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Katherine Dunn

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As the Binewskis take their act across the backwaters of the U.S., inspiring fanatical devotion and murderous revulsion; as its members conduct their own Machiavellian version of sibling rivalry, *Geek Love* throws its sulfurous light on our notions of the freakish and the normal, the beautiful and the ugly, the holy and the obscene. Family values will never be the same.

Geek Love Details

Date : Published June 11th 2002 by Random House Vintage (first published March 1989)

ISBN : 9780375713347

Author : Katherine Dunn

Format : Paperback 348 pages

Genre : Fiction, Horror, Fantasy, Contemporary

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From Reader Review Geek Love for online ebook

Bonnie says

4 ½ stars

Any book that was written in the early '80's and is still worth reading today, is almost by definition, a semi-classic; though cult-horror classic might be closer to the mark for *Geek Love*. That's right: this is not your run-of-the-mill beach novel. I will not be placing this book on my list of Best Ten Novels of the 20th Century; but I'm sure there are others who will, and I have no basic argument with them. *Geek Love* is bizarre, but only on the surface. Fundamentally, this is a solid, serious, brilliant, and beautifully written story. I didn't "get" that when I first began reading. At first, I thought this book was weird, horrifying, shocking and sometimes sickening. But I recognized and appreciated Katherine Dunn's excellent writing, and as an admirer of good literature, I kept reading.

I found the first few chapters confusing, mainly because they weren't arranged chronologically. Dunn did this to set the novel up to follow two storylines: the one that Olympia (Oly), our bald-albino-hunchbacked-dwarf (!) narrator tells during her childhood and adolescence with the carnival; and the present-day story of Oly as an adult, living in a the same boarding house as her mother and her daughter Miranda, neither of whom knows who Oly is. There's also a star role here for Miss Lick, a wealthy older woman who pays beautiful women to have themselves disfigured.

In the main narrative (where the best writing happens) when "Carnival Fabulon" is threatened with bankruptcy, Oly's parents, Al Binewski and Chrystal Lil, decide to purposely breed defective children by feeding Lil drugs and radioisotopes in order to "give their children the gift of making money just by being themselves." The babies that don't survive are preserved in jars for public viewing. {No offence taken, those of you who choose to leave this review now.} Firstborn Arty is followed by Siamese twins Electra (Elly) and Iphigenia (Iphy); next is Oly, then Chick (Fortunato, because his parents thought he was a "norm" until they learned he is telekinetic).

Oly is our narrator; not deformed enough to perform, she is reduced to the role of a servant to her family. It is her brother Arturo (Arty, Aqua Boy) born with flippers attached to his torso who is really at the centre of the story. Oly loves and hates Arty, while she waits on him "hands and feet". At seventeen years of age, she has a child, Miranda, by Arty, via Chick, with his telekinetic powers. {Pause, while this sinks in.} This compensates for Oly's feelings of isolation from the rest of the family – but not for long. It is for Miranda that Oly tells this tale.

Eventually Arty not only controls the whole show and his family; he forms a cult around himself. The "norms" form the cult of self-mutilation and butchery, calling themselves Arturans, with the help of a mysterious Dr. Phyllis. {Note that Dunn is writing this at about the same time that Irving is salting Garp with Ellen Jamesians; something in the water?}

And thus, while what Dunn has created in this multilayered story is admittedly absurd, those of us who chose not to throw this book into the garbage halfway through reading, realize that Dunn wrote to challenge her readers' opinions about society. What is normal; what is bizarre? How do we perceive and "rate" ourselves compared to others? What do we view as perfection; what do we regard as deformity? What is beneath the surface of people; what is their real reality?

And perhaps most important of all, what is that sickness in our society that allows us to connect – even tenuously – with the particular set of absurdities we find in *Geek Love*.

Chris says

If the world is a carnival, then we were all born to be its freaks. After all, when each of us arrived on the scene, naked and covered in blood and goo, we were unique specimens. But soon after our births, a member of The Cult of Normalcy gave us a pamphlet and offered us the opportunity to blend in with the rest of society. Most of us accepted the offer. Loneliness is a scary thing, after all. So here we are trying to live our lives like everyone else, constantly checking the mirror to make sure we look like everyone else, and taking some time out of our day to laugh and gawk at those who have failed miserably at our collective endeavor. If what we see in the mirror doesn't reflect the rest of society, we do things to fix ourselves. It's exhausting work, trying to be like everyone else, but it's worth it because we're not alone and that makes us happy, right?

I love *Geek Love* for reminding me that I'm a freak. I am the only person who popped out of my mother's vagina on a certain Sunday in November of 1978 at 10:56 a.m. at a little Catholic hospital in suburban Maryland. No one other than me has my brain, my heart, and my penis and it is time I started using all three of them to the best of their individual abilities. (Sorry, ladies. I'm happily married.)

I'll finish with a great quote from the book:

There are those whose own vulgar normality is so apparent and stultifying that they strive to escape it. They affect flamboyant behavior and claim originality according to the fashionable eccentricities of their time. They claim brains or talent or indifference to mores in desperate attempts to deny their own mediocrity...

Then there are those who feel their own strangeness and are terrified by it. They struggle toward normalcy. They suffer to exactly that degree that they are unable to appear normal to others, or to convince themselves that their aberration does not exist. These are true freaks, who appear, almost always, conventional and dull.

Vanessa says

This book is one that has sat on my shelf for several years, and I honestly have no idea why I didn't pick it up for so long. *Geek Love* is a fantastically interesting novel, with a real focus on character development for the Binewski family, who live in a travelling carnival. The parents have 4 children, and during pregnancy their mother experiments with drugs, alcohol, pesticides, etc. so that her children can be born with various disabilities and deformities that will allow them to bring money in for the carnival.

