

The Meadow Vole's Mishap And Other Tales

by Kaimi Rose Lum

On a quiet afternoon in June, a few weeks before the library re-opened fully to the public, a visitor scurried in, ignoring the "Ring Bell for Service" sign. He or she—we're not sure which—ran under the curbside pick-up table wedged between the open front doors and proceeded into the main lobby. There the intruder met the startled gaze of the librarian at the circ desk and, realizing there had been some mistake, swerved in a panic to the right, shot through a gap in an iron railing and tumbled over the edge of a stairwell. A few seconds later, a thud echoed upward from the large print area on the lower level.

Jamie, the librarian at the circ desk, hurried to the railing and peered over. The creature lay still on the carpeted platform in the alcove below. She could see that it was some sort of burrowing animal, too big to be a mole, too cute to be a rat, and her instincts told her that it was not dead but merely stunned. Small rodents and their relations tend to be "flexible," she told me later, "so, when I heard it 'plop,' I knew it kind of would be OK." She fetched a pair of protective gloves from the workroom and headed down the stairs.

Her hunch was right; the animal was dazed but alive. She scooped it up gently and carried it up to the main level and out the delivery door in back, talking to it in reassuring tones as it began to squirm around. In a shady spot under the rhododendrons she let it go, and off it went, full speed.

"But what was it?" I asked when I returned from lunch, sorry to have missed the excitement.

"I don't know," Jamie said. "It looked like a really big mouse with a short tail."

Sophisticated researchers that we are, we quickly Googled "really big mouse with a short tail" and netted a screenful of photographs of the meadow vole, *microtus pennsylvanicus*. "That's it!" Jamie exclaimed. She dubbed the vole Sir Charles Whiskerton (and assigned him a gender). We suspect he lives on under the mulched banks of perennials lining the front walkway, from which he strayed that day.

Had the story ended differently—had Sir Whiskerton escaped detection and been locked inside the library for the rest of the weekend—we imagine he'd have been worthy of the kind of picture-book fantasies on our shelves. He'd have a fictional counterpart in "Library Mouse," Daniel Kirk's tale

of a tiny bibliophile named Sam who lives in a hole in the wall behind the children's reference books. At night, when the people have left and the library is all his, Sam reads everything he can get his paws on. Life goes on in this wonderful way until his head is so full of "facts and information and images of faraway places" that Sam is inspired to write some books of his own.

"Bunny's Book Club" by Annie Silvestro, with illustrations by Tatjana Mai-Wyss, tells the story of a rabbit who develops a hunger for books while eavesdropping on outdoor story hour. When the program moves inside for the winter, he finds a way to sneak in through the book return at

night and smuggle stacks of books out through the slot. Soon Porcupine, Frog and Bunny's other woodland friends are joining him in the raids. "Back at Bunny's, they [cozy] up with cups of tea and carrot muffins" and read until dawn. Only a canny librarian who suspects something is amiss can spoil their fun—or will she make proper patrons of them instead?

True story: a bunny once ran into the Eastham Library, leading Melvil, the Eastham Library's cat, on a high-octane chase through the stacks. This was back in the day when libraries were allowed to have pets. Probably Sir Whiskerton would not have appreciated such an experience, but the feline presence in libraries has been celebrated in picture books such as "Dewey: There's a Cat in the Library!" by Vicki Myron and Bret Witter (based on another true story). Grander mammals drive the narrative in "Library Lion," Michelle Knudsen's charming tale of a big cat who softens the hearts of the sternest librarians, and Josh Funk's "Lost in the Library: A Story of Patience and Fortitude," about the stone lions coming to life at the New York City Public Library.

Then there's Kazuno Kohara's "The Midnight Library" in which owls are the library assistants, and Judy Sierra's "Wild About Books," in which an entire zoo is introduced to the joys of reading (the librarian "even found waterproof books for the otter, who never went swimming without Harry Potter"). Bonnie Decker's "A Library Book For Bear" reaffirms the notion that there is a book for everyone, even pompous, pickle-loving bears.

Someday there may even be a book about Sir Whiskerton. Keep checking our shelves to see.

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