



A Curious Man: The Strange and Brilliant Life of Robert "Believe It or Not!" Ripley

Neal Thompson

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A Curious Man is the marvelously compelling biography of Robert "Believe It or Not" Ripley, the enigmatic cartoonist turned globetrotting millionaire who won international fame by celebrating the world's strangest oddities, and whose outrageous showmanship taught us to believe in the unbelievable.

As portrayed by acclaimed biographer Neal Thompson, Ripley's life is the stuff of a classic American fairy tale. Buck-toothed and cursed by shyness, Ripley turned his sense of being an outsider into an appreciation for the strangeness of the world. After selling his first cartoon to *Time* magazine at age eighteen, more cartooning triumphs followed, but it was his "Believe It or Not" conceit and the wildly popular radio shows it birthed that would make him one of the most successful entertainment figures of his time and spur him to search the globe's farthest corners for bizarre facts, exotic human curiosities, and shocking phenomena.

Ripley delighted in making outrageous declarations that somehow always turned out to be true—such as that Charles Lindbergh was only the sixty-seventh man to fly across the Atlantic or that "The Star Spangled Banner" was *not* the national anthem. Assisted by an exotic harem of female admirers and by ex-banker Norbert Pearlroth, a devoted researcher who spoke eleven languages, Ripley simultaneously embodied the spirit of Peter Pan, the fearlessness of Marco Polo and the marketing savvy of P. T. Barnum.

In a very real sense, Ripley sought to remake the world's aesthetic. He demanded respect for those who were labeled "eccentrics" or "freaks"—whether it be E. L. Blystone, who wrote 1,615 alphabet letters on a grain of rice, or the man who could swallow his own nose.

By the 1930s Ripley possessed a vast fortune, a private yacht, and a twenty-eight room mansion stocked with such "oddities" as shrunken heads and medieval torture devices, and his pioneering firsts in print, radio, and television were tapping into something deep in the American consciousness—a taste for the titillating and exotic, and a fascination with the fastest, biggest, dumbest and most weird. Today, that legacy continues and can be seen in reality TV, YouTube, *America's Funniest Home Videos*, *Jackass*, *MythBusters* and a host of other pop-culture phenomena.

In the end Robert L. Ripley changed *everything*. The supreme irony of his life, which was dedicated to exalting the strange and unusual, is that he may have been the most amazing oddity of all.

From the Hardcover edition.

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