

He ran away to join the circus

"Circle of Sawdust: A Circus Memoir of Mud, Myth, Mirth, Mayhem, and Magic"

*Rob Mermin
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Rob Mermin, known today as the charismatic founder of Circus Smirkus, grew up in a large family of successful professional people—and ran away to join a circus in 1969. At that time, there were no circus schools in the United States, so he traveled to Europe to apprentice himself to a circus so he could achieve his longtime dream to be a clown.

At 19, in love with the idea of adventure, he eagerly welcomed his first job in Wales with the small, rough-and-tough, traveling Circus Hoffman, which hired him one morning and sent him into the ring with two experienced clowns that afternoon, his only instructions being "Stay close to me...I vatch out for you." Later, he was tossed up on the back of an arthritic camel and sent into the ring—and found he could disembark only by clinging to a trapeze a few feet above him and hanging there until the act below him was done. Experiences like this, Mermin recalls with amusement, give circus folk tales to recall years later, when, true to the circus farewell "See you down the road," they run across their former colleagues and laugh over their memories.

Mermin's readers share these unbelievable (but true!) exploits—as for example, his harassment by Kansas the mule in a circus tour of Sweden with "Kossmayer's Unrideable Mules of the Netherlands," whose animals lived up to their reputations.

Interspersed with Mermin's tall tales are wonderful insights into the history of the circus (often referring to European circus families that have been performing for five or six generations), and tips on the art of clowning (Pace! Timing! Don't hurry through your act! Remember: clowns don't know that what they're doing is funny!). His insights are the result of serious study: between

his exploits with Hoffman (1969) and the Unrideable Mules (1976), Mermin studied with the famous mime Marcel Marceau in Paris, and subsequently became one of the three principal clowns in Copenhagen's distinguished Cirkus Benneweis, meeting many of Europe's premier circus artists.

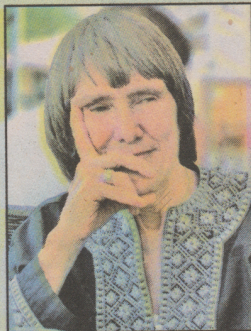
Every page of this portion of his memoir reveals his deep love of circus culture and his respect for the aspect of the circus that many people dismiss as "clowning around"—clowns in baggy pants, big shoes, and slapstick acts designed to make kids laugh. To Mermin, clowning has at its heart a deep understanding of life, of acting, and of the seriousness of laughter.

Always behind the "mud, myth, mirth, mayhem, and magic" of Mermin's life was what he describes as his quest for "the experience I needed, absorbing everything about tenting circus, following my intention of someday going out under canvas with my own itinerant company" in the US. Although briefly tempted by his celebrity in Denmark, where he and his performing dog Rufus performed mime on "TV I Teltet" (TV in a tent), he remained true to his dream and returned of the US to found his own circus.

"Circus, schmirkus," said his mother disapprovingly. "Go get a real job, like in a bank." Without knowing

it, she named the successful product of his dream. Because Mermin has published two books on the early days of Circus Smirkus, he says relatively little about its founding in the memoir. There is enough there, however, to make readers share his heartbreak at discovering that even Dr. Suess (of "If I Ran the Circus") and other circus enthusiasts shook their heads at his naive "clown's dream."

Eventually, however, Vermont film director Jay Craven helped Mermin get started in Greensboro — and after that came the magic. As its enthusiasts know, Circus Smirkus is internationally famous, and it has become a training ground for circus artists now hired by the premier circuses in the US and beyond. Mermin's passion, humor, and enthusiasm (and the skills which he modestly mentions very little), have made circus arts "almost" as respected as a job in a bank.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson