



The Electric Woman: A Memoir in Death-Defying Acts

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A daughter's astonishing memoir of pushing past fear, through life in a traveling sideshow and her mother's illness

Turns out, one lesson applies to living through illness, keeping the show on the road, letting go of the person you love most, and eating fire:

The trick is there is no trick.

You eat fire by eating fire.

Two journeys—a daughter's and a mother's—bear witness to this lesson in *The Electric Woman*.

For three years Tessa Fontaine lived in a constant state of emergency as her mother battled stroke after stroke. But hospitals, wheelchairs, and loss of language couldn't hold back such a woman; she and her husband would see Italy together, come what may. Thus Fontaine became free to follow her own piper, a literal giant inviting her to "come play" in the World of Wonders, America's last traveling sideshow. How could she resist?

Transformed into an escape artist, a snake charmer, and a high-voltage Electra, Fontaine witnessed the marvels of carnival life: intense camaraderie and heartbreak, the guilty thrill of hard-earned cash exchanged for a peek into the impossible, and, most marvelous of all, the stories carnival folks tell about themselves. Through these, Fontaine trained her body to ignore fear and learned how to keep her heart open in the face of loss.

A story for anyone who has ever imagined running away with the circus, wanted to be someone else, or wanted a loved one to live forever, *The Electric Woman* is ultimately about death-defying acts of all kinds, especially that ever constant: good old-fashioned unconditional love.

The Electric Woman: A Memoir in Death-Defying Acts Details

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Rhonda Lomazow says

So so good a look at Carnie life family relations. Tessa Fontaine story kept me turning the pages. #netgalley #fsg

Melissa says

Tessa Fontaine has a very good writing style and really makes the two story lines of her mom's illness and her summer with the traveling side-show come alive. I don't quite agree with how she laid out the timeline of the book - there are a few places where it seems she jumps back and forth unnecessarily in time - but it is really interesting.

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

I received a copy of this from NetGalley in exchange for my review. Two years after her mother experiences a devastating stroke and is still severely disabled, the author's parents decide to take a trip to Italy. The author decides to spend a season with a traveling sideshow to take her mind off her grief and worry. The work is grueling and she has to be fearless to learn the acts. Fascinating look behind the scenes and at the lives of the people who work the shows. Stellar writing.

Lesley says

Thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for the ARC of this book. After her mother suffers from a debilitating stroke, Tessa decides to join a traveling sideshow. The story nicely parallels her mother's story of progress with Tessa's time in the World of Wonders. I could almost smell the stench of sweat and feel the author's tired muscles as she worked tirelessly for the show. This book was a mesmerizing look into the world of freak shows and carnival life as well as a lovely story of what some of us will go through to overcome pain and loss.

Molly says

Usually I find memoirs by white women exhausting. Their fish-out-of-water stories strike me as exploitative, both of the reader and the people they encounter on their journeys to (insert eyeroll here) self-discovery.

Tessa wasn't born into the sideshow world, and while she only lives in it for 5 months, she writes about it with honesty, humor, and heart. She wants you to believe all of it too—the sweat, tears, and snot that go into making the magic. And the way she intertwines scenes from the fairgrounds with those from her mother's hospital room? Mesmerizing.

Keith Beasley-Topliffe says

Fascinating. Tessa Fontaine, a young woman (with an MFA in literature) joins World of Wonders, the last traveling sideshow, for their 2013 season--150 days of long hours, hard work, and performing as a bally girl (outside the show, helping lure customers inside with fire eating and such), a talker (providing a running commentary on some of the inside acts), and a performer (the headless woman, the four-legged woman, and ultimately as the electric woman). This story is interwoven with the story of her mother's stroke several months before World of Wonders and the long, slow, recovery punctuated by many crises. The backstage stuff (living in a trailer, mid-night trips to Walmart, interactions between the show people (like her) and the carnies who run the games, food, and rides) is nearly as interesting as her quest to learn everything possible in her time with the show. Her portraits of her fellow performers are sharp and sympathetic. I don't want to say more, because much of the fun is in following Tessa's journey (even if that drove me to searching YouTube to see some of the folks she worked with).

I received this book through NetGalley in return for writing a review of an uncorrected digital galley. The publication date is May 1st.

***TUDOR^QUEEN* says**

I received an advance reader copy from publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux via NetGalley.

Tessa Fontaine was 30 when she was invited for a 5-month stint with America's last traveling sideshow, the World of Wonders. She started as a bally girl (someone that lures people to buy tickets for the show), then progressed to snake handling, handcuff escape, and fire eating. But her education in the sideshow arts did not end there. She performed the illusion of a 4-legged lady and what she considered her ultimate triumph...as the Electric Lady. For this she sat in an electric chair and lit up light bulbs with her tongue! She also practiced sword swallowing using a twisted up hanger, but this challenge proved insurmountable.

