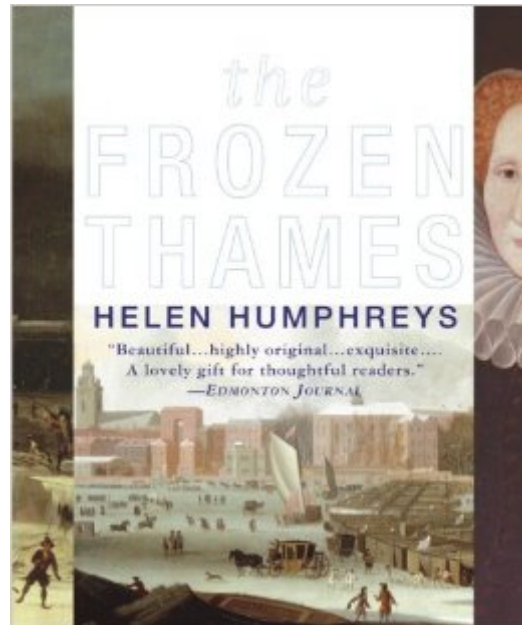


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# The Frozen Thames



## Synopsis

In its long history, the river Thames has frozen solid forty times. These are the stories of that frozen river. So begins this breathtaking and original work, which contains forty vignettes based on events that actually took place each time the historic Thames froze solid. Spanning more than seven centuries—from 1142 to 1895—and illustrated with stunning full-color period art, *The Frozen Thames* is an achingly beautiful feat of the imagination—a work of fiction that transports us back through history to cast us as intimate observers of unforgettable moments in time. Whether we're viewing the magnificent spectacle of King Henry VIII riding across the ice highway (while plotting to rid himself of his second wife) or participating in a joyous Frost Fair on the ice, joining lovers meeting on the frozen river during the plague years or coming upon the sight of a massive ship frozen into the Thames—these unforgettable stories are a triumph of the imagination as well as a moving meditation on love, loss, and the transformative powers of nature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

All of the stories in this book relate to the freezing of the Thames over the years, how lives were affected by the changed terrain. The rebuilding of London Bridge corrected the problem, but the tales remain. In this intimate collection, replete with colorful period art, the author revisits the Thames through that unique period, from 1142 to 1895. Humphreys' rich imagination infuses her vignettes, people from each era contemplating the phenomenon, from flowing water to solid ice. In 1142, Queen Matilda of England has been locked in battle with her cousin Stephen for seven years.

Laying siege for the last three months, Stephen hopes starvation will weaken Matilda, barricaded behind the thick walls of her Oxford castle. At night, starving folk in the castle huddle together like dogs for warmth. Under the cover of blinding snow, a nightgown-clad Matilda and three of her men descend from a tower window, their rope light-colored linens tied together. In nightcaps and gowns, soldiers and queen reach the ground, stealthily navigating between the fires of Stephen's troops, the swirling snow giving cover. The frozen Thames delivers Matilda from her cousin to fight another day. Years pass. In 1309 a brown hare scurries along the "long white river". The fellow unleashing the dogs in pursuit of the hare does not think "it is fair to bring what is meant for the felled out onto the ice". He tips the odds in favor of the hunted animal, but not so obviously to will be caught, or lose the promised small wage, bottle of ale and loaf of bread he has been promised. This man could freeze in the bitter cold of the frozen Thames, but his life is of little import; it is the greyhounds that are treasured: "the dogs are the dogs of noblemen" who wish to be entertained on a long winter day. In 1506 three boys skate across the Thames; one of them falls behind his companions. Surrounded by so much ice, the lagging boy is suddenly covered in sweat. He realizes with dread that he has contacted the sweating sickness, a disease unique to England. Within a short time he will be dead; still he fights the outstretched arms of his returning companions, knowing they will only hasten his end. He will not be allowed to spread the disease, but will be bludgeoned to death on the ice where he has come to skate. The boy's brutal demise is but one of the precise vignettes (and illustrations) in this small book, intimate stories that focus on the historical and the mundane incidents on the frozen river. From ordinary folk to royalty, nature's phenomenon- the frozen Thames- has consequences, some remarkable, some dire, tales of man vs. nature. Luan Gaines/2009.

