



Secrets at Sea

Richard Peck , Kelly Murphy (Illustrator)

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Helena is big-sister mouse to three younger siblings, living a snug and well-fed life within the ancient walls of the Cranston family home. When the Cranston humans decide to sail away to England to find a husband for one of their daughters, the Cranston mice stow away in the name of family solidarity.

And so begins the scamper of their lives as Helena, her siblings, and their humans set sail on a life-changing voyage into the great world of titled humans . . . and titled mice, and surprise endings for all. On the eve of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, will our Cranston heroes squeak by, or will they go entirely overboard?

Secrets at Sea Details

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From Reader Review *Secrets at Sea* for online ebook

Josiah says

"How at ease I was with a human! I wouldn't have dreamed it. I suppose it is better to start with their children, who have open minds."

—*Secrets at Sea*, P. 171

Richard Peck not only has good moments as a writer, he's a terrific public speaker, as well. At the same time I was closing in on the end of *Secrets at Sea*, I was privileged to attend a live bookstore event for the Newbery Medalist, and few authors I've met come across more convincingly or forcefully than Richard Peck, all in an introspective, understated fashion. Richard Peck knows writing, and while his opinions on common points within the topic differ from those of most writers, his logic is consistent, and obviously has worked well throughout his award-winning career. One doesn't win a Newbery Medal for nothing; Richard Peck has proven over the long haul that he understands readers, and he understands kids. It is for their sake he willingly enters the solitary world of novel-making, and the truth of that comes through clearly in his writing. Who can help but be fond of an author who has given so much for you?

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) in Great Britain is nearing an end, but the powers of regimented tradition still hold firm in both the human and rodent worlds as a young mouse named Helena comes to terms with what it will mean to have the humans her mouse family lives with move away, across the ocean to lands unknown. While 'tis true time is always running out for mice, the seconds seem to have speeded up even more now, and it's going to be difficult to get everything in order to accompany the humans to their new home. But Helena is ready to move when the time arrives, despite the suddenness with which the change is enacted. What she isn't quite as ready for is the changes among her own family: a brother who wants to room with other guys his age and start thinking of a definite direction for his life as an adult, and a sister influenced by the love bug, far too prone to throw caution to the wind and venture beyond the safe perimeters of a mouse's traditional existence. As Helena and her family stow away onboard a ship destined to cross an entire ocean, some of the family members exercising more caution than others, she also begins to see the necessity of opening oneself up to the world to receive what it has to give, the bad as well as the good, even for a timid creature like a mouse. There are people we can give ourselves to, heart, mind, body and soul; indeed, people we *should* give ourselves to, because without giving freely of all we are to those certain special people, we've missed out on the best part of life. Love can be found in the oddest places, where we never would have looked and might have scoffed at the idea of there being any point in trying. When we make that right connection, whether for the first time or the tenth, there's no mistaking we've gotten it right, and all the prior days of bobbing in the doldrums become but a sweet prelude to the new life we've found. What mouse would ever say the days of aimlessness weren't worth the first sight of their new human's smile when, at long last, they finally find each other?

"This is how you hold on to your family...You hold them with open hands so they are free to find futures of their own. It's just that simple."

—*Secrets at Sea*, PP. 235-236

Primarily a standalone novel, *Secrets at Sea* does share a link with another Richard Peck offering, *The Mouse with the Question Mark Tail*. Since Richard Peck didn't consider it giving away too much about the books to

publicly announce the following information, I will repeat it here: *Secrets at Sea* and *The Mouse with the Question Mark Tail* end on the same day in the same year in the same building, but one room apart. After reading *Secrets at Sea*, that intriguing was tidbit enough to pique my interest in the followup book, and I hope other readers who liked *Secrets at Sea* will continue on and read *The Mouse with the Question Mark Tail* to find out how the stories connect. Richard Peck does a solid job writing readable prose that flows smoothly and without too much complexity, even though the Victorian language style in *Secrets at Sea* is somewhat more elaborate than most of his books. Roughly forty years after beginning his career communicating with kids using the power of the written word, Richard Peck shows he still has the will and the way to touch young lives through his novels, and we are all beneficiaries. I would give one and a half stars to *Secrets at Sea*, and I nearly rounded that up instead of down. For lovers of stories told from the perspective of animals, what's not to like?

