



# The Illusionists

*Rosie Thomas*

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## The Illusionists Rosie Thomas

From the bestselling author of the phenomenally successful *The Kashmir Shawl*

London 1885

As a turbulent and change-filled century draws to a close, there has never been a better time to alter your fortune. But for a beautiful young woman of limited means, Eliza's choices appear to lie between the stifling domesticity of marriage or a downwards spiral to the streets – no matter how determined she is to forge her own path.

One night at a run-down theatre, she meets the charismatic Devil Wix – showman, master of illusion, fickle friend. Drawn into his circle, Eliza becomes the catalyst of change for his colleagues – a dwarf, an eccentric engineer, and an artist – as well as Devil himself. And as Eliza embarks on a dangerous adventure, she must decide which path to choose, and how far she should go when she holds all their lives in her hands.

## The Illusionists Details

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Author : Rosie Thomas

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# From Reader Review *The Illusionists* for online ebook

## Amy says

It's quite fitting that *The Illusionists*, just like an actual illusion, is entirely not what it seems.

Unfortunately, while illusions and magic acts are generally enjoyable in their unpredictability and twisting of reality, Rosie Thomas's novel is not.

I picked up *The Illusionists* expecting to read a thrilling and eccentric novel surrounding a modern woman's intrigue with the London's theatrical world in the late 1800s. "A dangerous adventure" of a young woman's journey towards emancipation through art. That's what the novel's synopsis implied, after all. Instead, I got two emotionally distraught male performers, a wax-modeler (also male), a psychotic engineer (guess what? Male) and a run-down theatre. Oh, and featuring as the love interest of *every single one of the aforementioned characters* is Eliza – a middle-class woman who poses as a life model on Tuesdays, and considers herself "forward-thinking" (she's not).

Eliza was infuriating – and even more infuriating was the author's evident conviction that Eliza was a woman of her own means. Sure, Eliza did things that were not technically societally acceptable for her class, but let's have a little more girl power! If you're going to have a strong female protagonist and write about her journey towards emancipation, then don't only introduce her on page 66! Don't let her slip backwards into conformity just as she's finally getting somewhere! Don't let the men always overshadow her! Don't let her become a damsel in distress just to showcase the courageous virtues of your male characters!

(And yes, I am putting Eliza's actions into the context that she was a woman in London in 1885. Come on. Loosen your corset a little, at least, Miss Eliza.)

On top of all of this, I was also astounded to note that Thomas switched perceptions between her characters as if even she didn't know who she was supposed to be writing about. One moment I would be in Eliza's head, but then the next moment Devil's outlook would take over without warning. That's the danger with writing in third-person perspective – you have to be so careful about switching between characters and throwing the reader all over the place. And Thomas fell right into that trap.

Around two-thirds of the way through, I couldn't take it any more.

But I persevered, because I'd already struggled through 380 pages. I could handle two hundred more. (I'd just like to point out that a novel this long-winded could definitely have been cut down by at least two hundred pages.)

Then I got to page 454, and my face did this:

At which point I decided Eliza was not worth my efforts (I'd screamed at her for just about the entire novel),

and that my hope for humanity had diminished by a further eighty percent or so.

What a waste of good ideas. *The Illusionists* had so much potential, and it really was quite upsetting to see it spiral towards inadequacy, then below that to distastefulness. Additionally, Thomas has a truly beautiful style. It's a pity she threw it away.

**Rating: A *very generous* 2/5 because it started off relatively well.**

**This review was also posted on All Things Amy.**

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## **Vicki says**

Full review here: <http://lilmissvixreads.blogspot.co.uk...>

My book of the year so far!

Every once in a while you find a book that hooks you from the very first page, and doesn't let go until long after you've finished it. *The Illusionists* is one of those books.

From the minute that I read the blurb for this novel I knew I was going to love it, and I was not disappointed. From the very first page you find yourself completely immersed in Victorian London; the sights, sounds and smells so well described you feel as if you are there walking alongside Devil as he goes about his daily life. The novel also provides a fascinating insight into the world of Victorian magic and illusion, revealing the amount of work behind the scenes that was necessary to make a show a success. From the guillotine to the famous bullet trick, you'll never look at magic in the same way again.