This book is fucked up, as you can imagine from the premise alone. Every character is truly fascinating, and all of the children in particular have such fascinating individual personalities that jump off the page. Although I didn't feel like I was very emotionally connected while reading the majority of the book, towards the end it surprised me how much I felt for these characters (especially with regards to specific plot points that I won't spoil).

The majority of the book follows the family in chronological order, but there are a couple of chapters that follow the character of Olympia (our narrator) later in life, and those were the only parts that didn't hold my interest as much. If those sections hadn't been there, this would have been a 4.5 star rating at least. Overall though it was a fascinating and exhilarating read, and one I would recommend to everyone who considers themselves to have a semi-strong stomach.

Richard Derus says

Book Circle Reads 26

Close to the top of any literature lover's life list of lovely books.

Well, now, upon more than a decade's passing, I can't say I agree with myself here.

Rating: 3.25* of five

The Book Description: *Geek Love* is the story of the Binewskis, a carny family whose mater- and paterfamilias set out—with the help of amphetamine, arsenic, and radioisotopes—to breed their own exhibit of human oddities. There's Arturo the Aquaboy, who has flippers for limbs and a megalomaniac ambition worthy of Genghis Khan . . . Iphy and Elly, the lissome Siamese twins . . . albino hunchback Oly, and the outwardly normal Chick, whose mysterious gifts make him the family's most precious—and dangerous—asset.

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My Review: Little Katie D's report card:

Idea: A+

Execution: C+

Nutritional Value: D-

While I, unlike some, adored *The Night Circus* in all its flawed glory, I thought this book was a bag of generic cheez puffs versus Morgenstern's home-made real-butter cheese straws.

I must be hungry....

But seriously, the reason I've given it so many stars is the sheer audacity of Katherine Dunn's imagination. I was gobsmacked by Oly's impregnation. I was stunned by the hubris of the horrible, horrible parents of these deformed and bizarre siblings. I saw in this book a spiritual ancestor to *Swamplandia!*, and I felt some of the same things about that book as I do about this one: Oooh, so close! It's sooo close to being extraordinary in a good, satisfying way. Unlike *Swamplandia!*, though, I think this book really does deserve the time and attention of serious fiction readers.

Yes, it does fail on some levels, but it's ambitious enough to make even that really interesting. Yes, it lacks some hard-to-define something, that one thing that makes an unbelievable premise feel right and inevitable, but instead it leaves the reader with a weird, uneasy new set of images imprinted on the brain.

But most of all, despite the ways it's not perfect, one thing it is, is fun. A fun-to-read failure is better for summer than a successful sob-fest, no?

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Jason says

WTF?!

On the surface, *Geek Love* has it all: jealousy, betrayal, sexual objectification, and murderous revenge. It's got a whole shitload of family drama topped off with a generous helping of physical deformities and possibly, *possibly*, a side of incest. (That part's not too clear, though.) The problem is, once you get past the shock value of wanting to fuck your brother who also happens to look like a giant fish, there really isn't much going on here.

Right before starting this book, I read *Middlesex*. The similarities in theme (except for the bit about the giant fish) are uncanny: there's incest, sexual objectification, and also a shitload of family drama. The difference is, *Middlesex* is an engaging novel while *Geek Love*, on the other hand, falls sadly flat. Besides the fact that I'm not usually keen on weakling protagonists—Oly is a patsy who gets pushed around her entire life by her older brother whom, for some reason, she *never* stands up to—I was actually more disturbed by the whole Miss Lick situation. I believe she's supposed to be like a second coming of Dr. Phyllis, disfiguring her clients as a means of helping them achieve enlightenment, yet for some strange reason she wants to *remove* Miranda's tail? I don't get it. You'd think she'd want to make it bigger or help her grow a second one or something. The premise of this just doesn't seem very well thought out to me.

Chick is the one thing I did love about this book, though, and *Geek Love* could have used a lot of more of him. But as for the rest of the Binewskis, I could take 'em or leave 'em. I mean they might be *marginally* interesting, but not enough for me to care what ends up happening to them. So by the time whatever happens to them, um, happens, I had pretty much lost interest.

The Binewski Family.

Charity says

This book is complex, creative, and mind-boggling. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the book is trying to grapple with what it's trying to describe into something you can visualize. It's not that Katherine Dunn doesn't do a fine job describing her material...it's just that the imagery is so complex and vivid that it takes a lot out of the brain to envision for oneself.

This book is about the outsider making the insider feel bad because the insider doesn't fit with the outsiders. This book is about belonging and acceptance in ways that are partly disturbing, but not unbelievable.

My favorite line in the book (there are many as Katherine Dunn is terrific with her imagery and her descriptions and analogies): ...a true freak has to be born.

My only complaint is the end of the book, how Dunn chooses to explain the point of the book at the tail end when I kind of believe it would have made better sense at the beginning. Although the book rarely leaves the first-person narrative or its framework even when entering into another person's perspective by way of the

main narrator Oly, the tone does shift at the end and that bothered me.

I also don't fully understand the main character's last action...and I don't get the satisfaction of knowing whether or not the message of Oly is given out. Hence, four stars instead of five.

Meredith Holley says

"Whenever you read a good book, it's like the author is right there, in the room, talking to you, which is why I don't like to read good books." - Jack Handey

This is one of the only books I plan never to finish. I thought the writing was beautiful, and I don't even know that I would say it was badly edited (a comment I read in another review), but I hated all of the characters. I loathed them by the time I stopped reading. I even hated Chick a little bit. I skipped some and glanced at the end to see if it would be worth finishing, but I couldn't get too excited about anything I saw. If anyone has a good reason for me to finish this book, I would be interested to hear it.

I was recommended to read it by two very different people - the prom queen my Senior year of high school, and a friend of mine who was later locked up in a high security mental ward in Seattle. Made me want to give it a try, you know? I don't know if I've ever hated so many characters in a book as though they were my personal enemies.