Ginnie says

Picked up this book on Audio because I like Richard Peck. I also grabbed a Christmas story. I thought I was putting the Christmas story in the CD player. Listened to A whole track before Helena says, "We're mice" Oh, Haha, that makes more sense.

This was a really fun story, and had a lot of historical detail, even though it was about mice.

I enjoy stories about really tiny things, like The Borrowers, Beatrix Potter's story, and such, and this one was really funny and also had a good ending.

Brenda says

The story centers on a family of mice (Three sisters and a brother) who live with their human companions the Cranston's. When the upstairs Cranston's decided that it is time for one of their daughters to find a suitable husband, mice and humans must take a voyage to England. I found the story very charming. There is lots of talk about who the Cranston's daughter should marry, titles, Queens and parties ensue. There is a few instances of peril but nothing that is to scary. Overall a fun adventure story for third to sixth graders. The illustrations by Kelly Murphy are beautifully done.

Marple says

This is how you hold onto your family. You hold them with open hands so they are free to find futures of their own. It's just that simple

Unfortunately, I couldn't find the amazing aspect of it as many of you who read and reviewed it here in Goodreads.

It was a plain read nothing special. Maybe suitable for the young princesses but I don't know if I will

recommend it or not.

babyhippoface says

It pains me to give a book by Richard Peck only 2 stars. I think he's a wonderful writer. His Grandma Dowdel books are absolutely hilarious. So 2 stars goes against my genuine admiration for Mr. Peck. But I just have to. It was a struggle to get through it. I just was absolutely not interested in the story or the characters. I wouldn't have cared if the ship's cat ate every last mouse on board and ended the book early. I probably would've cheered him on. *Here, kitty, kitty, kitty....*

Roxanne Hsu Feldman says

Who would have thought? Richard Peck: the 21st Century Austen for the 8 to 10 set? But he IS! This little gem of a book has all the good stuff:

A cast of talking mice whose actions and living conditions are completely believable and are in tune with children's fantasy play; a twisting, surprising, and humorous upstairs/downstairs comedy that involves Royalty and seafaring; the perennial favorite plot progression allowing the lower class main characters go up the social ladder due to good luck and hard work; and clean grown-up romances.

Peck's deft hand also created a great protagonist in the no-nonsense Helena and made her think and speak properly like one would have from the late 1800s. I was completely charmed!

(And the full-page incidental illustrations add to its charm even more!)

Quick – go and get a copy and treat yourself and your young readers!!

Bryce says

Sometimes it's not necessarily what's new that's brought to the table, but the manner and skill in which it's presented. This is such a case. Thank you Richard Peck for a few respite "date nights" with my best friend filled with humor, fake British accents, and a great message on family.

The Library Lady says

This is compared in the blurb to one of the most overrated children's books of the last few decades *The Tale of Despereaux* and it shouldn't be, because it's a lot better. No cloying "dear reader" narration here, but the charming voice of Helena, oldest surviving mouse daughter of the Cranston family.

Instead, compare this to Margery Sharp's immortal "Miss Bianca" who was served so badly by Disney's crappy film of *The Rescuers*. Here too is humor, wit and adventure. Not as pithy as Sharp, but well done and well worth reading.

Mike says

A delight from start to finish: full of ridiculous jokes, absurd situations and a general air of total impossibility. Just wonderful.

2019 - I picked this up from the library and it took me a chapter or so to realise it was very familiar: I'd read it only 18 months ago. But the book is so delightfully written it was a joy to read it again. I don't think it's really intended as a children's book: there are far too many sly references to things that will go over the heads of most kids, and the style, with its dry wit, subtle and quirky humour, is surely there primarily for adult readers.

