

# White

# Tops

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*Andre McClain, ringmaster on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey "Built To Amaze" Red Unit show.*

*photo by Deborah Grosmark*



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*Honk Honk, My Darling* is a fun read. The judges of the Chicago Writers' Association awarded it the 2011 Book of The Year for non-traditional fiction. It's a great gift for your circus and mystery-minded friends.

## A review of Never Quote the Weather to a Sea Lion

And Other Uncommon Tales from  
the Founder of the Big Apple Circus  
by Paul Binder, AuthorHouse, 2013, 201 pp.  
ISBN 978-1-4817-3190-4.

reviewed by Mort Gamble

The circus is a complex right-brain, left-brain kind of business. It's art and science, inspiration and perspiration, passion and discipline, romance and finance, and even on a good day, just plain hard work – “not an easy life,” Paul Binder writes in his new memoir, “yet you'll never meet a bunch of people with a more positive outlook.”

It took both halves of his brain and no small amount of optimism for Binder to make a go of one of the most original and inspired of American productions – New York's Big Apple Circus. His efforts paid off, not only in mounting unforgettable productions of his circus, but in producing an affectionate memoir firmly grounded in show business from the very first page.

The foreword is by Glenn Close, who studied juggling with Binder for her part in the Broadway production of *Barnum*. And Binder reveals that he unwittingly appeared as a boy in Hollywood's homage to another New York pageant, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, while watching the procession during the filming of the original *Miracle on 34th Street*.

Binder proves to be a skillful storyteller. There is a lot here to appeal to circus fans of every persuasion. His book is a charming, breezy, sophisticated, funny, world-wise (but not weary) big top travelogue by someone who overcame formidable challenges to put the Big Apple Circus on the entertainment map. If anything, Big Apple's story could be subtitled “Miracle at Lincoln Center”.

The show had humble beginnings, at the other end of Manhattan, as a small tent production pitched at a Battery Park landfill in the shadow of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Binder and his co-founder, Michael Christensen, one-time street performers in Europe, had been inspired by the possibilities of combining the more intimate European style of circus performance with a New York City setting, all in a single-ring format now common in U.S. productions. It would become in Binder's italicized words *circus done right*, a different kind of production drawing creative energy – and contributions as a not-for-profit enterprise – from the citizens of a nearly bankrupt city in a Son-of-Sam era.

With wry New York humor Binder recalls those early years, like enduring an inspection from an NYPD humane officer of the rubber chicken used in his juggling act. Through it all, he never

seems to have lost his sense of wonder about the circus where even an empty ring “commands attention”.

Big Apple eventually moved uptown, marking its annual holiday debut in Lincoln Center, making a star of Barry Lubin's brilliantly understated “Grandma” character, highlighting the incredible skill of such acts as the Flying Gaonas, and charming audiences accustomed to New York City chutzpah. Eventually the show took to the road, sharing its original annual productions with selected cities and starring in a PBS documentary series about circus life. At the center of it all was Binder, the elegantly tailored ringmaster, tireless promoter and resident dreamer, and imaginative artistic director who today serves the show as a senior advisor.

The book serves up some delightful turns of phrase: “Howard Rower was the only man I ever knew who thought the most exciting thing about the circus was the maintenance tent.” Or this: “If you want to get anywhere in New York City, it helps to have a subway map – or to have City Hall on your side.” And: “To me, it looked as though you could get from one end of Istanbul to the other just by letting yourself be jostled.”

The pages are populated by celebrities in and out of the circus ring: Bello Nock, Philippe Petit, Buckles Woodcock and Anna May, Francis Brunn, Dolly Jacobs, Ed Koch and Mike Bloomberg, Jackie Robinson, Julia Child, Robert De Niro, and many others. Binder writes as gracefully as he conducted his performances. He has fun telling his story because he obviously has had fun living his life, which became the circus.

To that fabled institution, which has a way of redefining how a person looks at almost everything, Binder offers a simple but eloquent tribute as he recalls stepping into a circus ring for the first time, an experience that would drive his vision for Big Apple:

“What I felt when I entered that ring was nothing less than pure joy – not just a personal sense of satisfaction and pleasure, but something far more powerful and deeply primal: true, elemental, ritual celebration...performers and audience, act and appreciation, and the very geometry of the circus ring all converged to create a spectacular moment of common joy.”

His memoir is a triumph of storytelling, directed by a masterful ringmaster of an author. You'll laugh in all the right places as Paul Binder brings up the lights and hurries on to his next act.

### A Swedish circus book titled *A Cirkusz*

Idras Publishing is proud to present a photo book entirely dedicated to the wonderful world of the circus. The book is titled “A

*Cirkusz*” and features behind the scenes photographs of all Swedish circuses.

During a period of almost four years, Sebastian Sardi worked with this project of portraying the daily

lives of circus people to show a unique glimpse of what goes on behind the curtains. This book helps spread and promote the wonderful world of the circus and gives the viewer a chance to dive right into the mysticism and warmth that the circus world brings.

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