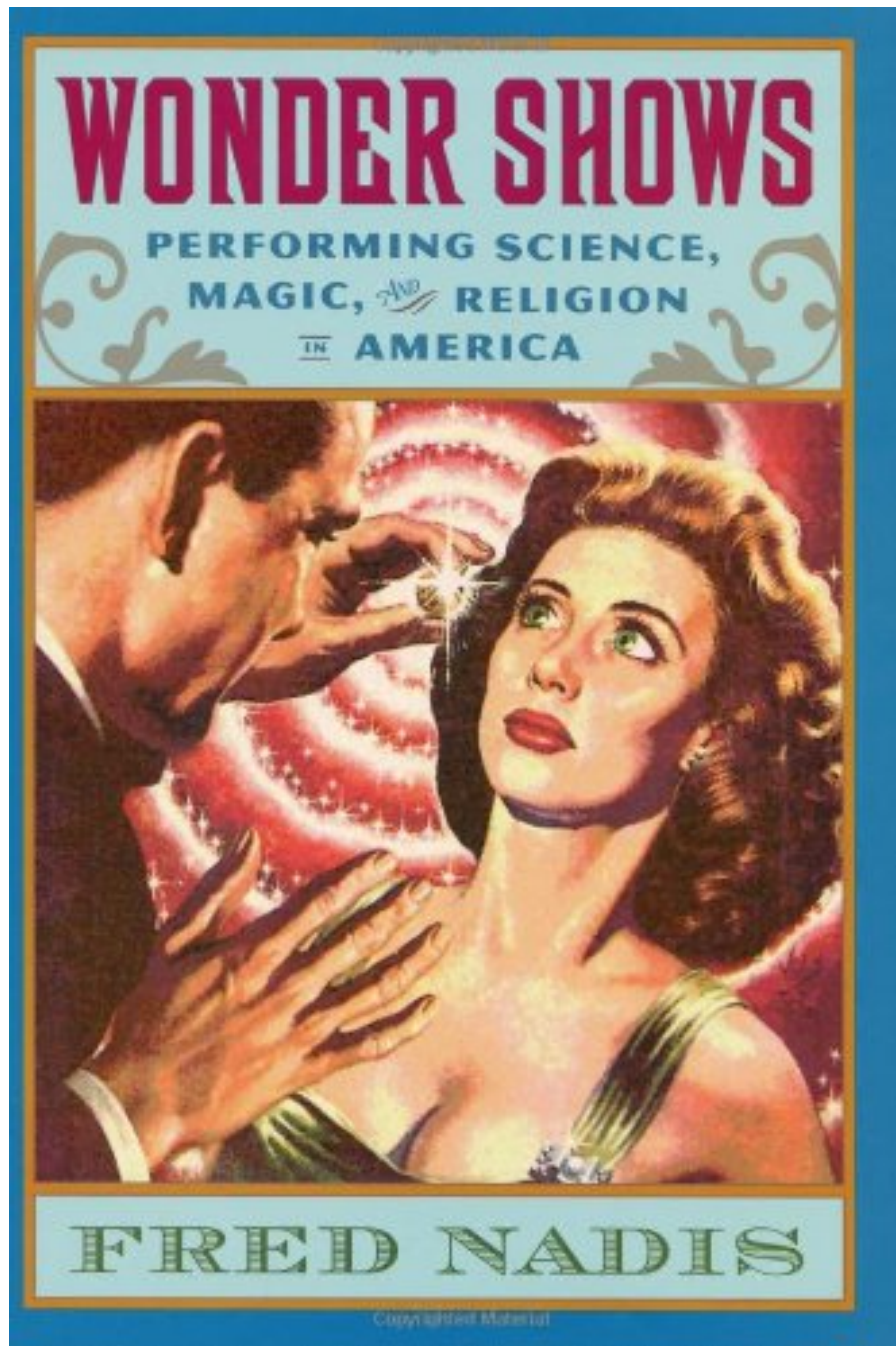


**WONDER SHOWS: PERFORMING SCIENCE,  
MAGIC, AND RELIGION IN AMERICA BY  
FRED NADIS**



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## Review

"This is a fascinating examination of the boundaries between science, religion, and magic."

