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A Boy Called M.O.U.S.E.

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

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Media type:

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Hitherto an established author of fiction for younger children, including a longstanding favourite of mine, **Mr Pod and Mr Piccalilli**, this first novel for older readers marks a new departure for Penny Dolan. And what an enthralling departure it is. Roll up, roll up, for a great Dickensian sweep of a story, which boasts high Victorian thrills and spills; a cornucopia of memorable characters, and at its heart, a cute but courageous hero.

Nicknamed for his round brown eyes, tufty hair and little ears, Mouse is born to wealthy botanist parents but soon consigned to the care of nursemaid Hanny when they depart on yet another plant-hunting voyage. Stout-hearted Hanny doesn't trust the intentions of Mouse's uncle Scrope, who knows only too well that one small boy is all that stands between him and the inheritance of a fortune, and with Mouse's parents believed lost at sea, she decamps to the country with her charge, where Mouse experiences an idyllic early childhood with his devoted Hanny and her husband Isaac, and discovers a talent for acrobatics.

Unfortunately Scrope is in the debt of the sinister Mr Button, who wrenches Mouse from his rural idyll and deposits him at Murkstone Hall, a school as grim and terrifying as its name. Eventually Mouse escapes its sinister walls and returns to his childhood home, only to find that it has been razed to the ground. So begins his quest to find Hanny and Isaac in the big city, a perilous journey which takes Mouse right to the heart of London theatreland, where his acrobatic skills are soon in demand. But before long, danger lurks perilously close once more.

This is an enorMOUSEly enjoyable novel ? rich in period detail and resonance but never over-wrought with it. Gorgeously archaic things: scullions and tippets, guineas and claw-footed armchairs, sealing wax and inkwells pepper its pages. Though they waylay the main plot for quite some while, Mouse's theatrical adventures provide some of the most diverting intrigues in the book, and in renowned thespian Hugo Adnam, twin dancers Flora and Dora, theatre manager Vanya and Mouse's firm friend Kitty, some of the most alluring members of its dramatis personae. Dolan was clearly transported by her researches into the theatre, and her obvious pleasure in its magic adds greatly to the appeal of the story. The book has charming embellishments by Peter Bailey throughout which can only enhance the considerable pleasures to be found in this delightful tale.

Running Order:

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