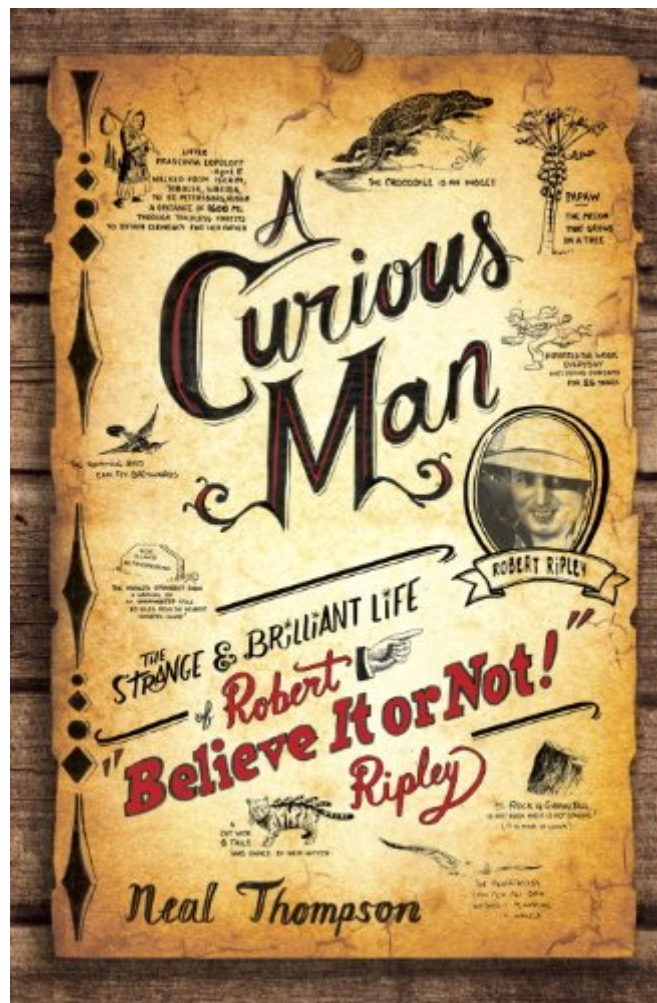


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# A Curious Man: The Strange And Brilliant Life Of Robert "Believe It Or Not!" Ripley



## Synopsis

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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## Customer Reviews

I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, reading Ripley's "Believe It or Not!" cartoons, which as a young boy I thought were fascinating. In the early 1950s I also pestered my parents to buy me a ticket to a Ripley museum in Florida. But, until now, I never really knew who the guy was - and still don't in depth. Thompson's book is a quick, easy read - he did this, he went there, he had many girl friends, and so on, but mostly the book is filled general descriptions of Ripley's life. There's little detail, and virtually nothing to give you an idea of the inner Ripley. It may be that he was just such a private man, guarded in his feelings, that Thompson didn't have much to go on. What I missed most were Ripley drawings, for practical purposes completely absent from the book, and a discussion of his style and its evolution, if there was any. Maybe Thompson faced permission, copyright problems in using the cartoons. I think inclusion of the drawings and more discussion of Ripley's style would have boosted the book a star in my estimation.

I love this book. The subject is quite and enigmatic man. Awkward and socially inept as a boy, he compensated for his shortcomings by being a very curious person. His curiosity brought him fame and fortune and a life he could never have predicted from his early beginnings. With the internet and instant information available at our fingertips now, I doubt he would have become so famous in our time. But he traveled where people only dreamed of going and brought back fantastic tales and

objects that captivated his audience. The other benefit of not having lived in our times was that it was harder for people to question his veracity and the authenticity of his claims.

When I saw Mr. Thompson interviewed on The Colbert Report, Stephen Colbert asked, "Did you like Mr. Ripley?" At the time, I thought this was a strange question to ask. I don't think I've ever heard anyone ask a biographer ask this question. After reading the book, I totally understand the question. I really didn't like Robert Ripley. And, this makes for a pretty strange book. I don't necessarily have to like the subject of a biography to like the book (I've read several books on Adolph Hitler that were spellbinding), but this book was simply okay. Ripley did have a fascinating life, to a point. But, after you understand that he overcame a troubled childhood, and an exciting young life, he becomes rather boring. Yes, he has a lot of money. And, yes, he does travel a tremendous amount. But, in many ways, he does so in a superficial manner. He has no interest in really learning about the people of the lands in which he travels. He only wants to see the oddest, tallest, strangest, etc. of the area. He wants to see what he can (often to verify his pre-determined views) by 4:00 p.m., so he can get back to do his drinking. After a few pages, this gets to be boring. Like some others of the era, once he has his personal wealth, he becomes an extreme conservative. Of course, he continues to have his share of lovers throughout his life. This book is not awful, but not extremely good, either. As noted, it's just "okay".

A fascinating man who lived the kind of life that many successful driven people do. When huge amounts of money start rolling in the excesses can become ridiculous. That's what happened with Ripley. He worked like a fiend, he drank, he womanized, he traveled, he bought people, houses, pets, and boats. Unfortunately, the book seemed to dwell way too long on the later years of his life and becomes tedious. The last hundred pages or so need serious editing. Ripley was a generous man to his family and the people he felt helped him become successful. Some people have criticized his treatment of his researcher, Pearlroth. Pearlroth, however, loved his job and Ripley did help him send his son to school and did leave him \$5,000 in his will which was a lot of money in 1949. I agree that Pearlroth should have been given more public recognition for his work, but I am not sure that he wanted that recognition. If he was unhappy he got his revenge by outliving Ripley by 31 years. He was 90 when he died while Ripley was only 59. He continued to work for the Ripley organization until 1975 when he was 82. Ripley was a very interesting man and the book is very well researched. However, I wished that most of the last 1/3 of the book wasn't there as Ripley's life became a cliché in an outrageous Hefner sort of way, Too much of a sad thing.

Before today's media celebrities, there was Ripley - part showman, artist and creative entrepreneur, he lived a life as curious as the subject of his cartoons. Like many people I grew up seeing the Believe It or Not shows and cartoons, but never thought much of the man behind such curiosities. While some things are more clear now, other parts of Ripley are even more mysterious than ever. We follow him on his classic "rags to riches" story so we learn a lot of how he ended up making more than many movie stars. But the in's & out's of his personal life will probably take you further down the rabbit hole that is his mind.

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