

Showbusiness helped plight of Victorian disabled, says novelist

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A theatre historian's new novel has shone a light on the way disabled people, forced to make a living as freakshow performers, were treated in the Victorian era.

The Newgate Jig, the latest novel by Dr Ann Featherstone from The University of Manchester and based on her research , shows how performance gave what the Victorians described as 'human oddities' a chance to support themselves.

Not all, she says, were mistreated, however their lives were hard and to 21st century eyes, humiliating. Most had little choice.

The story features three performers making their living in the fictional

East London Aquarium and Waxwork Museum: Princess Tiny, ‘the world's smallest woman’; Herr Swann, ‘the German Giant’; and Moses Dann, ‘the Boneless Man’.

Dr Featherstone said: "Of course, Victorian showmen saw disabled people as a means of making a living, as objects to be shown on the fairground or in a penny theatre.

"But they had to look after their 'investment': a sickly performer would make no money; little men and women had to be 'handsome'; giant men and women elegant.

"If they were fortunate enough to find a reasonable employer, they were better than being in the workhouse or begging on the streets.

“They could have regular employment and income - until, of course, they lost their audience appeal, and no one would come to see them.

"Even though the hours were long and exhibition work was way beyond our idea of what is dignified, exhibitions could allow disabled people to a earn a living and have some independence.”

Some became famous after they died which is why, in the novel, Princess Tiny is terrified her body will be sold and her skeleton hawked around the fairs and side shows like the real life ‘Irish giant’ Charles Byrne.

She is loosely based on the real-life ‘Sicilian Fairy’, the 19 inch high Caroline Crachami - who wore fashionable clothes, sang the latest songs and conversed with spectators, who would have paid extra cash to see her.

Crachami's bones are kept at the Royal College of Surgeons' Hunterian

Museum - a fate she would have probably been very unhappy with, says Dr Featherstone.

She added: "The Newgate Jig offers another perspective on [disabled people](#): here are characters who are more than their disability.

"Herr Swann is funny and protective of the little Princess. Moses Dann is sharp-witted and sharp-tongued, and looks out for the young and vulnerable Barney Kevill.

"And while the Little Princess might be only 24 inches high, she has big ambitions."

Provided by University of Manchester

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