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BOOKS

Review: *A Curious Man*

Robert Ripley traveled to 201 countries to find stories for his notorious museums

ONE OF THE PRIMARY REASONS TO read fiction is to escape the mundane for a short while and encounter the fantastic world an author has dreamed up. It's rare for a biography to offer such adventures, but if ever one could, it's *A Curious Man: The Strange & Brilliant Life of Robert "Believe It or Not!" Ripley* by Neal Thompson.

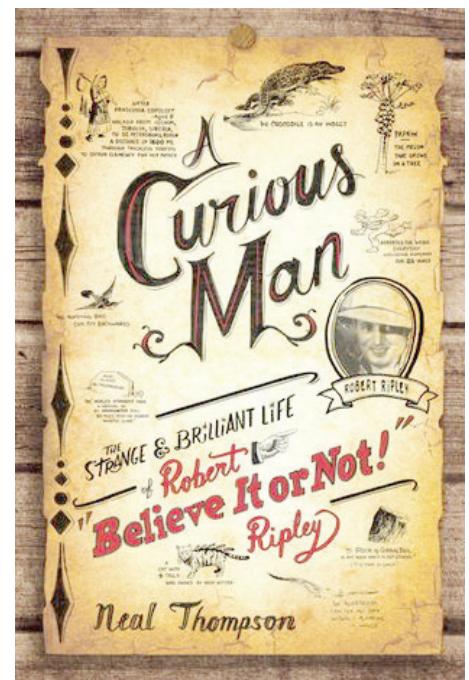
Thompson was inspired to write the book in 2007 after reading an article in *The New York Times* about Ripley and realizing little had been written about the man whose escapades captivated a nation, he says on his website. Yes, believe it or not, a single person inspired the endless coffee table books and museums in tourist-filled cities. Robert Ripley was a cartoonist who became a world-traveling millionaire. But believe the 373 pages will fly by in no time.

Ripley's story is truly that of the underdog eventually living the dream (and then some). As a stuttering, impoverished youth in California, he sometimes wore shoes made from newspapers covered in shoe polish, which is perhaps the worst substitute known to humanity. Upon his death in 1949, Ripley the millionaire had traveled to 201 countries, become famous for having beautiful women on his arm and an abundance of artifacts in his houses, and seen more than the average American would in several lifetimes. Oh, and he had a mansion on a private island.

Thompson's book not only tells the story of Ripley's rise to the top but also spends a delightful majority of the pages detailing his various exploits. Although the book is also an intriguing historical portrait of America in the early 20th century, even readers who are not history buffs will enjoy reading about the adventures of a man who spent his life traversing the globe in pursuit of the unbelievable, the strange and, at times, the grotesque.

There are a lot of adventures to fit in, so the book is fairly fast-paced. In addition, Ripley's affinity for sensational showmanship shines through in the story of his life. After all, the man once broadcast his radio show from a snake pit, just because. Even Indiana Jones wouldn't dare do that.

The book is filled with quotes and fun facts. It's easy to find oneself reading a lot



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in one sitting. Interspersed throughout the chapters are "Believe It" sections with interesting details about that part of the book. They appear to be facts that didn't quite fit into the narrative but were just too fascinating to exclude. If you're the kind of person who memorizes facts from Snapple caps, you might want to get your note-taking materials out because these tidbits are plentiful.

Thompson closes the book by maintaining that Ripley was the start of our fascination with all things odd. Although we know that the world is more jaded in this century and might be harder to surprise — thanks to endless reality shows about extremes — there are few who are unable to recognize the Ripley brand.

For those interested in learning about the ambitious young cartoonist who led a "strange and beautiful life," *A Curious Man* is a captivating read to start the summer.

• TERESA KLASSEN