This book sat inside my nightstand for a couple of months, and then I just couldn't stand having it there any more, knowing it might be sneaking out and watching me while I slept. I took it to the library and handed it to one of the customer service people, asking him if I could give it to the library. I didn't want to sell it to a used book store and then have someone make the mistake I made of actually spending money on it; and I couldn't throw it away because I do think it's well written, so I had to give it more respect than that. The man tried to scan it for about thirty seconds as though I was returning it. "No," I explained, "I'm not returning it. I just want to give it to the library, if that's okay." "Oh," he said, looking at his computer screen and not giving any other response. I walked away quickly, just in case he was planning to tell me I couldn't leave the book. He's the librarian here at the Eugene Public library with the handlebar mustache, and the greying hair with a bowl cut, who looks like he's part basset hound. That's a pretty irrelevant story, but why are you still reading this? (that's what Katherine Dunn said)

James says

This book was as good as I heard it would and better. I love weird characters and twisted plot lines, but this went so far that it made me very uncomfortable. And I love the book for that.

The plot is simple and sick enough: Al and Lil Binewski, a young couple madly in love and struggling to save Al's family business, a traveling carnival fabulon, devise a plan to keep themselves from going under. Al, with Lil's eager permission, exposes his wife to radiation, prescriptions, and whatever else may affect her pregnancies in unforeseen ways. The result is a line of children who are so strange that the traveling carnival now has its main attraction, a bloodline as part of one of the most bizarre freak shows of all time.

I don't want to say any more about the book than that, but it's really amazing. Expect to be disgusted, expect to be appalled, expect one of the most despicable antagonists in literary history, and expect one of the most repulsively loveable protagonists ever envisioned. This is a brutal and horrific book that also succeeds to be

hysterical and heartbreaking, not to mention incredibly human, and that may be the most uncomfortable part of all: How these freaks of nature succeed so well at reflecting the inner-side of emotion, which is more human than one could ever hope their physical appearance can be. In short, expect to see yourself in and everyone you know in one character or another. There is a little bit of Chick and Arty in all of us.

This book is incredible.

Maciek says

I had *Geek Love* sitting on my shelf for three years. I got it on May 30th of 2010 when the library of the university I've been attending was having a clearance. This book was among the pile I took home with me. It still had its library card attached, and from it I discovered that it was donated to the library on 23/04/1996 and that the last time anyone checked it out was on 25/04/2001. I could understand the library casting it slept on the shelf for nine years, but it wouldn't stop me from giving it a chance - and getting a free book!

Geek Love was received with applause, and was a finalist for the National Book Award. The novel tells the story of the Biniewskis, a family of carnies who make their living by travelling across the backwoods of the U.S. and showing their many talents. The Biniewskis aren't your ordinary carnies: papa Al Biniewski was a practitioner of some crazy Hunter S. Thompson style eugenics and gave mama Biniewski a ton of different drugs and experimented on her with radioactive materials, so that their children would be born with as many physical deformities as possible. The result is a pair of Siamese twins, Electra and Iphigenia; Arty, a boy without arms and legs and with flippers for hands and feet; Fortunato, also known as Chick, a kid who looks normal but who has amazing telekinetic powers; and Olympia, a hunchbacked albino dwarf who is also the narrator of the story.

The protagonists of *Geek Love* are all despicable, and none more than the Biniewski seniors, Al and Lily. They value their children only by their deformities, and how strange and exotic they would appear to the outsiders and how much profit they would generate. The Biniewskis treat "normal" people with contempt; Biniewski children who are miraculously born undeformed are abandoned after birth at stores, gas stations and other places where people would find them. Despite the old Biniewskis pretending that the business is a family run affair there's little family there besides business: business and making a profit is the entire rock the carnival is built upon.

Olympia, the main character of the novel, is obsessed with her brother, Arty the Aquaman. Throughout the novel Arty is shown to grow into a self-obsessed megalomaniac: he develops a cult of himself which he calls Arturism, and encourages his followers to mutilate themselves by cutting of parts of their body - starting with fingers and toes, and progressing from there. Arty sees the human body as a burden and believes that only in deformity such as his one can achieve true peace and freedom.

Olympia is just an hunchbacked albino dwarf; by the Biniewski standard she has no real exotic deformity, and because of this she was almost abandoned at birth. She is well aware that she is judged by her parents and feels inferior to her siblings, whom she feels they consider to be of much more worth. Olympia knows that she cannot change her genetics, and this makes her feel weak and worthless. She clings to Arty because he is the only person to give her any attention - even though most (if not all) of it consists of abuse and exploitation - she feels that she deserves the abuse, as it comes from Arty who is obviously much more valued by her parents than she is (they even make her attend to his needs and basically become his servant). Olympia is almost a sympathetic character, but her utter indifference to Arty's Machiavellianism and narcissism makes it hard for the reader to feel sympathy for her as well.

I felt that Katherine Dunn has crafted these weird, twisted characters and aimed to explore their lives - The Binewski children never feel secure with themselves and their family, feeling they have to compete with one another for affection/approval. Because of this, they do terrible things and end up being miserable. However, I felt that Katherine Dunn simply did not know what to do with her characters, and never created a compelling enough story to carry them through the novel. I was simply *Bored* as I went on, and felt that the novel did not fulfill its initial potential. As a child, I watched the film *Freaks* on TCM, and still remember it today. It's a great carnival story of human greed, made immortal by the director's brave choice of casting real people with deformities to play the eponymous "Freaks" instead of actors in make up and costume. The film shocked both the critics and the audience and his career derailed, making it next to impossible to get his next project accepted, but today is considered a cult classic and is preserved in the U.S. National Film Registry for its significance.

