



# The Lives of Dwarfs: Their Journey from Public Curiosity toward Social Liberation

*Betty M. Adelson*

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"The Lives of Dwarfs is extraordinary in its range and vision. Beautifully written. Totally absorbing."—Ursula Hegi, author of *Stones from the River*

"As a little person, husband, and father of a little person, I dream of the day when dwarfs attain full acceptance in society. The Lives of Dwarfs provides a giant step in that direction."—Rick Spiegel, former president of Little People of America

"This important book makes it possible for both average- and short-statured people to challenge our collective understanding of dwarfism as a synonym for diminishment or as an array of cute and evil fairy-tale figures. The libratory work of this book is to invite us all to reimagine dwarfism as a livable experience and tenable way of being in the world."—Rosemarie Garland Thomson, author of *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*

"A work of compassionate scholarship. A unique contribution to the literature of physical deformity and social isolation and a gift to the individuals whose personal struggle this is."—Linda Hunt, actor

Historically, they have borne the labels "freaks" and "oddities"; they have been collected as pets, displayed as spectacles, and treated as comic relief. Now, for the first time, in this elegant and comprehensive volume, the lives of dwarfs are explored in all their fullness and humanity.

Spanning the centuries from ancient Egypt to the present, this unique social history chronicles the various ways this population has been exploited, describes their strategies for coping, and notes the persistent influence of mythology upon perceptions of them by others. The narrative also highlights the lives of eminent individuals and contains a thought-provoking account of the representation and participation of dwarfs in the arts, enhanced by outstanding color photographs. Betty M. Adelson, the mother of a daughter with dwarfism, brings special insight and sensitivity to the research. She traces the widespread mistreatment of dwarfs over the centuries, engendered by their being viewed as curiosities rather than as human beings capable of the same accomplishments as people of average height, and deserving of the same pleasures. For much of their history, dwarfs have resorted to exhibiting themselves: because of social stigma no other employment was available.

Only in recent years have short-statured individuals begun to challenge their position in society. Medical advances, new economic opportunities, and disability legislation have led to progress, mainly in Western nations. Advocacy groups have also formed in countries as diverse as Chile, South Korea, and Nigeria. Adelson compares what she refers to as the "small revolution" to similar social and cultural awakenings that women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, and persons with disabilities experienced when they identified themselves as a community with shared goals and obstacles.

Written with passion, grace, and the dignity that the subject deserves, *The Lives of Dwarfs* will not only revolutionize current perceptions about the historically misrepresented dwarf population, but also offer

pause for thought on issues of disability, medical treatment, height, beauty, and identity.

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