It surprises me, somewhat, to see a number of reviewers who say they didn't enjoy it. Plainly humour is an individual thing, and what appeals to one person doesn't appeal to another.

Roselyn says

3.5

This book brought back memories of childhood. I went through this phase where I'd only (or at least mainly) read books about animals and I guess there's a part of me that always will love stories of this nature. I would have adored this book even more as a kid and I almost wish it had been around ten or so years ago. The truth is we never really know what animals think or do when we're not looking and I'm always interested in stories that play on this concept.

Don't be fooled by the fact that this is a children's book. The story telling was impeccable as was the characterization and writing. I always find the story telling, that is the flow of plot and mood, in children's books to be far superior to that in books for teens or adults. There are no loose ends, no wasted words and the story engages you from start to finish. Seemingly irrelevant details always come into play later on and the book ties off neatly at the end. You are only left wondering about the future, what happens after the book ends, not questioning gaps in the story.

The characters are quirky and memorable and surprisingly well fleshed out for such a short book. The world building is smart and I love the way mice are integrated into the human world. It is funny at times and sad at others, but always works out in the end. There is a touch of romance but at its heart it is a story about family. All of this together made the story sweet and cute which is what I was looking for when I picked it up. The illustrations are wonderfully imaginative and really add to the story. *Secrets at Sea* leaves you feeling warm and happy and slightly sad, which is how all good books should leave you. Recommended.

Ann Jacobus says

SECRETS AT SEA is Richard Peck's latest middle-grade novel, with lovely soft-edged illustrations by Kelly Murphy.

This is a charming historical novel about mice, and that's a phrase I've never written before. It stars mice

siblings in fact, and the oldest sister Helena, like every good eldest sister, is in charge and, naturally, the narrator. Most of the story takes place during a trans-Atlantic crossing aboard a great ocean liner due to reach England in time for Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897. It's a mice-tale of manners, a swirl of romance and royalty, ball gowns, weddings and many coursed-meals, whether with humans at the Captain's table or at the mice's yardstick table on thread spool seats.

The mice siblings live with the wealthy, but comic and all-too-human Cranston family who are headed for London to find suitable matches for their two daughters. Mrs. Cranston in particular says all the wrong things with, as described by one passenger, "a voice like the cawing of a crow," displaying "shoulders like sides of beef." The mice sisters, Helena, Beatrice and Louise, and their pesky brother Lamont, all hate water, but accompany their human family tucked away in their steamer trunks. They find the ship teeming with a hierarchy of all classes of mice also accompanying their human passengers, and of course, a ship's cat. Helena and her siblings work feverishly behind the scenes, relying on every rodent social connection they can muster to compensate for the clumsy Cranstons, and match-make for the deserving Cranston girls. They are aided by, among others, Nigel the Mouse Steward, the old Duchess of Cheddar Gorge who has "terrible teeth and breath that would kill flies," and dashing Lord Peter, Mouse Equerry.

To the reader's happy satisfaction, mice and humans both find plenty of romance and adventure at sea. Best of all, Peck's trademark dry humor and sly sense of fun are in full play on every page of *SECRETS AT SEA*.

Beth Wood says

Absolutely delightful. This new book by Richard Peck, which I have read before, is wonderfully written and illustrated. The language is so descriptive and evocative, you can practically see the little mice's ears twitch and whiskers wiggle. The book takes place right before Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and the historical details definitely add to the overall story.

The Cranston mice, watched over by big sister Helena, live with the Cranston family. When the family decides they must sail to England to find a husband for nearly-spinster Olive, the mice decide they must go as well. The ocean voyage, with its dangers and delights, makes up the bulk of the story.

Several plot twists kept me delighted right up until the end of the story. A true fairy tale, happy endings all around. This would be an excellent read-aloud. I can't say enough nice things about this book.

