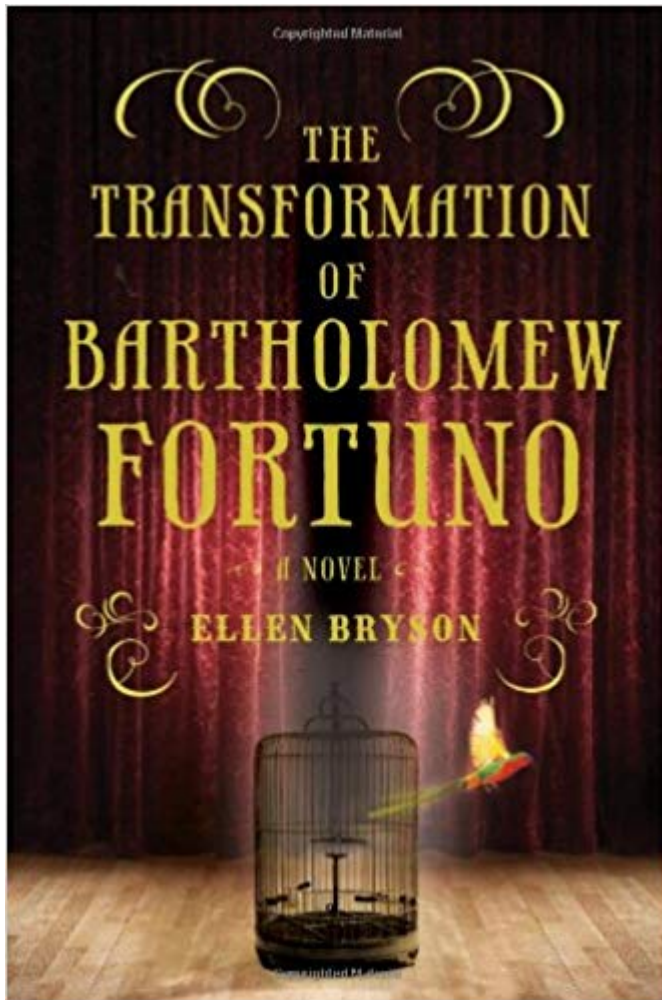
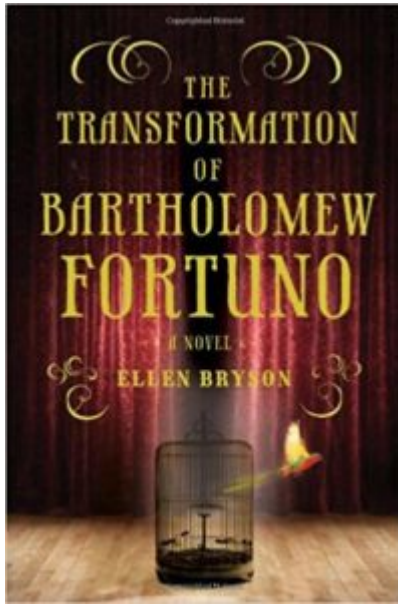


## “But, That’s Just Not True!”



I loved novels and short stories long before I loved the study of history. As a child, history came to me through textbooks. In contrast to my other reading, it presented two problems: I couldn't lose myself, and I couldn't find the author. The way I liked my history best was in fiction. Esther Forbes' *Johnny Tremain*, Elizabeth George Speare's *Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Rosemary Sutcliff's *Eagle of the Ninth*: these were my beloved doorways to an imaginary past. I didn't like these books better because they weren't true. I liked them better because you could dream your way into them. As I learned to recognize the writer's craft in setting a scene or penning a line of dialogue, I didn't lose my connection to the fictional world. Instead, I felt another connection to the authors who had made those worlds. I wanted to be like them almost as much as I wanted to be like brave Johnny Tremain or gentle Mercy Wood.



Like all authors of historical fiction, Bryson has to make not one kind of reality, but two.

None of that came to pass, of course. Not only am I neither particularly brave nor gentle, I'm also completely incapable of writing fiction. The latter realization arrived in college. Around the same time, I began reading really good works of history—the kind with authors. The combination sent me to graduate school in history. There I learned to think rather than to dream my way into the past, and to admire the historian's crafts of fact-based analysis, reconstruction, and detection. But I still loved biographies—they had characters and plots, even though I knew better than to call them that. I also loved those moments in monographs when the author's power seemed to go beyond accuracy to connection, and even to mystery, to that shock of simultaneous intimacy and difference, that sense of knowing without quite understanding, which thrilled me as fiction always had. I slowly learned to cultivate an historian's imagination, one that steered between the Scylla of no invention (Plagiarism) and the Charybdis of too much invention (Making Things Up). I kept reading novels, but swore off historical fiction for years. I believe I was afraid that if I indulged even a little, I might throw aside my copy of Jack Greene and curl up in my office with the American Girl series. In the end, though, I couldn't sustain my ban. I slipped first with Iain Pears' *Instance of the Fingerpost*, then his *Dream of Scipio*, and on it went, down to Kathleen Kent's *Heretic's Daughter*. When Jill Lepore and Jane Kamensky wrote their own novel, *Blindspot*, I purchased it head held high. And now, *Common-place* has decided to review historical fiction such as Ellen Bryson's *The Transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno*, set in P.T. Barnum's American Museum. Let the revels begin.

