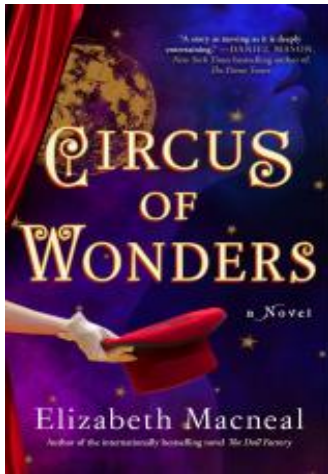


# Circus of Wonders

by Elizabeth Macneal

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## About the Book

From the #1 internationally bestselling author of the lush, evocative Gothic (*The New York Times Book Review*) **THE DOLL FACTORY** comes an atmospheric and spectacular novel in which one woman's life is transformed by the arrival of a Victorian circus of wonders.

Step up, step up! In 1860s England, circus mania is sweeping the nation. Crowds jostle for a glimpse of the lion-tamers, the dazzling trapeze artists and, most thrilling of all, the so-called "human wonders."

When Jasper Jupiter's Circus of Wonders pitches its tent in a poor coastal town, the life of one young girl changes forever. Sold to the ringmaster as a "leopard girl" because of the birthmarks that cover her body, Nell is utterly devastated. But as she grows close to the other performers, she finds herself enchanted by the glittering freedom of the circus, and by her own role as the Queen of the Moon and Stars.

Before long, Nell's fame spreads across the world --- and with it, a chance for Jasper Jupiter to grow his own name and fortune. But what happens when her fame begins to eclipse his own, when even Jasper's loyal brother Toby becomes captivated by Nell? No longer the quiet flower-picker, Nell knows her own place in the world, and she will fight for it.

A gorgeously wrought exploration of celebrity, power and belonging, this is a historical novel unlike any other, with an unforgettable heroine at its heart.

## Discussion Guide

1. In her village, Nell finds herself "both intensely visible and unseen" (p. 5). How does Nell's perception of herself change throughout the course of the novel?

2. Both Jasper and Toby are haunted by Crimea. How does their experience in the war echo throughout the events of this book? What role does Dash play in the novel?
3. In Jasper's vision, Nell was Icarus, and he had crafted those wings from iron? (p. 124). The story of Icarus is referenced frequently in the novel. How do you think CIRCUS OF WONDERS adheres to or deviates from myth?
4. Throughout the novel, the performers are often referred to as "living wonders" or, later on, "living monsters." What effect does this have on their humanity? How does the change in wording reflect the shift in Jasper's own vision?
5. When Jasper takes a loan from the Jackal, a man warns, "Every so often he'll make an example of a man, when he knows the debt won't be paid. You should be careful." (p. 140). In what ways does this turn out to be true? How does the loan further fuel Jasper's ambitions?
6. Both Toby and Jasper note that "all of history is fiction." Where do you see evidence of that in this novel? How do stories, including fairy tales like "The Little Mermaid," come to illuminate the action here?
7. Nell's father sells her to the circus for 20 pounds, but when her brother, Charlie, comes for her to take her home, she tells him, "I like it here, Charlie. I'm happy." (p. 154). Why do you think Nell chooses to stay with the circus when she could be free? What does it cost her to tell her brother to truth?
8. Stella's dream for her circus is for the Flying Sisters to "belong only to ourselves" (p. 189). How does this theme recur for the women in this novel? By the end of the novel, do you believe Stella has achieved her goal?
9. "The line...between success and failure is so thin" (p. 198), Jasper reflects. Where do you think Jasper begins to step over that line? How does his desire for fame intersect with Nell's?
10. Toby keeps several secrets; among them are his many tattoos of "flowers, vines, fruits, tiny birds with their beaks dipped into peaches" (p. 209). What do you think these represent?
11. Jasper thinks that "if Toby is jealous of him, then his life is worth something" (p. 214). Discuss the complicated relationship between Jasper and Toby in this novel. What consequences does their jealousy and love have for those around them?
12. Nell forms a fiercely protective relationship with Pearl. What binds them together? How does Pearl's experience mirror Nell's and vice versa?
13. Animals, including Minnie the elephant, Benedict the mouse, and the wolf the metaphor, make frequent appearances in this novel. Why do you think this is? What do animals represent, and how do they interact with the characters here?
14. Toward the end of the book, Jasper notes that "human beings are the collateral of progress --- jobs lost, skills fallen away. Soon, there will be no need for most of mankind, the world ruled by those who have had the ingenuity to innovate, to evolve" (p. 299). Does this prove true in the novel? How can this be applied to the present day?

15. What do you think of the epilogue, which takes place 10 years later? Is it what you expected?

## Author Bio

Born in Scotland, Elizabeth Macneal is a writer and potter based in London. *THE DOLL FACTORY*, Elizabeth's debut novel, was an international bestseller, has been translated into 29 languages, and has been optioned for a major television series. It won the Caledonia Novel Award 2018. *CIRCUS OF WONDERS* is her second novel.

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