



## Thomas the Rhymer

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Award-winning author and radio personality Ellen Kushner's inspired retelling of an ancient legend weaves myth and magic into a vivid contemporary novel about the mysteries of the human heart. Brimming with ballads, riddles, and magical transformations, here is the timeless tale of a charismatic bard whose talents earn him a two-edged otherworldly gift.

A minstrel lives by his words, his tunes, and sometimes by his lies. But when the bold and gifted young Thomas the Rhymer awakens the desire of the powerful Queen of Elfland, he finds that words are not enough to keep him from his fate. As the Queen sweeps him far from the people he has known and loved into her realm of magic, opulence—and captivity—he learns at last what it is to be truly human. When he returns to his home with the Queen's parting gift, his great task will be to seek out the girl he loved and wronged, and offer her at last the tongue that cannot lie.

## Thomas the Rhymer Details

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Author : Ellen Kushner

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### Rebecca says

More than enough has been written about bards and elves (although not as much back when this book was written). The two have always gone together. But this one does stand out. It's an odd book—there's very little in the way of actual plot. It's told in four parts, from four different perspectives. A bard befriends an old couple and falls in love, gets swept away to Elfland for seven years, comes home, and eventually grows old and dies. That's about it. There are no grand quests or major battles, no need to defend humanity or Elfland, no souls to be saved. To some extent, it's a book about how life changes us, and how hard it is to come home changed.

It's a lovely thing, though. Without any strong narrative propelling it forward, it has time to linger on subtleties of character. More like literary fiction than fantasy, in a way. And the lack of driving plot doesn't mean that it's pointless or boring—it's just a story about how to deal with getting your heart's desire. It's bittersweet and beautifully written.

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### Werner says

This was a book I read sometime in the 90s (1995 is a rough guess), after getting it from the Science Fiction Book Club. It's a masterful re-telling of the Scottish folk legend of Thomas of Erceldoune, a 12th-century minstrel (who was apparently an actual person), who was said to have been abducted by the queen of Elfland to serve her for seven years, as the price of a kiss, and to have returned with the gift --or curse-- of never being able to say anything but the truth. The author's treatment is scrupulously faithful to the Middle English ballad version of the tale (which I'd read previously), but fleshes it out much more richly.

Kushner uses first person narrators for the four-part novel, each part narrated by a different human character (Thomas himself is one of the four). Each character, male and female, is delineated very realistically, coming alive for the reader, as does the Fairy Queen herself --granted, she represents a kind of being that doesn't actually exist, but you feel that if the fae were real, she's exactly the sort of person their queen might be. The author's knowledge of and feel for the period is obvious; she evokes medieval Scotland very effectively, and she clearly knows the legends and literature of that day (each part is introduced by period epigraphs). Her version of Elfland has a subtle tie-in to Arthurian legend, which I found a nice touch. She also doesn't censor the erotic elements in the old legends, in which the fairies were full-bodied beings who could be sexually attracted to humans, and vice versa (for instance, she interprets the "kiss" in the tale --probably correctly-- as a convenient shorthand for something more... involved); but she handles this quite tastefully, with nothing explicit.

Even though she's writing fantasy, and describing events that can't occur, Kushner writes in a way that's psychologically true, and that expresses real-world truths; she also evokes genuine caring for all of her important characters, and spins a bittersweet tale that conjures real emotional involvement. (It also doesn't hurt that, in my opinion, she's one of the best English-language stylists writing today, considered just in terms of her mastery of and treatment of language.) This novel earned the World Fantasy Award when it was published; and it couldn't receive any less than five stars from me.

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### **Lisa says**

A sensually told tale of Thomas the Rhymer - pre, during and after his abduction by the Queen of Elfland, with whom he resides for seven years, returning with her 'gift' of a tongue that can tell no lies.

Fleshing out the myth and letting us get to know Thomas as he might have been before, with a tongue that flattered and lied easily, the first part of the book was the strongest for me. And while I enjoyed the plunge into Faerie, I found that Thomas's return and remaining life, as told by the girl he'd loved before the Faerie Queen, didn't quite live up to what preceded it. But still, this was a pleasant and dreamy read with which to happily while away a summer evening.

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### **Suzanne says**

I'm maybe half-way through Thomas' interminable time with the Queen of the Elves, and I just can't force myself to read any further. I really can only echo others who say that the first section, Gavin's, was entrancing. The character himself was charming (if a bit of a female fantasy of what a good husband should be), his descriptions of the other characters make them come alive, and the action moves at just the right pace. Thomas, on the other hand is, as others have said, arrogant, smug, shallow, self-centered, self-absorbed and very much a Mary Sue -- I think I know where Rothfuss got his inspiration for the Lay of Felurian. The other characters in his section are simply two-dimensional objects that exist to reflect him, and the action, such as it is, is repetitive and boring. Nothing happens, and it takes a long, long time to do it.

It is entirely possible that Meg's and Elspeth's sections redeem the work, but at this point, I want nothing more to do with Thomas.

Count me among those who do not understand how or why this won the World Fantasy Award. It must have been a slow year.

