

The Christmas Mouse

DJ Lenhart

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An orphaned mouse skitters through shifting, sometimes magical circumstances in the fantastical chapter book The Christmas Mouse.

In DJ Lenhart's seasonal chapter book *The Christmas Mouse*, an orphaned mouse yearns for companionship.

Nick is a talented mouse who was named after St. Nicholas. When his family dies, he searches for a new home, navigating fears about predatory cats and humans who set traps. He meets a kind boy, Jacob, who feeds him peanuts and hides him. Nick reveals his wish to gain a family again. Their brief encounter is curtailed, however, when Nick decides to return to his first home after all. There, he encounters a surviving mouse whom he vows to protect. And as Jacob searches for Nick, Nick faces repeating problems, including his lack of food and shelter. Indeed, his worries wear thin, in particular because he maintains his negative view of humans even after meeting exceptions.

The story is too rushed through, and too many scenes (including one in which Nick finds a restaurant and another in which he narrates his history to a woman) are summarized in the book's rush to reach the next. Details of Nick's story are too taken for granted as well, as with his unexplained ability to communicate with people and be understood by them. And while Nick's brief encounter with Jacob is posited as the basis for their abiding friendship, they spend years apart after it. Instead of focusing on their bond, Nick joins a circus, forming a duet with a blind laundress who happens to be gifted at singing; she's an archetype of goodness among a cast marked by too-stark divisions (those who help Nick are acceptable to him; those who do not are to be avoided).

Indeed, the book is moved along by sentiment and eschews cohesion. Conversations about the spirit of Christmas pervade, with an emphasis on harmony and love for all creatures, and Nick's future is determined too much by coincidences, as when he and Jacob meet once again. At one point, Jacob's new love becomes focal, with each person perceiving the other as kind because of how they have treated Nick. A sudden turn toward a "magical village" pulls the story further into the fantasy realm. Amid such glittering circumstances, shifting morals are suggested: there are thoughts about rejecting prejudice and about the need for compassion, though all are stated too plainly to leave a lasting impact.

In the uplifting chapter book *The Christmas Mouse*, an unusual mouse brings others together through his far-flung adventures.

KAREN RIGBY (September 26, 2024)

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