I will never forget the culminating scene of *Freaks*, and the film has left a lasting impact on me. I'm afraid I can't say the same about *Geek Love*: it culminates when (view spoiler). I did read all the way to the end, but lost interest way before that.

BrokenTune says

DNF @ 60 pages.

Some books just aren't for me. This is one of them.

No rating, no regrets, but no more time spent on this one either.

Joey says

Warning: this review contains spoilers. Read or don't read it accordingly.

I had a schizophrenic reaction to this book. On the one hand, it had a more profound impact on me than books—even some truly great ones—usually do. On the other hand, I thought it was sloppily edited, and Dunn's prose ran the spectrum from sublime to clunky and ridiculous.

The good:

Geek Love has a handful of the most memorable characters you'll ever find. Arturo the Aqua Boy is deftly handled, a megalomaniacal little turd whose true gift is not his freakish nature, but his incredible powers of manipulation. His slow seizure of power behind the scenes at the Binewski Fabulon and his exploitation of his followers after the inception of the Aruturan amputation cult are handled perfectly. Elly and Iphy, the Siamese twins, are also done well, especially after they blossom into sexual maturity. Dunn could have easily fell into trite cliché when she has the two conjoined girls bicker and fight, but their personalities are rich enough that it's never an issue. Throw in lesser characters like the Bag Man and Dr. P, both of whom are hard to stomach for different reasons, and you have a virtuoso ensemble cast.

I also admire the way the reader's ideas about Al and Crystal Lil as parents changes slowly. Aside from dosing his willing wife with bizarre drug cocktails in order to sire a brood of freaks to populate his carnival,

Al seems like a model father at the beginning of the book, but our view of him changes as the book progresses.

The story of the Binewski children and the fiery demise of everything they know is mind-blowing. To quote the blurb on the back cover, this book “throws its sulfurous light” on the notion of what’s normal and what’s freakish, not just in terms of outward appearance, but in our heads as well. To say that *Geek Love* is often unsettling is a rank understatement, but the book holds its dark thrall not by describing the physical deformities embodied by the characters, but by forcing that unflinching view inward. In that regard, *Geek Love*, feels epic and important.

The Bad:

Dunn needs an editor with a big red pen and the balls to call her on the carpet when her writing gets way to precious. She has a real tendency to over-write. Often, she makes a nifty turn of phrase, only to bury it with another paragraph of useless description and clunky metaphor. While the overall effect of the novel is pretty marvelous, on the sentence level, Dunn is sometimes a hack.

I was also disappointed in the way Chick’s inferno was described. Dunn doesn’t think twice about spending four or five pages describing, say, the horse Arty has lopped off at the knees. She’ll write an entire paragraph about Miss Lick cooking popcorn or Chick cleaning Arty’s tank. But the climax of the novel gets barely a page and leaves readers scratching their heads.

A bigger editing problem is the whole frame story of the now-adult Oly and her quest to save her secret daughter’s (literal) tail. The whole Miss Lick saga adds nothing to the book and drags it down. It seems added on in an attempt to make the book seem more sophisticated, what with the chronological shifts and simultaneous story-telling. The novel would have been much tighter and stronger had it focused on the story of the Fabulon.

The Bottom Line:

This is a book that flirts with being truly great, but only ends up being pretty damn good.

Howard says

Like a collaboration between John Irving and David Lynch, this audaciously conceived, sometimes shocking tale of love and hubris in a carnival family exerts the same mesmeric fascination as the freaks it depicts, despite essential structural flaws. In language as original and fantastic as her story, Dunn (Attic, 1970; Truck, 1971) tells the tale of Binewski's Carnival Fabulon, an unremarkable traveling show until patriarch Aloysius decides to breed his own freaks. Using drugs, insecticides and radioactivity, Al and his wife Crystal Lil, sometime geek, produce Arturo, a thalidomide child; Elly and Iphy, beautiful Siamese twins; Olympia, the novel's narrator, an albino hunchbacked dwarf trained as a barker; and the outwardly normal but telekinetic Chick. With overtones of classical tragedy, Olympia relates Arturo's growing power: first over his sisters, who vie for his love, then over the entire show, and finally over the many followers of the cult of "Arturism," who, like their prophet, have pieces of themselves amputated to transcend appearance. (Arms and legs become lion food; hands and feet, fodder for "transcendental maggots," ironic souvenirs of Arturo.) Arturo's pride and jealousy combine with the arrival of a failed assassin, now a freak himself, and with the twins' sideline of selling "norms" unique sex, to bring the show to a flaming end. Although the framing story - years later, Olympia schemes to save Miranda, her daughter by Arturo, from a perverse philanthropist - is

poorly integrated, and the novel sometimes judders along, this is captivatingly original stuff. With wit and poetry, Dunn redefines the limits of the acceptable.

(My editor made me change the last line from "pushes the envelope of acceptability," because she was unfamiliar with the expression, which was ridiculous at the time, because *The Right Stuff* had been out for a while by then, but I think now it would seem dated, so she was ultimately right.)

Will Byrnes says

They thought to use and shame me but I win out by nature, because a true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born.

Geek Love is an amazing book, audacious, moving, beautiful, substantive, creepy, upsetting, tragic and dark.

So you think of yourself as different, an outsider, a freak in one way or another? Well, maybe you are, but your differences would likely fade were you to compare yourself to most of the characters in this best-selling novel from Katherine Dunn, so best-selling in fact that it has never been out of print. And, in addition to being a popular success, it was a critical one as well, earning a spot as a finalist for the 1989 National Book Award.

A word of warning (several, actually) for those who are familiar only with the contemporary meaning of the word "geek." Before the word had its DNA mutated to mean "an expert," particularly of the techie variety, before serious people proclaimed that the geeks will inherit the earth, the word referred specifically to carnival performers who engaged in the very un-nerdy practice of biting the heads off live chickens for paying audiences. Let's see a show of hands. How many of you folks out there, how many nerds in particular, would be interested in returning to etymological roots and getting your McNuggets started the old-fashioned way? Not many. But you, in the back, with your hand up? Do me a favor please and read some other review. Thanks. Of course this was not a problem for Crystal Lil. Somehow it did not freak her husband out that she got off on using her teeth to remove small heads from quivering bodies.