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### **Katya says**

Another take on the legend of Thomas Learmount. Beautiful language, absence of violence - these are the book's pluses. However, that is about it. The story itself lacks something very important - the point. I do not mean the point of the legend of True Thomas, but the point of this very book. Thomas lives here and then he lives there... so what? What was the point of his stay with the Elves? What did the riddle he had resolved while living among the Elves have in common with the rest of his life? In general, what was the whole book about? just retelling of the old legend? Why bother? The legend is still more beautiful.

There is no logic in main characters actions:they just act as the author tells them to - never mind the logic of their own! I am giving three stars just for the style, but it is difficult to believe that written with such a beautiful style the book lacks so much in the area of ideas...

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### **Alice says**

This was such a disappointing book.

I really liked the premise, of combining myths and folklore and songs. But Kushner seems to have forgotten to tie that in with a character I wouldn't loathe. Thomas was self-centered, vain, selfish, dishonest, and unable to think about anything other than his penis for longer than an hour. He says at one point that he was enchanted to follow the "Elf Queen" (hated that "elf" and "fae" were interchangeable) to her domain, but I really didn't see him putting up a fight. I see him later longing to go back, feeling like this world's just a stopover.

But that wasn't the most irritating part. The worst was that Kushner seems to assume that the reader is familiar with the tales she's retelling. Several elements were brought up and never explained in a way that made any sense to me. The great riddle that's central to the plot fell flat. Maybe it made more sense if I'd heard the original song, but I hadn't.

Overall, the cost of admission to this book was too high, and the payoff wasn't worth it. I was severely disappointed. It was such an interesting premise. Don't read this unless you're already familiar with the songs and legends. And even then, you have those songs and legends to go by. I'm sure they're more compelling.

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### wanderer (Para) says

Lovely but far too short, *Thomas the Rhymer* is a retelling of an old tale by the same name, which tells the story of a poet and harper who is by the Queen of Elfland to serve her for seven years and returns being unable to tell a lie.

*What songs do you sing to them in Elfland? There, where all the songs are true, and all stories history...I have seen lovers walking in those glades, with gentle hands and shining faces, their feet light upon the grass, where little flowers shone in the shadows as though the lovers trod the starry firmament. And some I almost recognized: Niamh of the Shining Hair with Irish Oisian; Fair Aucassin with his gentle Nicolette; and two kingly men with their arms around one graceful, merry queen...other faces, other figures strangely arrayed, each one with their own story, no doubt, and now at peace, with all stories done.*

The story is divided into four sections, each from the point of view of another character: Gavin, a farmer who gives Thomas shelter, Thomas himself, Gavin's wife Meg, and Elspeth, a girl he loved. Thomas himself starts off as a bit of a frivolous womaniser (slightly reminiscent of Kvothe at points...), but grows up quite a bit over the course of the story. Fittingly, the writing style is poetic and lyrical and absolutely wonderful, and each character has their own distinguishable voice, though along with the POV split it does create a certain distance from the story. There are also many Scottish words scattered throughout the text (bonnie, bairn instead of child, weird meaning fate...), which gives it a nice atmosphere as well.

Overall, I found the book very enjoyable, a perfect short read for during a slump. The writing, my general weakness for atmospheric retellings and folktale-inspired stories, the large focus on everyday life, the insights into how he composes his poems, the bittersweet taste the ending left...wonderful. Still, I wish certain parts were expanded upon more and I'm not sure if the POV split worked for me. Perhaps I should have read on the original story/poem beforehand.

**Enjoyment:** 4/5

**Execution:** 4/5

**Recommended to:** fans of retellings, prose nerds

**Not recommended to:** those who hate it when parts of the story are glossed over, those who hate it when parts of the story are glossed over, anyone looking for fast-paced stories

*More reviews on my blog, [To Other Worlds](#).*

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### **Lisa Jensen says**

Ellen Kushner takes a traditional Scottish ballad and weaves it into something magical and beguiling in this lovely, haunting tale. The ballad sings of a minstrel lad abducted to Elfland for seven year's to serve as the Elf Queen's lover, then returned to the mortal world. A footloose and carefree young minstrel, Thomas gives himself up to the quicksilver Elf Queen and the succulent delights of her bower. Yet, he is tormented by her small, careless cruelties, by the elves' constant game-playing, and by his lonely isolation as a mortal in a magical realm.

While Thomas' Orpheus-like descent into the eerie glamor of the Elvish underworld is the centerpiece of the story, Kushner provides humanistic grace notes in the characters of a down-to-earth farm couple who love Thomas like a son, and a wild-spirited but careworn country lass who wins young Thomas' heart and witnesses the bittersweet epiphany of the story's conclusion. Both fairy tale and love story, full of lusty balladeering, poetry and heartbreak, this novel is truly enchanting. I felt bereft when it was over, as if the portals of Elfland had been shut behind me forever.

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### **Nikki says**

It took me a while to get into this version of Thomas the Rhymer. The story is told in four voices: the voice of an old man who takes Thomas in almost as his own son, Gavin; the voice of Thomas himself; the voice of Gavin's wife, Meg; and the voice of the mortal woman who loves Thomas, Elspeth. The part in Gavin's voice didn't grip me so much, but when I came to Thomas's part, I could barely put the book down. It's not full of action, and Elspeth doesn't play a part in Thomas coming back from Faerieland. Instead, it's full of emotion, which builds right through the story until the final line -- so innocuous on its own -- makes my heart ache. Without saying any more about it, I love the end.