Devil Wix is a character worth a paragraph of his own. A brilliant showman, he is also witty and loveable, and I found myself willing him to succeed. Haunted by bad memories from his childhood, he is a man determined to prove his worth in the world, and along with his band of misfits he sets out to put on a show like no other.

The story moves at a relatively slow pace, and at just under five hundred pages it's a hefty novel, but one that is well worth taking your time over. The characters are compelling, darkly so at times, and I found myself looking forward to immersing myself in their world for an hour or so each evening. It's been a while since I've been so eager to find out how a book ends, yet at the same time so reluctant to say goodbye to the characters and the world that they inhabit.

Told in third person primarily from the perspectives of Devil and Eliza, it is clear from the start that this is their story, and you get the feeling that had the narrative reflected a different point of view, Carlos' or Jasper's in particular, we as readers would have a completely different perception of Devil. There are moments in the novel that you ought to hate him, yet you instantly forgive him, just as Eliza does.

As the Palmyra blossoms under Devil's ownership, the man himself undergoes a transformation from an opportunist showman into a husband, and eventually a father. I found myself falling more in love with him as the novel progressed - and the ending image of Devil with his son on his shoulders is purposely a million miles away from the Devil that we met on the first page. All of the characters mature and grow as the novel

takes place over the span of twelve years, a long time to cover but so expertly managed that it never feels drawn out and all makes perfect sense.

The story is not unlike Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants* in its themes of love triangles, misfits and showmanship, but at the same time it is entirely different from anything I have ever read before. The only predictable part of this novel was Devil and Eliza's relationship, but even this doesn't run smoothly, and as events begin to take a darker turn you find yourself wondering which characters will actually make it to the end.

5/5 stars: So much more than a love story, *The Illusionists* is a story of friendship and fellowship, of magic and illusion, of life and death. It is the most absorbing and atmospheric book that I have read this year by a mile! Read it and you won't be disappointed.

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### **Bernadette Robinson says**

I gave this 3.5 stars or 7/10.

Whilst I did enjoy this bittersweet story, I felt it wasn't one of the best that I've read by her. You really do need to check out this author's back catalogue as she has written some amazing stories that have stayed with me.

This is a gothic tale, that I found to be a slow burner about Eliza and how she becomes the linchpin to how this story evolves ~ she is drawn in by the enigmatic Illusionist Devil Wix and his performing friends. She appears to have them all eating out of the palm of her hand, but as her future becomes uncertain who will become her saviour. The story is mainly set around a theatre where they all perform their different acts. With lots of infighting between one another as to whose performances bring in the biggest audiences, Devil wields his cunning and soon manipulates things in his favour.

Sad to say I found this a little over long and lacking, I found myself with my mind wandering at times yet I still was invested in the story enough to find out how everything panned out.

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### **Cat says**

Apart from the danger of choosing a book based on its cover, we should all be aware of the dangers of basing one's choice on a book's synopsis. We read one thing, buy the book because that thing sounded great, but then the actual story is a bit different.

This was what happened to me with *'The Illusionists'*. I saw it was about a young woman called Eliza who was a bit too far ahead for her time, and who decides to join a theatre company after meeting one of its charismatic performers, a man who went by the name of Devil Wix. Against a Victorian London background, I was promised "a dangerous adventure", and thus I decided to buy this book.

Don't get me wrong, there was danger. But the book starts off with Devil Wix meeting a dwarf who calls himself Carlo Boldoni and the two of them managing to get a job at the decrepit theatre Palmyra, run by the

execrable Jacko Grady. All great, but where was Eliza, the young woman who decides to make her own path in life in 1885, from my book's synopsis? She didn't appear until page 64. By then I had already understood that 'The Illusionists' was not about a woman going against society's conventions, but about a whole lot of different things.

