

Key Porter Reader's Guide
The Biggest Modern Woman of the World
By Susan Swan

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In the novel, Susan Swan has convincingly re-created the era of respectable freakdom, in which P.T. Barnum and other impresarios took giants and fat women, midgets and Siamese twins out of the sideshows and into the Victorian lecture halls of North America and Europe. Would you consider Barnum exploitative, or progressive?

Has society today become more tolerant of those who are different - race, sexuality, size and shape - than in Anna's era, or in our efforts to be "politically correct," has prejudice just become more disguised?

In the Victorian era, freaks were invited into the company of the crowned heads of Europe, and were paid salaries rivaling those of today's Hollywood superstars. Modern giants are not paid nearly so well; they are asked to open shopping centers and give public talks at places like the Niagara Wax Museum. Which scenario is the more enlightened?

Barnum borrowed the idea of using human freaks or prodigies from English museums. In England, skeletons of giants were displayed in museums as a way of educating the populace about normal human anatomy. For instance, Anna played Lady MacBeth at Barnum's museum; her midget colleague Commander McNutt played MacBeth. Is there an analogy today with events such as the Paralympics (physically handicapped sports events) or Famous People Players (mentally handicapped theater troupe)? Do these events exploit their constituency or do they succeed in helping to educate the public through the medium of entertainment?

Barnum's approach to physical difference would be considered politically incorrect today. How do you feel about his exploitation? What did it do and not do for Anna Swan? What message is author Susan Swan attempting to convey here?

How do Anna's fantasies add to the understanding of what it must be like to be

"not normal" in a normal person's world?

Swan claims all the facts in the novel are in the service of the marvelous, but every single biographical fact is true. Can you recognize the places where the author is taking literary liberties? Does it matter?

What responsibility does a novelist have to history and factual accuracy? How do you feel about the way Swan has used historical fact in her novel?

Susan conveys much of the storytelling through letters, testimonies, and journal entries from Anna Swan's friends - how does this lend an aura of authenticity to the novel? Does it make Anna's story more plausible?

Write your own book of giant etiquette. How would it be different from etiquette in Anna's day?

Literary critic and author Alberto Manguel said that Swan's use of fact in the novel "was like walking down the stairs and having the boards creak in unexpected places." What do you think Swan is trying to say about appearance and reality?

Several of Anna Swan's descendants challenged Susan Swan at a reading with regard to Anna's loss of virginity; Susan argued that she was never attempting to write a biography but wanted to pay homage to their ancestor by creating a Canadian legend out of Anna's real life story. Do you think she was successful?

Susan Swan thinks that it is through our vulnerabilities that we feel our full humanity because it leads to understanding ourselves and others. Anna's vulnerability leads to humiliating incidents such as Queen Victoria walking through the arch of her enormous legs and looking at her underwear. Do you feel closer to Anna through her humiliation?

No man in the novel can resist the temptation to exploit Anna's size. What do you think Swan is trying to say about men and their historical treatment of women?

Anna Swan's real grave in Seville carries the inscription "I will behold thy face in righteousness. I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness." (Psalm 15: verse 15). The inscription suggests that Anna thought she was too big to be feminine and her

body was not acceptable in the eyes of God. Is this still a persistent theme in our culture - that women carry a subliminal level of guilt because bodies don't live up to society's image of beauty?

"Anna Swan's story, despite its fantastic trappings, is an everywoman's tale" states Maclean's magazine. What universal issues does Swan touch upon in her novel?

Anna states in the novel "Height was my religion and my politics, for I believed that if everyone was tall like me, nobody would feel unimportant or unhappy." Discuss the delusions of power that come with size, for both tall people themselves and the delusions others hold about them.

Susan Swan was motivated to write about her distant relative Anna based on the humiliations in her own life of being six foot two at age twelve. For Susan Swan, the world always responded to her through her height and gender. In what ways is the tale of Anna Swan not about giantess as superwoman, but as giantess as larger-than-life-sized victim?

Charles de Gaulle pronounced that being tall gives people more status in life, but for author Susan Swan it was a liability growing up. Does being tall give people more status in life?

Characters as Politics

"When I wrote this novel," explains Susan, "I was aware that I was critiquing the standard of femininity I'd been brought up with, namely that women should be supportive and small and their hard unremunerated work mostly invisible." Has the status of women and the value of their role in society really changed since the novel's publication in 1983?

"I read into the life of the giantess Anna Swan my own immense nation's struggle to find a way to put its size to best use," author Susan Swan stated in a lecture about her writing. In what ways does English Canada resemble Anna Swan?

Susan also states, "I read into the saga of the bullying Kentucky giant, Martin Bates, a symbol of the American tendency to push other people around because he thinks he knows what's best for them. But Anna Swan spent

her life searching for a way she could fit into the world." Do you agree with Swan that Bates is a symbol of American bullying? Why or why not?

Susan Swan has said that to grow up Canadian is similar to growing up female because Canadians live next door to the most powerful nation in the world. Do you agree with this view? Why? Do you feel Anna Swan's story expresses this view?

It could be argued that Canada is seen by Americans as a resource to be exploited; the country is perceived as part of the American domestic market by extension is not a distinct culture in its own right. Is there a Canadian identity? How would you characterize that identity without using terms that state what Canada is not?

Menu

In order to get the cultural flavor of the book, here are a few options for menu's to serve upon the consideration of The Biggest Modern Woman of the World:

Desserts at Delmonico

- Anna Swan's choice of "Gloria and La Loi du Destin" black coffee and brandy; chocolate pudding "with dark runny intestines and hard white knobs of frosting."
- "Stars and Stripes" ice cream pie
- "La Temple de la Literature" fluffy white cake
- Blueberry Pies

New York Oyster Bar

- Oysters in all their incarnations - oyster soup, oyster stew, smoked oysters, oysters on the half-shell all accompanied by oyster crackers and cheap draft beer

Nova Scotia Staples

- Blue-nose potatoes, apples, squash, and zucchini from the garden
- Crowdie, a dessert of oatmeal and cream