

The Penny Mansions

Steven Mayfield

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The Penny Mansions is a charming historical novel wherein lovable townspeople rally to save their home.

In Steven Mayfield's rollicking period novel *The Penny Mansions*, a diverse group of eccentrics try to save their once-booming Gold Rush town.

With the 1920 census drawing near, the town council of Paradise, a remote Idaho community, comes up with a cockamamie plan to stave off the possibility of their home becoming a ghost town: they offer abandoned mansions for a penny apiece to families who seem likely to help repopulate the town. All goes well—until the original residents begin to suspect that some of the new Penny Mansion inhabitants are in league with the corrupt politician who's trying to take over Paradise.

The post-Gold Rush Western landscape and the townspeople of Paradise are honored in fluid prose. Among the book's ensemble cast, each person has a necessary role to play in Paradise's past, present, and future. Among them are a young genius, a beautiful schoolteacher, and a shell-shocked World War I veteran—the town's future—and those who remember glorious, bygone days in Paradise, like a retired madam and an old gold miner who represent the town's living history. The townspeople's relationships with each other are revealed early on, too—not only in terms of their roles, but according to how they care for each other as individuals and how that care translates to Paradise's group identity. As one outsider puts it, Paradise is notable for an unusual "out-of-family love" that enfolds everyone in its diverse community.

This character-driven story delights in its ideas about people's identities. One character is described as a man who's "all shirt and no trousers," and two women who are new to the town are seen as "a pair of mannequins with a small amount of face getting into the way of their makeup." Ribald humor abounds in their interactions as well.

When one of the new residents organizes a local production of *Our American Cousin*, the novel is further lit up by the resultant theatrics—and a rich vein of stage themes, imagery, and plot devices. The differences (or lack thereof) between acting on a stage and acting in real life are teased as the citizens assume their roles; some of them find the space therapeutic. A conflagration on opening night leads to further drama—as do attempts by racist individuals to invade the town, where Chinese and Black citizens have otherwise been safe. The end result is a memorable novel that enlivens a particular, unforgettable place.

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MICHELE SHARPE (August 16, 2023)

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