There was Devil and Jasper's background, managing the theatre and coming up with new tricks, four men in love with the same woman, that woman in love with one of those four men, and what else can I say? This is a book with a lot of things, and comprises some different genres. There's romance, historical fiction, a bit of fantasy.

There was also quite a large cast of characters but, very positively, they weren't difficult to memorize and led to no confusions.

The tricks were probably the best of this book. Not only were they described in the stage, but we were also told how everything worked. The setting of the story in London, at the end of the nineteenth century, add an interest to it.

So why the three stars? Why not four?

For me Thomas's 'The Illusionists' is a clear example of a story with a lot of potential and poor execution. The book is more than five hundred pages long and it is not just the telling of a group of people trying to strive in order to bring back from the ashes a ruined theatre. Devil gets the the Palmyra from Grady and becomes its manager. And then we have the entire story of managing the theatre, looking out for ways of bringing in money. In the midst of this, there was also Devil's relationship with Eliza, which was very interesting to follow in the beginning, but turned out to be one of this book's disappointments for me.

Remember the young woman from the synopsis who didn't want to settle and live the life society intended for her? Well, in the end she does.

There was also the matter with Heinrich Bayer, the awkward Swiss engineer who build automata. Even though his end was one of the most enthusiastic, if creepy, parts of the book, I couldn't quite agree with it. I didn't like Carlo's end as well. I understood, but felt it was shame, especially considering the fact that he "disappears" for some parts in the middle, after making up most of beginning of the story.

What I mean is that I felt that the characters, and the book in general, had a lot of potential, but Rosie Thomas felt the need to write a long, slow, book, full of descriptions that became, most of the times, boring. Then, because it was a long story, she had to put a lot of characters; obviously something (in this case a lot of 'somethings') had to be missing.

All in all, I was expecting more. In content and quality, not in length.

I had never read anything by Rosie Thomas. I didn't even knew she existed. Apparently there's going to be a sequel to this book, with the Palmyra still making an appearance. I don't think I will read it.

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## Laurie says

"The Illusionists" has a premise that should be great: set in 1885 London, a group of people-stage magicians,

a scientist who makes life sized mechanical dolls, an independent woman who leaves her middle class home to become an artist's model, an artist who makes amazing wax models and props. Add in a highly competitive theater owner and a lot of sexual tension between, well, nearly everyone and it should be a story that one couldn't put down. Sadly, while the book is okay- I enjoyed it- I can't call it great.

While the characters are interesting- Devil Wix the fast talking stage magician; his new partner Carol Boldoni, a dwarf who is a world class contortionist and illusionist; Jasper Button the artist and childhood friend of Wix's; Heinrich Bayer the introverted engineer who adores his mechanical dancer; and Eliza Dunlop, who has a very modern outlook for someone of her class and time and seems a bit of a Mary Sue- none of them has much depth. We get backstory on Devil and Eliza, and a bit on Button, but nothing on Boldoni or Bayer. The setting is wonderful; the decaying theater brought back to life and the hustle of the behind the scenes work- I loved the descriptions of the magical illusions. The pace is odd, though. There are a couple of events of great tension and excitement that would seem to be the climax of the story, but they don't resolve anything. The first one, around the middle of the book, just happens with no explanation. Why the character does what he did there and what his goal was are never explored. The violence at the end upsets everyone, but it changes no one; they just go on about their lives.

I enjoyed the book but it could have used a good editor to help with the pacing and characters.

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### **Greg says**

I very much enjoy the magician/illusionist genre. But this book is really, at heart, a romance. There seems to be a lot of books published in the last year or so set in London in the late 1800s, but that might be simply because I choose and read books in this fascinating era. All of the main characters are involved in a theatre dedicated to illusion, but the story is basically about a rather liberated (for the time) woman, Eliza, who is attracted to Devil, a man who wants his very own performance theatre. I do recommend this for people who are looking for a good historical romance with a dash of magic on the side. The author, Rosie Thomas, appears to be rather prolific and her short biography on the book jacket indicates a life dedicated to grand adventures.