"When your mama was the geek, my dreamlets," Papa would say, "she made the nipping off of noggins such a crystal mystery that the hens themselves yearned toward her, waltzing around her, hypnotized with longing."

Binewski's *Carnival Fabulon* travels the Podunk USA circuit, offering pedestrian locals a peek at the extraordinary. The Binewski family will remind no one of Ozzie and Harriet. More the Addams family, sans the smirks. In fact, they may be the ones who put the nuclear in *nuclear* family. Frustrated by the frequent loss of carnival performers, Aloysius Binewski and his wife, Lilian Hinchcliff Binewski, (the Crystal Lil of the geek mention above) opt to craft their own, applying measured doses of sundry illegal substances, poisons, and radioisotopes to ensure that their progeny emerge *special*. The efforts that do not make it through to live birth, or who meet an unhappy end soon after their emergence, are displayed publicly in large glass jars. The survivors include Siamese twins, Iphigenia (Iphy) and Elektra (Elly), Arturo (Arty), the malevolent and megalomaniacal AquaBoy, Fortunato (Chick), who manifests telekinetic power, and Olympia (Oly), our narrator through this family saga. Oly relates the tale of the family to us as an adult. She makes a living as radio personality Hopalong McGurk, which is a good venue if you are a bald, albino dwarf with pink eyes, a sweet voice and a hump.

Reading this book you will forget the boy who lived under the stairs and latch on to the girl who lived under the sink. Oly's needs are few, but a connection to family is chief among them. She is our insider, observing and reporting the goings on that seem normal to her, but maybe not so much to us. What is normal, anyway? To you and me, norms for the most part, average height, weight, a typical number of standard-issue limbs, no particular magical powers, we stroll the not very broad midway of the straight and narrow. But to Olympia Binewski, having a brother with flipper-shaped limbs, twins sharing one pair of legs, among sundry other parts, and a brother who can move matter with his mind, and a sense of place defined by the nearest road sign defines normal.

I was full-grown before I even set foot in a house without wheels. Of course I had been in stores, offices, fuel stations, barns, and warehouses. But I had never walked through the door of a place where people slept and ate and bathed and picked their noses, and, as the saying goes, "lived," unless that place was three times longer than it was wide and came equipped with road shocks and tires.

When I first stood in such a house I was struck by its terrible solidity. The thing had concrete tentacles sunk into the earth, and a sprawling inefficiency. Everything was bigger than it needed to be and there were so many shadowed, dusty corners empty and wasted that I thought I would get lost if I stepped away from the door. That building wasn't going anywhere despite an itchy sense that it was not entirely comfortable where it was.

Sometimes that family connection can be problematic. Oly is in love with her brother, Arty. AquaBoy is exceptionally bright and tuned in to what works on audiences. He expands his performance from a display of his unusual form to an interaction, as he finds success answering audience questions. He builds this into a very big deal

For a while, he answered only generic questions distilled from the scrawled bewilderments and griefs that piled up on the three-by-five cards. Then he stopped answering at all and just told them what he wanted them to hear. Testifying he called it.

And a cult is born, Arturism, in which the *Admitted*, seeking to find the peace that Arty has persuaded them he possesses, allow their bodies to be whittled a piece at a time.

Chick was thought to have been a dreaded *norm* when he arrived. Al and Lily decided that, as he was of no value to the show, the proper course was to leave him at a gas station. Turns out he has a special gift which manifests in the nick of time. He is absorbed into the family, and put to profitable use as soon as he is able to understand commands.

We follow the family as the children grow, and as will happen, sexuality swells the narrative mix. Complications ensue.

These are not exactly the nicest people, but Dunn offers nuanced portrayals of most of them. We never really find out why Boston Brahmin Lily chooses the low road, but we do see both the dark and the light sides of their children. Or in the case of Arty, the bright side illuminating his dark side. Oly is a sympathetic character and you will have little trouble appreciating her concerns, particularly when she is an adult. Her role, though, is primarily as an observer. Chick is like a wounded animal, who, despite his prodigious power, suffers as he feels the pain all around him. The twins have the same problems other twins experience, on steroids. There are a few outsiders who join the Fabulon, and offer a perspective other than Oly's.

The narrative follows two time lines. The bulk is following the traveling Binewkis over a decade or so. The smaller narrative is Oly as an adult, living in a boarding house in which her mother and her daughter,

Miranda, (a *Tempest* reference if ever there was one, resonant with the opening epigraph, taken from that play), reside. In that stream Mary Malley Lick is a wealthy heiress who professes a desire to liberate young women from the burden of being attractive so they can make their way in the world on their merits. Of course, the very large and not very attractive Ms Lick may be using her great wealth to take beauty away from those who have it, in a form of one-percenter jealousy. Oly takes an interest in her when Lick targets Miranda.

The tales of love, greed, power, envy, powerlessness and rage seem the stuff of Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, particularly those centering around Arty. Hubris, abuse of power, fate and comeuppance are most definitely on display.

There are really two primary preoccupations of mine involved in this book. One of course is this concept of the cult, and the how-come of that. And the other was the long debate of nature vs. nurture. So those two things linked and seemed to be in an odd way part and parcel of each other, I guess.

We are asked to look at questions about the definition of normalcy. Most of the time in literature the freaks want to be like everyone else. Here the norms seem to pine for freakishness. Dunn offers a fascinating comparison between the oddness of the Arturists and what society considers appropriate.

