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Wonder Shows: Performing Science Magic and Religion in America

Fred Nadis
Rutgers University Press (Jan 13, 2005)
Unknown $26.95 (336pp)
978-0-8135-3515-9

Reconciling science with religion is a longstanding, ongoing project in America. For most people today, electricity is still somewhat magical: they can neither produce it nor explain it. Two centuries ago, it was an awesome new discovery that lent itself to treatment in sideshows, novels, and sermons, as well as scientific venues. The author, a journalist and professor, takes a long, broad survey of those who produced “wonder shows”: the promoters, hawkers, quacks, magicians, hypnotists, and spiritualists, as well as legitimate and borderline scientists. Even major industries got into the act, like Westinghouse, with its “Hall of Miracles,” General Electric, with “House of Magic,” and General Motors, with “Room of Mystery.”

Science, magic, and religion often compete, but are blended in wonder shows, “where contradictions are canceled, opposites collapsed.” Wonder shows, ranging from lecture-demonstrations to vaudeville, from religious revivals to international expositions, “cause the spectator to see the world through new eyes, much like those of a child.” Nadis studies the performances and rhetoric of popular science and medicine beginning in this country around 1830. He writes from his own sense of wonder, which he traces back to a childhood visit to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, delving into scholarly works, newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, radio, TV, and movies, as well as recent wonder shows. Dozens of pictures enhance his clear narrative style, which describes small-time self-promoters (genuine and phony) along with major entrepreneurs and scientists.

Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, and George Westinghouse played out a grisly drama with the electric chair. Edison tried to associate the use of alternating current in the public mind with executions, so people would choose direct current for their homes. He lost that fight to Westinghouse. Houdini befriended and then fell away from physician-author Arthur Conan Doyle, who defended spiritualism. In the roaring twenties, mediums and séances were tested by skeptical scientists, with Houdini’s help. He had broken away from the spiritualists after Mrs. Doyle claimed one day to be in touch with Houdini’s late mother, but it turned out that the spirit did not speak German, nor did she recognize her own birthday.

The author’s review of ESP, clairvoyance, and telepathy leads from experimenter J. B. Rhine to mind reader Joseph Dunninger. Chapters on flying saucers, New Age healing, and scientists like Carl Sagan illustrate the tensions between mechanistic and romantic science.

Grand issues arise in this work. Is democracy feasible, for instance, or does governance require an educated elite? A recent cultural shift (post-modernism) challenges the claims of truth that science makes, while blurring boundaries, questioning traditional authority, and a confronting a recurring dilemma: does the universe care, or is it random? With this remarkable book, Nadis brings the audience to a new appreciation of eternal themes. It is a wonder show.

E. JAMES LIEBERMAN (August 18, 2009)

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