

## American Follies

### Norman Lock

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Norman Lock's dark, carnivalesque *American Follies* mines the seamier side of the 1880s through a woman's febrile imagination and New York sojourns.

Ellen, who was once Henry James's typist, now helps Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton with the newest edition of their book. She is pregnant and grateful for the empathy of her firebrand employers, even if they are wont to spar with each other. The lovable suffragist duo are only one layer of the novel, which, in escalating, satirical swerves, brings Ellen's tendency to view life as a hyper-real amalgam of omens and injustices to the fore.

The novel takes broad liberties with timelines and beloved figures. It includes Pinkerton agents, clairvoyants, and a submarine. Ellen befriends Margaret, a dwarf from P.T. Barnum's circus; encounters Herman Melville; witnesses tenement poverty and death in Bellevue Hospital; visits Sing Sing, and hears about prison reform. She's a lightning rod for other people's good causes, though she herself stays out of the fray. But childbirth prompts a postpartum nightmare that sets Ellen and her friends on a perilous rescue mission.

Believing that her infant son was kidnapped so that the Ku Klux Klan could make an example of him at a Memphis rally, Ellen, her friends, and godlike Barnum travel south to save him. The ensuing, blistering satire of race relations in America puts the suffragists and circus eccentrics in the midst of the Klan's gathering. The aftermath involves a near-lynching and minstrelry, all of which hammer home how ugly and absurd history is in hindsight, and how little changes.

The fascinating historical novel *American Follies* features lavish period details and unsettling alternative world building, warping expectations and standing out for its rapier wit.

KAREN RIGBY (July / August 2020)

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