

Miss Penny Dreadful and the Midnight Kittens



AUTHOR

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ILLUSTRATOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid to Upper Primary

SYNOPSIS

1872—Forever in trouble for sketching in her notebook, Penny Pickering dreams of her famous authoress aunt turning up at her boarding school and whisking her away. So when Aunt Harriet appears at Miss Strickland’s School for Girls of an Enquiring Mind and asks Penny if she would like to join her on an adventure, Penny knows exactly what to say – yes, please!

Penny soon finds herself headed for Hampshire and a strange place called Mr Toddington’s Museum of the Curious and Absurd where bewitched kittens are said to have a tea party at midnight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison Rushby, the daughter of an author, was raised on a wholesome and steady diet of classic English literature. Some of her favourite books, re-read countless dog-eared times include Rumer Godden’s *The Dolls’ House*, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, Dodie Smith’s *I Capture the Castle* and Noel Streatfeild’s “Shoes” series. She has long been a fan of cities with long, winding histories, wild, overgrown cemeteries, red brick Victorian museums, foxes and ivy. She prefers to write with a cup of Darjeeling tea by her side and a Devon Rex cat curled up in her lap.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Bronte Rose Marando is a Sydney based illustrator. Her whimsical artwork is influenced by our natural world, a love of narrative, the unknown and all things mysterious and magical. When she isn’t drawing you can find Bronte with her nose in a good book or wandering about antique stores.

STUDY NOTES

- The novel is set in England in 1872. How does the time period affect the story? How reliable do you think this novel is in presenting a realistic portrait of life at a girl’s school in that era?
- ‘I want to live in a world where astonishing things are possible, including bewitched kittens. Don’t you want to live in a world like that too? (p 125). Do you agree or disagree with Aunt Harriet? How did you feel when you realised the kittens’ magic wasn’t real?
- A ‘Penny Dreadful’ was a term from the nineteenth century for serialised (released in parts over time) books or

comics that were often exciting, cheap and with a lot of popular appeal. Can you think of anything similar to Penny Dreadfuls today that you might have read (or even seen)?

- Penny's parents don't approve of what Aunt Harriet writes, but Penny loves her stories. Discuss popular culture today, and the idea of some content being thought of as intellectual (sometimes called 'high brow') and other content seen as silly and for the masses (often referred to as 'low brow'). What are some books or movies or TV shows you can think of as 'high' or 'low' brow? Do you agree with judging culture in this way?
- Mr Toddington's is quite a unique museum. What's the most unusual museum you've ever visited?
- Penny has been taught by Miss Strickland to value logic above all else, but throughout the novel she further expands her 'inquisitive mind' through imagination. Do you think of yourself as more rational, or creative, or a mixture of both? Do you think one is more important than the other?
- How has her parents' absence affected Penny? Consider the postcard at the end. What do you think might have happened to them?
- How does Penny change as a character as a result of the events of the novel?
- How are attitudes to girls and women in the 1800s similar or different to today? For example, you could consider how characters like Miss Strickland and Mr Crowley treat Penny, and the limitations of what they believe her to be capable of. Do you think Penny fits the norms of her era? Why or why not?
- If they were to make a movie adaptation of *Penny Dreadful and the Midnight Kittens*, who would you cast in the lead roles and why?