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### **C.W. says**

This engaging and evocative novel presents a different side of Victorian England than we're used to seeing - one where charlatans and hucksters vie to make a living by peddling magic tricks to a gullible and impoverished public.

Though *THE ILLUSIONISTS* can feel a bit crowded at moments plot-wise, its characters are riveting, especially the unreliable and conniving protagonist, Devil, whose ambition to open his own theater sweeps up a variety of characters into a maelstrom, including pick-pocketing dwarf Carlo Bonomi; Heinrich Bayer and his eerie automaton, Lucie; and Jasper, an artist who helps pull off the illusions and is romantically drawn to enigmatic Eliza, a young woman who dreams of personal emancipation.

Eliza appears late in the story but her relationship with Devil forms the heart of the novel, as she leads him on his own merry dance fueled by her fight to control her destiny. Ms Thomas excels in portraying their oft-

contrary partnership, while spinning a web of deceit that eventually catches up with them. However, several plot threads seem to come and go without much dramatic denouement and it becomes challenging to decide whether Devil is an otherwise decent man trapped by the misogyny and corruption of his era or merely an irredeemable rogue. The ambiance alone, however, makes the effort worthwhile, as Ms Thomas paints in expert colors a portrait of the seedy desperation and volatility of England as it struggles under rigid sovereignty and the horrifying chasm between wealth and destitution.

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### **Cheryl says**

I liked this book. It was way on the darker side than I expected. Which is a nice present. Sometimes the magical world can come off as just that "magical", The author did a good job of portraying the other side of this profession. Not the one as an audience member sees as all fun and illusions but the daily grind of this work and the people who live it. Kind of like carnies people at a carnival.

Don't let the name Devil confuse you as he turned out to be a complex character but also a likable character. In fact, all of the characters were good. Don't get me wrong. It is just that the pacing of the story was slow. Which I would not have had a problem with if I had fully embraced the characters and the story itself. I felt that there was a lot of dialect and at times that was all there was was talking. Overall, a good book. So if you are looking for a book about magic with the old English/Victorian feel to it than you might check this book out.

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### **Kara says**

Did not finish. Probably should have been edited to 50% of it's actual length. Got tired of waiting for something to happen, though part of me wishes I'd had the fortitude to stick with it.

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### **Pallavi Sharma says**

\*\*\*DNF\*\*\*

This is one of the books that I DNF'ed this year (which is very rare!! and it might be 2nd or 3rd one this year).

The story revolves around a set of people with different backgrounds who join together to run a theatre which gives shows with illusions and very intelligent props.

Good Points:

1. Lovely Victorian Setting.
2. Good strong characters.
3. Above average narration.

Bad Points:

1. No strong Plot.
2. Blurb doesn't match with the content.
3. Part 2 is a collection of words that makes sentences that makes paras that makes chapters and story ends in.... Oh I did not finish it, so I don't know.



This book had so much potential to get reader's attention that It pains me to see how it turned out. Even if the author rewrites it, I am ready to read it, Just for the sake of knowing that this story turned out well.

## Happy Reading!!!

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### Tonya says

“Love, seduction, magic and illusion collide as Rosie Thomas takes us on a spellbinding journey through an extremely shadowy world.” ?Daily Express

An enchanting, Dickensian tale of desire, magic, and the Victorian theatre, perfect for fans of Sarah Waters, The Night Circus, and Water for Elephants?from the beloved and bestselling author of The Kashmir Shawl

London, 1885?a challenging place for a young, beautiful woman of limited means. But Eliza is modern before her time. Not for her the stifling, if respectable, conventionality of marriage, children, domestic drudgery. She longs for more. Through her work as an artist’s model, she meets the magnetic and irascible Devil Wix?a born showman whose dream is to run his own theatre company.

