

The Lives of Dwarfs

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Their Journey from Public Curiosity
toward Social Liberation



BETTY M. ADELSON

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Historically, they have borne the labels "freaks" and "oddities": they have been collected as pets, displayed as spectacles, and treated as comic relief. Now, for the first

time, in this elegant and comprehensive volume, the lives of dwarfs are explored in all their fullness and humanity. Spanning the centuries from ancient Egypt to the present, this unique social history chronicles the various ways this population has been exploited, describes their strategies for coping, and notes the persistent influence of mythology upon perceptions of them by others. The narrative also highlights the lives of eminent individuals and contains a thought-provoking account of the representation and participation of dwarfs in the arts, enhanced by outstanding color photographs. Betty M. Adelson, the mother of a daughter with dwarfism, brings special insight and sensitivity to the research. She traces the widespread mistreatment of dwarfs over the centuries, engendered by their being viewed as curiosities rather than as human beings capable of the same accomplishments as people of average height, and deserving of the same pleasures. Adelson explores how, for much of their history, dwarfs had to resort to exhibiting themselves since social stigma made other employment unattainable. Only in recent years have short-statured individuals begun to challenge their position in society. Medical advances, new economic opportunities, and disability legislation have led to progress, mainly in Western nations. By now, advocacy groups have also been formed in countries as diverse as Chile, South Korea, and Nigeria. Adelson compares what she refers to as the "small revolution" to similar social and cultural awakenings that women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, and persons with disabilities experienced when they identified themselves as a community with shared goals and obstacles. Written with passion, grace and the dignity that the subject deserves, "The Lives of Dwarfs will not only revolutionize current perceptions about the historically misrepresented dwarf population, it also offers pause for thought on issues of disability, medical treatment, height, beauty and identity.

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