It's interesting that when these individuals choose—and it is their choice always—to endure voluntary amputation for their own personal benefit, society professes itself shocked and disapproving. Yet this same society respects the concept that any individual should risk total annihilation in war, subject to the judgment of any superior officer at all and for purposes ranging from a promotion for the lieutenant to higher profits for the bullet company. Hell, they don't just respect that idea, they flat expect it. And they'll shoot your ass if you don't go along with it.

At what point does cultishness, do the needs of the pack, become the norm?

In addition to the startling tale of the Binewskis, Dunn demonstrates a particularly powerful and poetic command of language. Here is a small sample:

The sky above Molalla was aching blue but I walked from Arty's tent to our van in the same air I'd sucked all my life. It was a Binewski blend of lube, grease, dust, popcorn, and hot sugar. We made that air and we carried it with us. The Fabulon's light was the same in Arkansas as in Idaho—the patented electric dance step of the Binewskis. We made it. Like the muroid nubbin that spins a shell called "oyster," we Binewskis wove a midway shelter called "carnival."

There is plenty more where that came from. There is also serious structural craft on display, as Dunn, in this modern fable, wields parallelism deftly, particularly as applied to how people are formed and changed, and the diverse motivations, self and external, involved in the formation of who we are and what we are capable of, for good *and* ill. There is a particularly poignant look at innocence in childhood vs adulthood.

Appropriately for a book that concerns freakishness, *Geek Love* is notable for its packaging. Quick, name five books that are renowned for their covers. Right. Dead air, that's what I thought. Ok, Ok, *Gatsby*, and we all have personal favorites, but how many are really different, and universally regarded as groundbreaking? The Knopf wolfhound on the bound edge of the original hard-cover printing somehow sports five instead of the usual four limbs. And the letters used in the cover title are all mutations. It was considered pretty daring cover art for the time.

One of the inspirations for the story took place in Portland, Oregon. The International Rose Test Garden in Washington Park is home to a wide variety of rose variations. Dunn wondered how it might play out if people were applying genetic control to making people, not in some sort of Aryan quest for perfection, but in trying to design for different. She was also inspired, if the word can be used here, by the awfulness of Jim Jones, and puts some of Jones's words into Arty's mouth. Dunn is from Kansas, originally, but her family moved around a fair bit when she was a kid. She has lived in several European countries, having her son in Ireland, but lives in Portland now, where she has become a renowned writer on boxing.

As for film plans for *Geek Love*, rights have been sold and sold again, but now reside permanently with Warner Brothers, who may or may not ever get around to producing it.

Geek Love has been continuously in print since its' 1989 release. In fact she earned more money from it in the last year than she ever had before. The author was given a contract for a second novel, for a sum well into six figures. But the book has yet to appear. Perhaps it is in a glass jar somewhere.

You don't have to be a teenager or twenty-something to appreciate the pull of *Geek Love*. It is one of the most fascinating books I have ever read, and I am well on my way to geezerhood. Reading *Geek Love* may not alter your DNA, give you unusual physical characteristics or make sleeping under the kitchen sink seem appealing. But it will definitely alter your view of what is possible in literature, will make you think about some core subjects in ways that might not have occurred before and will make you perk up whenever you spot one or more of the many references to it that pop up in our culture from time to time, like a travelling carnival. It may be too *out there* for some readers, but I suggest that if it feels that way to you, take an excursion and go *out there* to see this amazing show. It is one of the best freakin' books ever.

Review posted – 12/5/14

Publication date – 1989

=====EXTRA STUFF

Dunn's FB page is maintained by Knopf not by Dunn

There are many clips on Youtube to the 1932 movie Freaks. When a character in GL is proclaimed One of Us it is a reference to the film

The A.V. Club interview – Dunn quotes are taken from here

Litreactor.com piece on Dunn, with a bit of interview - What The Hell Ever Happened To... Katherine Dunn? – by Joshua Chaplinsky

An excellent piece in Wired.Com - Geek Love at 25: How a Freak Family Inspired Your Pop Culture Heroes

A reading group guide from the Book Report Network

Lynx says

"A true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born."

When times were looking tough, Al and Lil Binewski used their ingenuity, along with some poisons and chemicals, to come up with a way to keep their traveling Carnival alive, breed their own main attractions. First came Arturo, born with flippers for limbs, better known as Arty the Aqua Boy. Then Iphy and Elly, conjoined at the waist who draw in the crowds with their song and dance numbers. Next was Olympia the albino hunchback dwarf, not special enough to warrant her own show but unique enough to keep around to help behind the scenes and finally came Chick. Sweet, cherubic and utterly normal - on the outside at least. Told through the voice of Oly, we follow the rise and fall of the Binewski clan.

My God, what a wild ride! Jealousy, greed, murder, cultism, violence, love, loss, revenge... there isn't much this book doesn't cover. Katherine Dunn does a beautiful job of describing the freakish surface details of her characters and the whole Carnival life while at the same time making each of them utterly human and easily relatable on the inside. This is simply a coming-of-age story revolving around a family in a very unique situation and is beautiful and horrifying and deeply moving all at once.

Barry Pierce says

If David Lynch wrote a novel, this would be it. This novel is repugnant, disgusting, and baffling. I loved it. Who'd have thought that a book narrated by a bald female hunchbacked albino dwarf would be so beautiful? The trials and tribulations of the Binewski family are shocking and sickening but yet you feel a strange attraction to this family of freaks. This is one of the most original novels I've ever read, I will never come across anything like this ever again. Reading "Geek Love" is an experience that I highly recommend to everyone, living or dead. You'll feel sick with awe.

