

★ **The Fascination****Essie Fox**

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Essie Fox's novel *The Fascination* is a scintillating cabinet of curiosities.

Theo—whose mother died in childbirth and whose father is, for him, a question mark—grows up love-deprived, hidden on a country estate whose grandeur belies its horrors. Keziah and Matilda, the twin granddaughters of a Bohemian seer, are exploited by their father for his tonic scheme after their fairy tale-telling mother dies. Theo first meets the twins by accident, and the trio are too soon parted; they remember each other ever after, though. In time, Theo's fortunes change; and the twins are rescued from the carnival by Captain, who hears fairy magic in Matilda's voice.

Fox's is a world wherein magic still exists—or is conjured by those who desire it most. Theo is exposed to perverse exhibits when he's young by a grandfather who both abhors, and wishes to possess, curiosities of nature and deviations from what's "proper"; Theo's virtue is unblemished, despite this heritage. And as she blossoms into young adulthood while Matilda remains child-sized, Keziah finds comfort in a childhood story—and among the rejected people who take her in.

Exalting those whom society relegates to the shadows and exposing those who do vulnerable people harm, this is an enchanting story set in an erstwhile world marked by voyeurism, showmanship, and superstition. Herein, surgeons are regarded as vulgar; a cleft lip or dwarfism puts newborns at mortal risk; and violent, exploitative appetites run rampant. Theo and Keziah unite against such forces once they reunite. They also rely on the aide of kindhearted people (including Theo's once-governess, a man covered in hair, and maligned family friends) as they work to rescue Matilda from a horrific fate.

Love blooms in the engrossing final acts of *The Fascination*, a historical novel that's well worth the price of admission.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November / December 2023)

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