Kris says

A cute mouse-tale with very nice artwork.

I didn't realize that behind many successful families there could be an army of mice modeling their lives and influencing outcomes--an imaginative premise.

Mike Puma says

Reviewed from an ARC.

4.5 Stars—4.5 tending towards 5 stars (so, I'll give it a 5)! I know what you're thinking—I've wondered about it myself: What's this crank doing reading a children's book—a GENRE-children's book at that? I can tell you, and I will: when a friend sends you an ARC of a Richard Peck book, and if you've made your living working with children's books, AND did I mention it was a Richard Peck book (?)—well Goodreaders, you stop what you're doing, pick up the Peck (alliteration is your friend), and read for all it's worth—because it's worth a lot.

Peck is one of those rare writers whose accomplishments are too numerous to mention (wiki him—in children's literature, he's earned his legendary status). More importantly, to me at least, he's one of those authors who not only writes for children, he actually cares about the young people who read his work—that may sound trivial, but when you've met some of these writers, accompanied them to conferences, signings, etc., you learn very quickly who appears one way to fans and those who buy their books then another way as he or she becomes Mr. (or Ms.) Hyde once they're out of public sight. So there you have it—I like Mr. Peck, as an author and as a person.

With *Secrets at Sea*, Peck melds fantasy, historical fiction, humor, and adventure into a story perfect for younger readers (ages 9 to 12, or so). A family of mice (the Downstairs Cranstons) prepare to accompany their human family (the Upstairs Cranstons) on a European trip, the purpose of which is to 'marry off' the socially awkward Olive Cranston, the oldest of the two Cranston daughters. For the mice family (three sisters and a brother), the success of the trip is crucial because the fates of the mouse family and the Cranston family is necessarily intertwined. With Olive's parents as socially challenged as Olive herself, the mice know they will have their work cut out for them and are willing to risk a dreaded sea voyage (mice are necessarily afraid of bodies of water having lost family members already to rain barrels) to contribute to the family's success. The ship is bringing members of the royal family back to Britain for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. During the voyage, life for the mice parallels the experiences of the Cranston family complete with mice porters and stewards, the attention of royalty on the British ship, and gala dinners. The interactions of mice and humans provide humor, the families each have their intrapersonal foibles and surprises, and, ultimately, a great time is had by (almost) all—especially the reader.

Teachers and school librarians know what to expect from Peck; he has too much respect for the young people for whom he writes to compromise the trust placed in him when addressing children—no inappropriate language or situations—but be forewarned, Peck has been a teacher himself, and he's definitely not adverse to using language that children will puzzle over (and some adults, like myself). If this book is a gift for a younger person in your life (and it would make a good one), consider giving them a dictionary as well. Happy reading.

Now, to return to the question posed at the beginning of this review: why is this crank reading a children's book? I'll explain it the same way I have since attempting to hide the cover of a Judy Blume title on a flight back from BookExpo (when it was still called ABA) while laughing like a moron—because of the work I've done, I can pick up any children's title and call it my Professional Reading. There you have it.

Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says

If *The Mouse with the Question Mark Tail* was a *Boy Mouse's Own Adventure* plus *Downton Abbey* for mice, this volume is definitely for the girl readers. However I wouldn't say they were "just" children's books, as much of the satire and sarcasm would be lost on kids today. It all goes back to the 19th century children's classics and adult novels of the Edith Wharton/Henry James sort, of the wealthy, crass Americans who go on a Grand Tour of Europe and hope to marry their daughter to a title. Which actually happened, right up to WW2; Nancy Astor for one, and many of her female relations for others.

This was written before the *Boy Mouse Adventure*, and it shows. The writing isn't as polished; it's repetitive and not as funny as it thinks it is. What saved it from two stars are the illustrations. I'm just funny that way, but Peck could have done better. I was surprised to realise he was the same author who wrote *Are You in the House Alone?*.

One wonders if Peck is going to make a habit of these mouse tails; one rather hopes not.