Kelly (and the Book Boar) says

Find all of my reviews at: <http://52bookminimum.blogspot.com/>

It's a snow day today and since my tiny humans are to the point where my snow days are numbered since they aren't so tiny any longer I decided to stay home with them in order to ~~read porn~~ make cookies and hot cocoa and scream loving things out the front door like "IT'S 10 DEGREES OUTSIDE - GET YOUR ASSES BACK IN HERE BEFORE YOU FREEZE TO DEATH!" But then I realized this book would be expiring from my Kindle in like a minute and a half so I figured I better morph my plan and get a "review" churned out right quick.

To be honest, I don't really know what to say. *Geek Love* has been on my TBR since 2012. I'm fairly certain I even checked it out from the library at one point and returned it without reading. When Ron 2.0 was trying to bait all us creeps with his *Last Days* updates someone mentioned *Geek Love* and since I'm an asshole I went with that one rather than Ron's choice.

Enough with the backstory, right? You probably want to know about the book. Well, it goes a little something like this

"Tell about the time when Mama was the geek!"

Y'all know what a geek is, right?

Well, yeah, but this one isn't about the kind of geek McDreamy was before he got dreamy. It's about this kind

That was Mama Lil. Lil had big dreams of being a trapeze girl, but an unfortunate accident proved that wasn't meant to be. Lil became the geek instead, catching the eye of Papa Al. With the help of some choice dope, a few insecticides and a handful of radioisotopes the two Binewskis created a **very** unique family

Geek Love is the story of family, of sibling rivalry, of sacrifice, of religion and a need for fame and glory. It definitely reminds us all to . . .

And featured a character that, even though it's the first week of the new year, I will remember forever. Oh little Boychick

I have **never** read anything like it and highly doubt I ever will. I don't know who to recommend this to because it is most assuredly not a story for everyone. But if you have a taste for the unusual and appreciate writing that isn't overdone or purple, but still makes an impact

"Do you know what the monsters and demons and rancid spirits are? Us, that's what. You and me. We are the things that come to the norms in nightmares. The thing that lurks in the bell tower and bites out the throats of the choirboys - that's you, Oly. And the thing in the closet that makes the babies scream in the dark before it sucks their last breath - that's me. And the rustling in the brush and the strange piping cries that chill the spine on a deserted road at twilight - that's the twins singing practice scales while they look for berries."

You should give it a go and become one of us

F says

love stories like this. Very twisted and disturbing sometimes.
Strange circumstances, weird characters & time skips.
Took me a while to read. Some parts hard to follow.

Paul Bryant says

Moderato. Lightly strummed guitar. Two backup singers who constantly refrain

*Sweet sweet, the freaks that you gave to me
You can't beat the geeks that you gave to me*

A handsome tuxedo-wearing guy sings

*Take one set of Siamese twins
Add a boy with only fins
No legs, no arms, he swims, he charms
Memories are made of this*

*Then add some pesticide
Just a sprinkle of infanticide
Incest and twin sex for the flavor
Should you be hard to please
Voluntary amputees
Will give you plenty to savor*

*Add a dwarfish hunchbacked girl
And a guy without a face
There's a telekinetic boy
And a rich lady who likes to pay pretty girls to undergo operations to make them really ugly
Memories are made of this
Sweet sweet, the freaks that you gave to me
Memories are made of this
You can't beat the geeks that you gave to me*

Fade.

*

The story is narrated by Oly, the hunchbacked albino dwarf. She says :

I realized that the peculiar look on people's faces when they saw me was not envy or hatred, but could be translated into one simple question : "What the hell happened to you?" They needed to know so they could prevent it from happening to them.

My answer was simple, too : "My father and mother designed me this way. They achieved greater originality in some of their other projects."

So, if you read the blurb you will know that this is the story of a family of freaks who run a freak show in their own carnival, which constantly tours the small towns of the South and Midwest. And it's a beloved cult novel, which I had only vaguely heard of until recently. It was one of those "why haven't I already read this?" moments. And now I have. Phew, it felt really long, and at the end, *I couldn't wait to be done with it.* It's uneasy reading when you utterly despise the sniveling wretched narrator in whose brain you live throughout. And also you find the author likes to describe the simplest things in oblique prose. And also the

most complicated things in oblique prose. And also I felt jerked around more than somewhat. I will explain.

This novel is has a couple of Real Big Themes. Like in Uncle Tom's Cabin, the theme is *slavery*. Or in the novels of Martin Amis the theme is *Martin Amis' fabulous intelligence*. Here it's kind of two intertwined ideas.

Arty the Aqua Boy :

We have this advantage, that the norms expect us to be wise. Even a rat's-ass dwarf jester got credit for terrible canniness disguised as tomfoolery. Freaks are like owls, mythed into blinking, bloodless objectivity. The norms figure our contact with their brand of life is shaky. They see us as cut off from temptation and pettiness. Even our hate is grand by their feeble lights. And the more deformed we are, the higher our supposed sanctity.

So Arty gradually starts a cult. The hicks who patronize the freak show begin to see him as a guru. He preaches a message of P.I.P. : Peace, Isolation, Purity. The idea is for people to be like Arty in order to achieve this.

The Arturans therefore snip off increasing bits of themselves to denormalise, starting with toes and fingers – because the normal world is so overburdened with expectations (get a good job, have great sex, go on fabulous holidays, you know) you can never find P I P there, so you have to make a radical incremental voluntary rejection of it. Snip snip snip. (Similarly in the great movie *City of Lost Children* the cult of self-blinded people preach that rejecting diurnal sight liberates the mind to spiritual sight.)

The carnival acquires a *very conveniently unethical* surgeon who travels with them and performs the amputations. And it was characters like this doctor who, alas, rang too hollow for me – *bong bong*, the telling sound of a character made up by the author because she had to make that part of the story work, and to hell with any considerations like plausibility.