## About the Author

Fred Nadis is the author of two books **The Man from Mars: Ray Palmer's Amazing Pulp Journey** (2013), and **Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic and Religion in America** (2005). He has a Ph.D. in American studies from the University of Texas at Austin and currently lives and works in California. He has published essays and articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* and other magazines.

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# **WONDER SHOWS: PERFORMING SCIENCE, MAGIC, AND RELIGION IN AMERICA BY FRED NADIS PDF**

Imagine a stage full of black cats emitting electrical sparks, a man catching bullets with his teeth, or an evangelist jumping on a transformer to shoot bolts of lightning through his fingertips. These and other wild schemes were part of the repertoire of showmen who traveled from city to city, making presentations that blended science with myth and magic.

In *Wonder Shows*, Fred Nadis offers a colorful history of these traveling magicians, inventors, popular science lecturers, and other presenters of “miracle science” who revealed science and technology to the public in awe-inspiring fashion. The book provides an innovative synthesis of the history of performance with a wider study of culture, science, and religion from the antebellum period to the present.

It features a lively cast of characters, including electrical “wizards” Nikola Tesla and Thomas Alva Edison, vaudeville performers such as Harry Houdini, mind readers, UFO cultists, and practitioners of New Age science. All of these performers developed strategies for invoking cultural authority to back their visions of science and progress. The pseudo-science in their wonder shows helped promote a romantic worldview that called into question the absolute authority of scientific materialism while reaffirming the importance of human spirituality. Nadis argues that the sensation that these entertainers provided became an antidote to the alienation and dehumanization that accompanied the rise of modern America.

Although most recent defenders of science are prone to reject wonder, considering it an ally of ignorance and superstition, *Wonder Shows* demonstrates that the public’s passion for magic and meaning is still very much alive. Today, sales continue to be made and allegiances won based on illusions that products are unique, singular, and at best, miraculous. Nadis establishes that contemporary showmen, corporate publicists, advertisers, and popular science lecturers are not that unlike the magicians and mesmerists of years ago.

- Sales Rank: #1345806 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Rutgers University Press
- Published on: 2005-01-13
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.34" h x 1.05" w x 6.44" l, 1.66 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 336 pages

Features

- Used Book in Good Condition

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#### Most helpful customer reviews

5 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

A fascinating look at a different era

By A. H. Schlenger

*Wonder Shows* was entertaining since it depicts an era where science was relatively unknown to the general public, so magic, science and the 'con' were all related. It's interesting to look at it from a present point of view where we can look at many of those ideas and say 'how quaint' or 'how did people fall for this stuff?', but a hundred years from now, what will people be saying about what we generally believe to be true? A well-written and researched book, entertainingly written by Mr. Nadis.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

A Rousing, Informative Tale.

By Walter McTeague

*Wonder Shows* provides a fascinating look at the boundary between science and showmanship. Nadis tells the reader of the strange connections between science, magic, and mysticism--some of which persist to this day. He also provides a spellbinding account of the competition between Edison and other innovators in the early days of the electric utility industry. An important book, and an entertaining one as well, *Wonder Shows* is a must read.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

*Wonder Shows: Performing Science and Magic in America*

By Science Educator

By bringing in scientific wonders for my shows, students (and teachers) get to see some amazing science demonstrations that they otherwise would not. The Tesla Coil, the Van DeGraaf Generator, Franklin's Bells, the Windham Machine, Hero's Steam Engine and much more.

Even something as common as liquid nitrogen is amazing and wondrous to an elementary school student. Although, when I use it to make a balloon dog shrink and then come back to its original size, even the teachers' jaws drop.

Frankly, I love to see eyes shine with delight at the wonders of science.

Buy the book, then got to [www.greatassemblies.com](http://www.greatassemblies.com) to bring the Wonders of Science to your school or event.

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