The Frozen Thames is one of those books so well-written that it transcends its theme; readers with no particular interest in the Thames or its temperature will enjoy Helen Humphreys's beautifully restrained prose. Each short story--or "vignette," as the book jacket calls them--takes place during a year when the Thames River froze. Although the vignettes are fictional, Humphreys has done extensive research about the historical figures, political circumstances and popular sentiment during each freeze year. The book is filled with descriptions of spectacular Frost Fairs on the river, accounts of everyday life and tragedy during each of the frigid years, and compelling references to the various British monarchs who ruled during the Thames freezes. The vignettes begin in 1142 and end in 1895 with the author's poignant explanation of why the Thames no longer freezes. Fans of Virginia Woolf will enjoy the author's closing reference to Orlando. Besides being compellingly

written, this book is also physically attractive. The stories are illustrated with contemporary depictions of London and the freezes. The book's pages are shiny and thick and fun to turn. The book itself is small, fat, and pleasant to hold. The Frozen Thames would make an ideal gift for a thoughtful reader, even if that reader isn't a Thames aficionado.

I've enjoyed other works of Helen Humphreys so when I saw *The Frozen Thames* which is a smaller book with a cover that intrigued me, I picked it up. It's a collection of forty vignettes based on events that actually did take place each time the river froze between the years of 1142 and 1895 and how people's lives were affected by it. After the London Bridge was rebuilt this didn't happen anymore but the stories still remain to be told. These vignettes capture small moments in time - they are only a couple of pages long but as with Humphrey's writing, they are very vividly told. The stories range from the poor British people to the royalty like King Henry VIII. Some of the stories I found interesting and some made no sense to me. The stories I really liked had known historical figures in them like King Henry VIII as he was being driven down the middle of the frozen Thames. There is talk of Anne Boleyn's offenses and that she may be put to death. The people are waiting to see him cross... 'We stand on the bank and wave and cheer, regardless of whether our King is full of sorrow or full of rage. It matters not this morning. What matters is that the horses are as white as the snow, that they look both magnificent and ghostly as they pass, and that the sound of the hooves and the carriage is deep as a bell, deep as our own heartbeats sunken in our chests. What matters is that we have waited for this. We have waited for this, and it has come to us.' (pg 49) Another story I liked was of Queen Matilda in the year 1142. Her castle is under siege and has been for more than three months. She no longer knows what to do when one night it begins to snow. She and her strongest men wait until the snow is at its thickest and they begin to cross the Thames. They are dressed in white and blend with the snow. They meet a sentry on horseback but they stand perfectly still. In turn, he blesses himself and rides on; he has taken them for ghosts. One other story I really liked was about a little girl and robins. It is the cold of winter and dark and the little girl awakens to a little robin sitting on her bedpost. It has been a very cold winter and many animals are not surviving but many people in England have taken to bringing the birds into their homes so they can survive until spring. The little girl's family is one that has done this and they have two robins. The little girl is waiting for eggs to be in the nest and baby birds being born. I just found this story magical. The book is beautifully written which is something I've come to expect from Humphreys. The stories of the ice are told in such vivid detail that you can almost feel the cold seeping into your bones. There are many pictures throughout the book, many of them quite beautiful. I read *The Frozen Thames* during

the read-a-thon and while I can't say it's a favorite of mine there were definitely quite a few of the stories that I really appreciated. I think for those who enjoy short stories and can gather the meaning from them without needing a more detailed novel form will get a lot out of this book. For me, I still enjoy an actual novel - a story I can sink my teeth into. I had actually thought this was an historical novel about the freezing of the Thames when I bought it so I had a bit of a surprise when I opened it. Either way it was ok for me. The stories I liked, I really liked and the others were just ok.

This little book is so well-written. I'm not sure I'd call it a novel; it's more like a fascinating prose poem. It's a work to savor and enjoy over and over, like a good poem. Try it for yourself... I think you will agree that it will also make a lovely gift for anyone who enjoys good writing like yourself. Also, if you haven't already read her novel, *The Lost Garden*, you will do yourself a favor to track it down. I'm pretty sure I've seen it here on .

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