Plausibility in a story about generically damaged freaks in a freak show which includes a boy with seemingly infinite telekinetic powers? Sure! We ask for believability in a science fiction story set on the Planet Glurg among the alien Glurgians just as much as we do in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

So increasingly I couldn't quite buy a lot of the motivations on display here, even given the abnormal psychologies of some of them. A great deal of what goes on in this book, and a lot goes on, seemed to be series of contrivances towards another ratchetting up of delicious grotesqueness. The Bag Man! The maggot factory from human parts! Let's have the hunchbacked dwarf do a striptease! The freaks are humanized and dehumanized co-terminously. This author has her cake and eats it.

Anyhow, the cult of Arty, takes up the majority of the story. But there's also the other part which involves the millionaire Miss Lick who likes to film pretty girls undergoing disfiguring operations. Yes. This is another Big Theme. This is also about liberation. Arty wants to liberate you from normality, and Miss Lick wants to liberate women from male attention. This then allows them to become molecular pharmacologists or top UN interpreters.

These two stories drag the book like a supermarket trolley with wonky wheels towards metaphor and polemic and away from the living breathing world which us readers want from fiction. Fiction has to be true. In *Geek Love* too many of the characters Stand for Something, like Mrs Do As You Would Be Done By and Mrs Be Done By As You Did in *The Water Babies* (1863).

I must say that most readers of *Geek Love* completely disagree with this, they have no problem with these characters and they love the world Katherine Dunn creates. But they can go and write their own review, and many have.

I read that people have been optioning this book for a movie since it came out and I'm surprised it hasn't been done. Common decency may have prevented it from being filmed before now, I guess, but now we live in a world of *The Human Caterpillar* and suchlike, so that's no barrier at all. And CGI makes the rest of it a stroll in the park. I say do it now, and Ellie and Dakota Fanning are shoo-ins for the parts of the Siamese twins.

2.5 stars because it's some kind of achievement, I guess

Zoeytron says

This is a horrifying look between the tent flaps of a traveling carnival known as Binewski's Fabulon. Al and Crystal Lil Binewski have a grotesque way of growing your own. Freaks, that is.

A horrific premise and disturbing ideas make for a very different read. Be forewarned, this one is way dark.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Sometimes the universe just *wants* you to read a book. A few months ago, Wired Magazine ran a feature on *Geek Love* at 25, an anniversary reflection of sorts. I'm not sure if that is why my book-club cohort picked the book or if it was just in the air for another reason, but not long after, it became the official pick for May.

The article points out that this was an important book cover design for Chip Kidd, who went on to become the best known book cover designer of recent times.

I'd seen this book before, and assumed it would be some love story about characters in the margins, pocket protectors and LARPerS. Well, I was half right.

"Like the muroid nubbin that spins a shell called 'oyster,' we Binewskis wove a midway shelter called 'carnival.'"

The reader of this novel discovers very quickly that geek is used in the second definition of the word - the circus performer, circus freak, carnival freak, not the main tent but the sideshow.

The story goes that the Binewskis fell in love as circus performers but in marriage saw an opportunity to magnify the geek experience. Under her husband Al's direction, Lil takes extreme drugs and chemicals into her body during pregnancy, and gives birth to siamese twins, an albino hairless dwarf with a hump, a child with flippers instead of limbs, and one more child that lives. The novel is the story of the family, starting and ending with Olympia, the albino dwarf child who narrates most of the story.

I kept thinking of *Infinite Jest* which would have been published seven years later, but may have been

influenced by this novel, which was quite popular in the circles of the early 90s non-pop, alternative, pop culture icons. I could picture the Binewskis menagerie of genetic "modification" fitting into the deformed children that live in the society of Wallace's near future world, while not being his main focus. The obsessiveness of Dunn's characters also would have fit well into that world.

I realize not everyone has read *Infinite Jest* so I'll talk more about the actual book. The tone is incredibly dark. The lengths the characters go to for what they want continued to shock and disgust me, yet I kept reading because I was fascinated and horrified and couldn't look away. There are not any good people here. They are flawed, inside and out. I can't think of anything else like it.

The pull isn't just the characters and ideas but the writing. Dunn has a way with words!

When the children are young, Dunn uses that opportunity to reflect on the evil nature of babies. I think this part might be what I remember most years from now:

"It is, I suppose, the common grief of children at having to protect their parents from reality. It is bitter for the young to see what awful innocence adults grow into, that terrible vulnerability that must be sheltered from the rodent mire of childhood..."

"How deep and sticky is the darkness of childhood, how rigid the blades of infant evil, which is unadulterated, unrestrained by the convenient cushions of age and its civilizing anesthesia."

And it's true. In *Geek Love*, the children do terrible, horrible things. You've been warned. The flipper boy character, Arty, is probably the most interesting-disturbing presence. Or is he just the product of his environment?

Some of the story is told by Oly as an adult, where she reflects on the benefits of being outwardly and obviously different.

"Just being visible is my biggest confession, so they try to set me at ease by revealing our equality, by dragging out their own less apparent deformities.... They tell me everything eventually."

I should say that in *Geek Love*, people outside the family are labeled "Norms" and are usually disregarded. Norms are boring, and lack the special qualities of the family members!

And the Binewski's love/hate the norms. When one of the conjoined twins falls in love for the first time, she only can love the norm boy until he loves her back.

"...If he comes to loving me it's because I've twisted him and changed him. If he loves me he's corrupted. I can't love him anymore. I won't pretend it didn't hurt."

And then later, a similar sentiment from Oly...

"I have certainly mourned for myself. I have wallowed in grief for the lonesome, deliberate seep of my love into the air like the smell of uneaten popcorn greenening to rubbery staleness. In the end I would always pull up with a sense of glory, that loving is the strong side. It's feeble to be an object."

This book won't be for everyone, but that's what makes it so great. She doesn't sugarcoat or temper anything, and it's in her willingness to go to an extreme where the beauty lies. But Dunn already knew she didn't fit as a norm!

Discussed on Episode 5 of the Reading Envy podcast!