There are some beautiful passages in the book, and some smaller lovely stories -- the story of the dove, for one, and the story of Thomas' invisible servant, for another. And some of the characters are really wonderful, particularly saucy Elspeth.

It's an interesting take on the story of True Thomas, Thomas the Rhymer, and I'm glad I kept on with it, after not really getting into Gavin's part of the story. I thought it was rather magical, really.

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### **Althea Ann says**

I love novels like this; that flesh out a traditional tale while remaining true and faithful to the source material. (Like Robin McKinley's 'Beauty', Donna Jo Napoli's 'Zel', etc). This book retells the legend of Thomas the Rhymer, a minstrel taken under the hill for seven years of service to the faerie queen, who returns with the

'gift' of being unable to tell a lie. It brings to life Thomas and those who know and love him, letting a reader feel not that what they'd heard previously of the tale was wrong, but that they have been given a privileged glimpse of heretofore unknown details and truths of the past. It's not really an exciting or action-packed book, but it is a lovely and magical one.

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### **Kyle Muntz says**

A really interesting, extremely unusual novel. Its sort of an example of what fantasy might have been like if Tolkien had never existed, with a deeply character driven storyline and a setting very rooted in old England and its mythology, sort of like Spencer or something. Its largely a down to earth, almost realist novel, interrupted by 100 pages of the strangest, most surreal storytelling I've seen in a while. (A friend of mine compared this section to the wizard knight by Gene Wolfe, and, for one of the first times ever, a comparison to Wolfe actually made sense.) Its unbalanced in a way that maybe isn't productive, but driven by intensely powerful feeling and imagination. A weakness, though, is it starts slow, and took about 70 pages to really start working. But then, after an otherworldly, surreal hunt scene, interrupted by music and a riddle, a dove starts crying tears of blood, and you understand what makes this book so exceptional. I read all but ten pages of this on a cross-country flight and it was an intensely powerful experience, even if it was difficult to get into

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### **Joseph says**

The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream.

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### **Susan Barchard says**

This is my all time favorite book about Faerie. I've been reading about and studying Faerie since I was a small child. And I am an AVID reader. Ellen Kushner has done more to bring the world of the Fae alive than anything else I've ever read.

Critics of this book need to understand that Thomas the Rhymer or Tam Lin is a legend. It is what it is. For Kushner to have made him pleasing to all would have been to stray from the legend. For the book to have had a more climactic ending would have been to stray from the legend. It was a story of a Bard taken by the Faerie Queen because of his physical beauty and his musical talent - a story of his adventures in Faerie and his subsequent return to the real world. The man, though chauvanistic and skirt chasing to some, is a very apt description of what a handsome and talented wandering minstrel's life was probably like.

But, if you ever want to experience a peek into the enchanted world of the Fae and if you ever want to just get into a magical frame of mind, this is the book to read!

I am a Faerie artist and I re-read it from time to time because it inspires me. While there are many authors whose work I love, no other book takes me to the world of Faerie like this one. Kudos to Ellen Kushner!

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### **kari says**

What a quietly beautiful book. At a first glance, it's a small story - but it has such depth, such insight, it's so full of raw emotions and witty humour, it touches your heart and doesn't let go easily. If at all.

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### **Minli says**

Thomas the Rhymer is a worthy and beautiful novelization of the ballad, elegantly told from the perspective of four people--Gavin and Meg, the elderly couple who takes on Thomas as a surrogate son, bookend Thomas's own experience in Elfland, and the fourth by Thomas's mortal love, Elspeth, after he returns to the human world with his 'gift' of soothsaying. Kushner's language is so subtle, lyrical and magical, some passages near left me in tears. She has such a flair for words (and this book is all about that--the truth of words). I really admired the shifting perspectives, and how all four were needed as separate pieces of the puzzle to come together.

The reason why I remain conflicted over the book, is because it put me through every emotion a human could feel. I'm not sure I enjoyed that feeling at all, though it attests to its power. Some parts were funny, some were unbearably painful. It hurt. I felt Thomas's anger and loneliness, living his half-life in his servitude. (Might I also add, Kushner's language also extends to some very sexy passages, particularly because they are so restrained and perfectly worded, hoo.) Some bits I reveled in the normality of country life. I felt Elspeth's chapped hands and Meg's hearty food.

I can't help but come away from this book without seeing it as a tragedy. I can't see his time in Elfland except as a CURSE, shiny and glitzy, but otherwise detrimental to his humanity. I felt so much pain for Elspeth at the end, knowing he was gone, knowing he had loved others. I wanted more passion between them--I wanted it to prove that mortal love could be just as passionate as whatever Thomas had with the Elf Queen. Elspeth is certainly worthy, I loved their arguments at the beginning, but it felt like she got the short end of the stick in pretty much every way. Sigh. I also wanted more exploration of Thomas's soothsaying (and whether it was really a gift?).

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