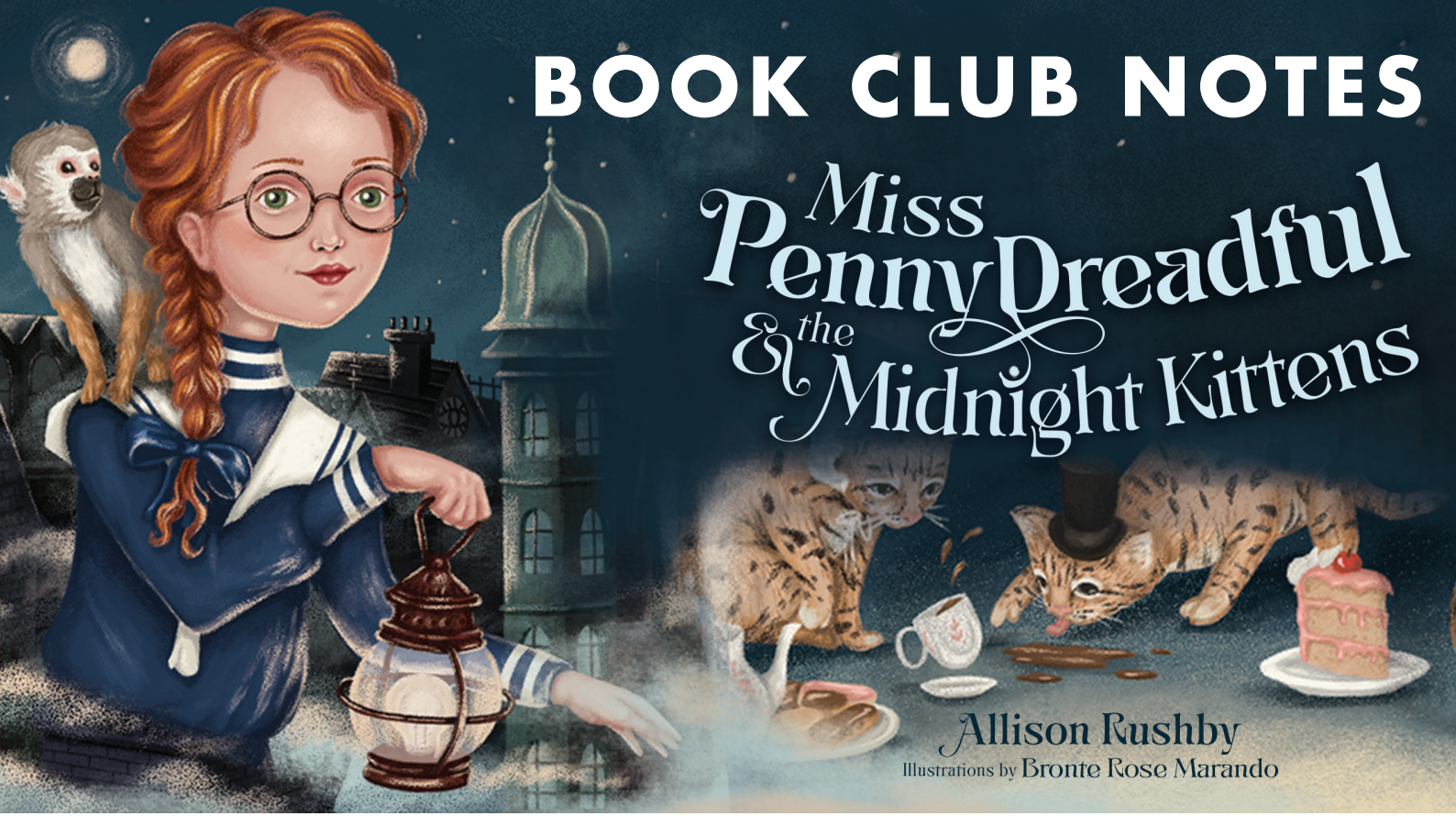


BOOK CLUB NOTES

Miss Penny Dreadful & the Midnight Kittens

Allison Rushby

Illustrations by Bronte Rose Marando



An enquiring mind - and mystical mysteries to solve - adds up to adventure in the first book of the new junior fiction series from acclaimed author Allison Rushby.

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.

FOR READERS AGED 7+
AUGUST 2022
9781760654030
PAPERBACK

Praise for Allison Rushby

“...she is such a brilliant writer. Her use of delicate and descriptive words builds the world and setting in your head so easily”

Blue's Fairy Tales

“Rushby's words have an enigmatic way of drawing you in, simultaneously caressing your emotions whilst firing them up.”

Dimity Powell

“...a master of the mysterious and unexplained”

Kids' Book Review

WALKER BOOKS

Illustrations © Bronte Rose Marando 2022

Discussion questions

1. 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?
2. "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?" (page 125). Do you agree or disagree with Aunt Harriet? How did you feel when you realised the kittens' magic wasn't real?
3. 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)?
4. 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 think of as 'high' or 'low' brow? Do you agree with judging culture in this way?
5. Mr Toddington's is quite a unique museum. What's the most unusual museum you've ever visited?
6. Penny has been taught by Miss Strickland to value logic about 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?
7. How has her parents' absence affected Penny? Consider the postcard at the end. What do you think might have happened to them?
8. How does Penny change as a character as a result of the events of the novel?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Q&A with Allison Rushby

Why did you decide to write a series set in the 1800s? Did anything particularly draw you to that time period?

The idea all stemmed from my trying to actually read a penny dreadful, one of the sensational serialised novels that were so popular in the mid to late 1800s. It was such an odd story and made close to no sense – characters came and went, chapters often didn't follow and it went on and on and on. It did make me wonder, though – what sort of author was writing these penny dreadfuls? Where did they get their ideas from? And that's how I came up with eccentric Aunt Harriet, penny dreadful authoress. Her niece, Penny, with her enquiring mind, followed not long after.

What inspired you to create a kooky museum like Mr Toddington's? What's the strangest museum you've ever visited?

I have actually seen some Victorian taxidermy that was quite similar to the ones described in Mr Toddington's Museum of the Curious and Absurd, which are, of course, truly horrifying to the modern eye! I've also visited a lot of anatomy museums over the years, which other people often find a bit of a strange thing to do (it's not so strange in my family as my husband is medical ...). The Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London certainly has some pretty interesting artifacts in its collection and the early surgical instruments on display will make you feel very fortunate to have access to anaesthetics and sterilisation and so on!

What was it like to see Bronte Rose Marando's illustrations bring Penny and her world to life?

Bronte Rose Marando's illustrations simply could not be more perfect. I just adore how she's brought Penny's world to life – it's just as I imagined it. I particularly love her illustrations of the naughty kittens and their midnight antics!

Can you tell us about what's coming next for Penny?

I'm so excited to continue Penny's adventures with readers – next up is *Miss Penny Dreadful and the Malicious Maze* in which Penny follows her aunt to Buckinghamshire to investigate a "malicious" hedge maze, which is said to be stealing away servants! Penny must once again use her enquiring mind to work out exactly what's going on, all while continuing to try to work out where her parents have disappeared to as well as what's going on with dastardly Mr Crowley, Aunt Harriet's devious publisher.