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Beneath the Big Top: controversial dimensions of circus stories

Kalita was of mysterious origin; in the tiny, grainy, and blurred photographs provided in the text, she wore what appeared to be a two-piece costume such as I had never seen, and was able to do amazing, unimaginable things with her body.

Edward Said, remembering reading about a circus girl in *Collins Junior Book of Knowledge*

As this quote from Edward Said's memoir, *Out of Place*, suggests, circuses, with their ethnic, social and sexual diversity, eroticism, exoticism and hybridity, are always crossing the boundary between innocent fascination and transgression. Circus folk are often cultural outliers, accepted briefly for the entertainment they provide, but soon required to move on. The challenging conditions for long endured by juvenile and animal circus performers are well documented and now subject to stringent controls. Together these make circuses controversial cultural spaces, yet for more than two centuries, the dominant rhetoric and mythos of the circus in children's books has constructed it largely in terms of glamour, spectacle, and magical transformations. In real life and in most fiction, the arrival of the circus temporarily vanquishes

the tedium and restrictions of childhood, and its juvenile performers show children seemingly exceptional versions of themselves. Understandably, then, a recurring motif in children's literature features malcontent children who run away to join the circus. The same motif highlights some of the controversial dimensions associated with circus stories. For instance, in some stories runaways do indeed find refuge, adventure and a career amongst the 'circus family', generating a critique of the home or society from which they have fled. Others, however, offer a controversial parallel narrative involving the procurement, abuse and manipulation of circus children. Once aware of this controversial dimension of circus children's experience, an uncomfortable shadow is cast over the genre for those who pay to see and who enjoy their performances. As this paper will show with reference to a range of circus stories from the nineteenth century to the present, while circuses themselves have changed significantly in recent decades, especially with regard to the involvement of children and animals, there is considerable continuity in the kinds of controversies raised in circus stories. Currently there is a new flourishing of circus fiction for all ages that is modernising the settings, but in current iterations the strange and mesmerising delights of the circus still frequently encourage readers to consider controversial aspects of culture, not least as it relates to the position and wellbeing of the young.

Kimberley Reynolds is the Professor of Children's Literature in the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics at Newcastle University in the UK. In 2013 she received the International Brothers Grimm Award for her contributions to the field of children's literature research. She conceived and was the first Director of the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature and was involved in founding the UK's Children's Laureate and setting up Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books. She is a Past President and Honorary Fellow of the International Research Society for Children's Literature and was the first Senior Honorary Fellow of the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions at the University of Western Australia. Currently she is Senior Editor of *International Research in Children's Literature* and on the scientific board of the Centre for Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature, University of Wroclaw. Recent book-length publications include *Reading and Rebellion: an anthology of radical writing for children, 1900-1960* (co-edited with Jane Rosen and Michael Rosen, 2018); *Left Out: The Forgotten Tradition of Radical Publishing for Children in Britain, 1910-1949* (2016), and *Children's Literature* in the Oxford University series of Very Short Introductions (2012).