Devil’s right-hand man is the improbably-named Carlo Bonomi, an ill-tempered dwarf who is a gifted magician and illusionist. Carlo and Devil clash at every turn and it falls to Eliza to broker an uneasy peace between them. And then there is Jasper Button: mild-mannered, and a family man at heart, it is his gift as an artist which makes him the unlikely final member of the motley crew. With self-styled impresario Devil at the helm of the Palmyra Theatre, acrobats and illusionists astonish audiences with their death-defying stunts and the magic of mysterious new inventions?like electricity. Backstage, secret romances, box-office dramas, and power struggles inevitably simmer, and intermittently boil over.

Framed by Rosie Thomas’s rich portrayal of the rapidly changing world of late-Victorian England, The Illusionists takes readers on an unforgettable journey with a cast of passionate, larger-than-life figures who are inextricably linked through their shared love of the stage and the theatre, and who will make you laugh and break your heart. And as Eliza is drawn into their seductive, precarious, and exciting bohemian world, she risks not only her heart, but also her life...

--My thoughts. Not what the blurb says. The cast is set, that is about it. Seems like a lot of books are set in London these days. That is the rage. Don't get me wrong, this book is good, just not what I thought it would be. Romance, historical fiction? Where does it lie? Not sure.. Devil is a character I grew to like... something about him. I enjoyed the journey, liked the behind the scenes. It isn't as glamorous as we all think. It is all indeed smoke and mirrors so to speak.

Will I read the next one? I am not sure. I might, just to see where they are now... Maybe it will get better.. ;)

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### Jessica Knauss says

The Illusionists invites comparisons to the two magician films that came out ten years ago, The Prestige and The Illusionist. Like those films, this book delves into the behind-the-scenes lives and competitions between

magicians and maintains an air of mysterious romance. From the beginning, the author finds magic and wonder in the sooty, hungry streets of Victorian London.

The descriptions for this book tend to focus on Eliza. However, Eliza is not the first character we meet. It takes quite a few pages to get to her, and she remains aloof for some time. This story is really an ensemble piece, with each character as unusual and well developed as the others. It's not long before the performing dwarf Carlo and the haunted magician Devil fall in love with Eliza. She's already being pursued by Devil's childhood friend Jasper, but the triangle is treated so subtly, it doesn't get stale. Perhaps the saving grace is that Eliza clearly favors Devil, but doesn't veer from her stubborn intention to take care of herself.

The reader roots for Devil's schemes and Eliza's goals and boos the bad guys off the stage. The author has done her research and has a talent for evocative detail. This is sure to be a favorite for any reader with a passing interest in Victorian England or the golden age of magicians.

As the book went on, the stakes got higher and higher.(view spoiler) I was disappointed in the ending, and that may be because I had grown so fond of the characters that I just wanted it to keep going.

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### **Sonja P. says**

A big old no. Hey, guess what? Saying I could have you anyways and her resistance excited him is, uh, about rape. Not sexy. not good. Pretty goddamned bad. Also, there were several other instances that were just a big old pile of shit, and on top of that, not that interesting. Boooooooo. Do not want or like or anything like it.

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### **Rissa says**

3.5 ??

Stared off really stong and pulled me into its world instantly but it started to lag. I really enjoyed the characters and the world but something was just missing.

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### **Mary says**

I like him well enough, as it happens. I only can't stand the bloody sight of him, with his grin and his yard-long legs and the damned ooze of his pleasure in being himself.

There was a moment when I thought, "What exactly is this book about?" It seemed a little confused as to whether it was a thriller, a mystery, or a romance. It went one way, then it switched directions and went a different way, and the blurb was misleading, to say the least. In the end, I decided it was the story of a relationship, and I didn't mind so much because I love character-driven fiction, and this had a cast of fascinating characters, and their growth, especially that of Devil was believable. I thought about how much he had changed from the beginning of the book to the end, and I loved the story just for that. I think this would have a been a stronger book had the plot been tightened up, but the historical detail was wonderful;

the author described many of the stage acts in vivid detail, and there were several unpredictable twists that gave the book a certain, fleeting tension. If you liked other historical fiction about performers; e.g. *The Magician's Lie* or *Water for Elephants*, you might like this.

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