

## Tonic and Balm

**Stephanie Allen**

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Decades after twentieth-century pharmaceuticals, urbanization, and television put traveling medicine shows out of business, Stephanie Allen's *Tonic and Balm* resurrects one worthy of giving prescription drugs, industrialization, and on-screen entertainment the boot instead.

Doc Bell's Miracles and Mirth Medicine Show is plucked out of obscurity by a twelve-year-old runaway stranded between dirt roads and corn fields. Mesmerized by a distant glow in the night sky, Ephraim ventures close enough to make out a crowd, stage, and theatrical antics so alien to his reality that they could be a mirage. By the time the full impact of the piano, banjo, skits, laughter, stunts, gasps, and the "freak" (*especially her!*) hits Ephraim, his wandering has lost its lust. Neither the home he left behind nor any romps awaiting him around the corner could possibly compete with this.

Subsequent chapters feature other narrators who, like Ephraim, reveal nothing about themselves or their circumstances until it is absolutely necessary. This technique of divulging only whatever the storytellers see, hear, feel, or remember in the instant they become aware of it imbues every unfolding scene with palpable intimacy.

Ma and Pa Fleet, a sword swallower, Sheba, Queen of the Nile, and others take turns hosting chapters, exposing their rawest, most vulnerable selves while dispensing their take on the others. Characters and relationships are simultaneously developed from the inside outward and from the surface to the core.

Never lacking in forward momentum, tension, or suspense, Stephanie Allen's *Tonic and Balm* could easily be a page-turner except that the sooner the pages are turned, the sooner Doc Bell's medicine show must be summoned back to history. The lure of finding out what happens next pales against the opportunity to spend more time with a captivating clan of cast-offs who were only misfits prior to stumbling upon one another.

LINDA THORLAKSON (January/February 2019)

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