Like all authors of historical fiction, Bryson has to make not one kind of reality, but two. She must create the reality of the historical moment she has chosen as her setting, and she must create the reality of her own fictional world within that setting. That this is no easy task is clear in the first few

pages. Bryson's fact-ridden portrayal of New York in 1865—its size, its street plan, its class divisions, its mourning bunting hung for Abraham Lincoln—shines the light of historical reality so brightly that it dissipates the mist of the fictional world. You can think, but you cannot dream your way in. But then Bryson brings us inside the museum. And there, her fictional world—the real world of her characters—stirs to life. The title character is the book's narrator, "Bartholomew Fortuno: The World's Thinnest Man since 1855." Living with him in the museum are Matina, sweet, calm, and immense; Ricardo the Rubber Man; Emma the Giantess; Alley the Strongman; and an African-American named Zippy (more on him later). All of them live, eat (with spectacular variability), and work in the museum, competing with each other for the approval of Barnum, his wife, and the crowds who pass through every day. Bartholomew classifies them into groups: at the top, "the highest among us," were the True Prodigies, "men with flippers, armless girls, parasitic twins." Below them "were the regular Prodigies," whose "special gifts emphasized different aspects of human beings—their hunger, their strength, their purity." Next came the Exotics, and lowest on the list were "the Gaffs, self-made Curiosities who faked what came to the rest of us naturally" (20). Barnum's museum consists mainly of "regular Prodigies;" their constrained but peaceful existence is disrupted by the nighttime arrival of a beautiful, red-haired woman wrapped in a veil. Bartholomew is desperately curious: who is this competitor? Why is Barnum so solicitous of her? And then the World's Thinnest Man, long devoid of desire for anything but abstinence in all its forms, is suddenly besotted. The woman, Iell Adams, is revealed to have a beautiful, flowing beard. The transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno has begun.

What follows is a coming of age story. Bartholomew, traumatized in childhood, had never accepted his man's body or assumed a man's role in the world. By starving himself, he had found his way to the fantastical nursery garden of Barnum's freaks. And by imagining his self-starvation as art, he finds a way to believe that his sheltered existence transcends the mundane world of the crowds who stare and gasp. Iell, for her part, is glamorous, sorrowful, and cultured; in one of the mock advertisements Bryson cleverly inserts in the text (along with handwritten notes and museum orders for the day) Iell is described as "a woman of great beauty with a man's beard and of figure so beautiful and comely, she was previously Mistress to kings and arbiter of high fashion" (83). Iell encourages Bartholomew's attentions, partly due to his kindness, and partly due to his willingness to brave the streets of lower Manhattan to bring her little packages of opium from a mysterious shop in Chinatown. Once past the awkwardness of her initial pages, Bryson draws those streets deftly and subtly, so that the sights and smells of Civil War-era New York and the emotions of her characters augment rather than diminish each other's realities.

Inspired by his attraction to Iell, Bartholomew eventually reconsiders whether his shocking thinness expresses his true nature. As he does so, he becomes an immensely more sympathetic character. Before this transformation, Bryson risks alienating the reader by making her central character flatly un insightful about himself and those around him. But it's a risk that pays off. Eating his three

daily lima beans and treasuring his isolation, Bartholomew at the start of the story is indeed the Thinnest Man in the World. There is almost nothing to him. And then, after a while, there is.

Does this book specifically appeal to—or repel—readers who are also historians? Two characters resonate differently, I suspect, for historians than they would for lay people. The first is the “son of former slaves,” Zippy, whom Barnum exhibits as “the missing link,” and whom Bartholomew describes as possessing an “elongated head and simian propensities” (20). Who is this man? Is he mentally retarded, is he traumatized, is he, or Barnum, manipulating racial expectations in a dangerous marketplace? Bryson hints at each possibility, but offers no real portrait of the character. So Zippy seems unreal in Bryson’s fictional world, and unreal in 1865 New York. I couldn’t help but lament that it was Zippy who remains thus opaque and distant. Must a work of fiction, whose author can roam the archive of the imagination, fail to create the same kind of person that history so often fails to document? The second character who left me uneasy is none other than the bearded beauty herself, Iell. There is, it turns out, a very unmysterious mystery at the heart of this book: Iell is literally hiding something, and no one who’s read any cultural history in the last twenty years should fail to guess what it is.

My slight impatience with Iell stemmed not from the lack of suspense, but from the fact that Bryson seems to limn her as the tragic mulatto, inevitably victimized by her betwixt and betweenness (although race is not, in fact, her secret). This reaction left me aware of my own nature—half historian, half novel lover. Does that make me a True Prodigy, uniquely able to resist the suspect trope, or a Gaff, a creature of “no inherent worth whatsoever” (20), desperate to conjure a complication where none exists? Neither, of course: just a reader, suddenly feeling the reality of the fictional world wear thin. As Iell blurs into an archetype, there’s less and less sense of an author’s distinctive vision, less shock of the alien melding with the familiar. Instead, the alien begins simply to feel familiar, and the specific to feel general. And that may be a failing in both history and literature.

The virtues of this book, however, far outweigh such imperfections. Iell, despite her scene-stealing beauty and oddness, is not the center of the book. Nor is the center the carefully drawn scenes from historic Manhattan or the American Museum. Instead, the center is Bartholomew, in all his prideful, self-delusional, kind, and, at last, hungry glory. I can’t say I wanted to become him, like the characters of my beloved childhood fictions. But I do want to make him dinner. And I’d love to raise a toast to his creator.