



The Outsider: The Life and Times of Roger Barker

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Roger Garlock Barker was one of the most extraordinary—and least known—figures in the history of psychology. Just months after becoming chair of the psychology department at the University of Kansas in the late 1940s, Barker decamped with his family to the tiny backwoods town of Oskaloosa, population 725. It wasn't escape Barker was after, but revelation. What Jane Goodall would do with chimpanzees in Tanzania, Barker wanted to do with his own species—*homo sapiens*—in its natural habitat. He hoped to understand nothing less than the “naturally occurring behavior” of “free-ranging persons.”

Barker stayed in Oskaloosa not for a one-off round of observations, but for a lifetime. He and his wife, Louise, joined its churches and social clubs. He sent his children to its schools. And for 25 years, Barker, his colleagues and even Louise and the three kids gathered meticulous data on the ebb and flow of everyday life in what he believed was a quintessential Midwestern town. He locked up his findings in the vault of an old bank building on the town square, in a rickety suite of offices that would rise to international renown as the “Midwest Psychological Field Station.”

The iconoclastic Barker saw his work as revolutionary, and by the early 1960s, establishment figures in psychology could no longer ignore his prodigious and painstaking output. Barker won hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant money and was decorated with the same prestigious awards given over the years to better-known luminaries like B.F. Skinner, Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky. Margaret Mead visited Barker's field station, as did Washington officials, foundation presidents, and scholars from universities as far afield as Norway and Australia.

But the shining new path Barker had illuminated for psychology faded suddenly into oblivion, the victim of forces Barker felt powerless to control.

In *THE OUTSIDER*, award-winning journalist and author Ariel Sabar tells a cinematic story of Barker's improbable rise and fall. The page-turning narrative takes readers on a journey into the life and times of one of psychology's most original thinkers, raising fascinating questions about what separates the Darwins and Freuds of science from the sometimes just-as-brilliant also-rans.

Cover design by Hannah Perrine Mode.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ariel Sabar won the National Book Critics Circle Award for his debut book, *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for his Family's Past*, which was excerpted in *The New York Times Magazine* and translated into several languages. His second book, *Heart of the City*, was called a “beguiling romp” (*New York Times*) and an “engaging, moving and lively read” (*Toronto Star*). He is a contributing editor at *Smithsonian Magazine* whose writing has also appeared in *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *the New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, and *Washingtonian Magazine*. He is a magna cum laude graduate of Brown University and an award-winning former staff writer for the *Providence (RI) Journal*, *Baltimore Sun* and *Christian Science Monitor*, where he covered the 2008 presidential campaigns. He has taught creative writing at The George Washington University and lectured on the crafts of journalism and memoir at Brown, Johns Hopkins, and Georgetown. He has been interviewed about his books and articles on NPR, PBS NewsHour, and the BBC World Service.

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