This unique and all-consuming experience (sideshow artists get very little sleep) was a parallel story to that of her mother Teresa recovering from a hemorrhagic stroke. Tessa's parents were divorced when she was a toddler, but her mother remarried a man named Davy who loved her absolutely. While others essentially gave up hope for Teresa's recovery, Davy could not fathom life without her. Not only did he nurture his ailing wife in every way possible, but against all rationale took her on a dream trip to Italy. Tessa struggles with guilt from once telling her Mom she didn't love her, and not being around for her rehabilitation as much as she could be. Signing on with the traveling sideshow was a thrill, a challenge, and a means of escapism.

I do enjoy reading about carnivals and sideshows. They are mysterious, magical and yes...a form of escapism. I think of the colorful striped circus tents, flashing bulbs and various oddities to be found there. It was interesting to read about how these traveling performers withstand extreme weather conditions, sleeping arrangements, ability to shower/toilet, and set up and break down their shows. In fact, inside the big trailer where they bunk at night and basically live, if someone cannot withstand the life, their name is immortalized on the wall with the moniker " couldn't hack it."

While I enjoyed the peek inside the inner workings of a traveling sideshow, I wasn't as interested when Tessa waxed poetic about her mother's illness in tandem. I also felt she could have edited the book down a bit more. Sometimes less is more!

Kasia says

This one was just okay for me. I felt like it badly needed an editor, for one, and the parts about her mother never really coalesced with the rest of the narrative. I felt like I never really connected with the author and her motivations, and I never got the feeling she was really giving an inside look at the performers she worked with in the sideshow. Often her perspective came across rather patronizing of them, like she was just collecting experiences to write about later from her safe middle-class life. Many of the stories from the carnival were interesting, though, hence the 3 stars. I'd like to read about it from someone else's perspective, like Tommy or Spif or Cassie.

Sonja Arlow says

3.5 stars

Many years ago, my aunt married a carnival mechanic.

The marriage didn't last long but while they were together I was given the opportunity to work at the carnival. As a 13-year-old getting unsupervised time in a carnival felt like an amazing gift even if it meant working in one of those lame Feed the Ducks booths. Each night once the place has officially closed, temp staff like myself could ride the scariest ride for as long as they wanted. I loved every second.

So, when I saw this memoir of a young woman and her time as a side show performer with World of Wonders I just had to read it.

From fire eating, snake charming and card tricks to finally getting to perform the creme de la crème of acts, Electra the Electric Woman, Tessa steadily worked her way up the ranks of side show attractions during her one season with World of Wonders.

Gruelling 16-hour days, hard physical labour, uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, overflowing porta loos and much more had to be endured with a smile on her face and a trick up her sleeve.

Alongside Tessa's 5 months with World of Wonders, is the story of her mother's battle with severe strokes and health complications 2 years earlier. Anyone who has had a sick parent will be able to relate to some of what she went through.

Writing about her mother's debilitating illness was clearly cathartic for the Tessa yet these sections never captured my attention as much as her carnival stories. There were also times where the story felt a bit all over the place with jumpy timelines making the reading feel disjointed.

But overall this was a solid memoir, and a very interesting peek behind the curtain of carnival performers.

Amy Morgan says

Thank you Edelweiss for my review copy of this book. I absolutely loved reading this story. The author presents a good balance of her life before and during her time with the sideshow. She has a great grasp on the people around her and really makes you feel a part of what she was experiencing. Brave, honest and adventurous this was an excellent read!

Shannon Dyer says

A fascinating look at carnival life.

Bonnie Brody says

When I was a child of a certain age, my favorite book was Toby Tyler. He was a young boy who joined the circus. I thought that was the neatest thing. In 'The Electric Woman', Tessa Fontaine, a grown woman, decides to join a real carnival, specifically their side show. She tells them she is able to eat fire and perform other acts that she is unable to do. "Sideshows are where people come to see public displays of their private fears: of deformity, of disruption in the perceived gender binary, of mutation, of disfigurement, of a crossover with the animal world, of being out of proportion. And that is the sideshow's intention - to frame whoever or whatever is on display as being outside the realm of what's "normal". " I remember going to side shows as a child. Even the Ringling Brothers had one. The experience was frightening, amazing, and each year it was my favorite part of the circus.

This book is about Tessa's inner and outer odyssey as she travels with her caravan. Interspersed with her experiences with the circus, are her feelings about her family, especially her mother who is very ill. Tessa's mother had a stroke a few years ago and has suffered one setback after another. For most of the book it is questionable whether she will live or die, what her cognitive abilities are, and what quality of life she is experiencing.

