood imaginations. Younger readers, who’ve never experienced the wonders of a circus parading before them, will enjoy learning about the heyday of a bygone entertainment.
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