Perhaps it's me, but I found it very difficult to connect with this book. I never really understood why Tessa wanted to join a side show and how her analogy between her experiences there connected with her mother's life. I found Tessa's writing to be very superficial and wanted a deeper and more intimate portrait of herself and her mother.

Kathryn says

I have to admit that when I won this book in a giveaway, I was not sure if I would like it. I put off reading it, but then I opened it and I was hooked.

Tessa Fontaine runs away from her problems and joins the circus; well, not quite. Tessa becomes intrigued by the sideshows that perform as part of state and area fairs. After interviewing performers and owner's, she is invited by the owner of "World of Wonders" to join up for a season and live the life. Frankly, it is a challenge beyond what most people could negotiate. The hours are incredibly long, with the entertainers performing the same act 20 or more times a day, full of hazards, hard labor of putting the tents and

equipment up at each location then tearing it down, the pay is abysmal and the living conditions are comparable to living in some 3rd world countries and yet, it seems there are people that can't live without performing each season, which lasts nearly 6 months per year.

Tessa's mother, Teresa had been a water acrobat in her youth and the thrill of performing gave birth to this craving to experience celebrity in Tessa. Juxtaposed with stories of learning new feats for the show, Tessa talks about the tremendous toll a recent stroke has had on her mother. Yet, despite the doctors prognosis of death, her mother overcomes tremendous obstacles, relearning how to eat and to stand. However, she never regains full function on her right side nor able to perform basic hygiene and her speech is limited to say "Na Na Na", which somehow conveys much more than most would anticipate. Tessa's stepfather, Dave is wholly committed to his wife's care and survival and decides that they will take the trip to Rome just they always planned despite the wheelchair. Due to money restraints, they travel across America from California by train to New York City, then take a ship to Italy. Tessa is fraught with worry that something will go wrong and her mother will die during the journey while Tessa is on the road.

Meanwhile, Tessa learns to endure holding a boa constrictor all day as a carnival barker (bally is the technical term) whose job it is to entice patrons to pay to watch the show under the big top. Later she plays with fire by eating it. She doggedly attempts to learn sword swallowing but never masters it. Towards the end of the trip, she becomes the electric woman! While sitting in a chair, she conducts electricity through her body enabling her to turn on a light bulb held in her mouth.

However, the story is much more about the lifestyle of the performers, they sleep on tiny bunk beds within an 18 wheeler without air conditioning; and not all places they stop at even have shower facilities and those that do are often filthy (I'm sure the descriptions don't do the real experience justice). Due to scheduling and time restraints, there is infrequent access to bathrooms, so performers learn to drink little and either pee in a container, or behind the truck (women too)! Clean clothes are a luxury, as the performers usually wash their clothing while showering. Then hang them on a nail next to their bed overnight. Privacy doesn't exist and sometimes the tensions boil over into fights (which were mentioned but heavily edited). Everyone is expected to work hard even despite any physical limitations from recent injuries. Just reading about how labor intensive the work is mind boggling. I have a new respect for those who commit to this lifestyle. There is a sense of comradery, of being a part of something bigger almost a family atmosphere exists and yet, when she departs she is saddened because she realizes that these relationships won't continue.

Ms. Fontaine is a gifted story teller. Her descriptions are vivid and you feel like you are watching the show. Her experience matures her in many ways but most obviously clarifies for her the depth of her love for her mother. She sees how much she took for granted and the annoyance she had because her mother was a unique individual is now what she values most in her.

Danielle says

This is a beautifully written personal story about facing one's fear while going through parent's illness and joining a traveling sideshow. You may think both stories don't intertwine but they do. Ms. Fontaine goes back and back forth with her story by sharing how both worlds struggle with not just finding acceptance but how to go through their world without being "a sideshow" by other people's perception. In all this, Ms. Fontaine goes back forth with her own feelings of not being there for her mom and her constant worry of doing her job right and finding acceptance from her peers.

I received this book from NetGalley and the publisher for an honest review. #NetGalley #TheElectricWoman

Pam says

I just finished the best memoir I've read in years -- TheElectric Woman by Tessa Fontaine. It's about a young woman who literally leaves the difficulties of her life behind to join the circus as a performer. She works as a snake charmer, fire eater, and ultimately as the woman who withstands the electricity in the electric chair. Half the book is her adventures with the circus and the people she meets. The other half is her reflections back on her mother who had a massive stroke and the seemingly impossible road to any meaningful recovery. It's at once funny, jaw dropping, and poignant. She's an amazing storyteller, and read her own audiobook, which was fabulous! This was one of the most life affirming books I've read in years. Totally riveting and engaging. This is coming from someone who is typically not enthusiastic about nonfiction.
