

The Mysterious Phone Call: A Mud Street Misfits Adventure

Brian O'Dell

Beth Lauderdale

Mud Street Misfits (Sep 28, 2019)

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The Mysterious Phone Call is a winsome middle grade mystery that lauds friendships and storied institutions.

In Brian O'Dell and Beth Lauderdale's clever middle grade novel *The Mysterious Phone Call*, tight-knit friends work to preserve their community's beloved theater.

Sarah, her brother David, and their friends Liam, Connor, and Molly are amateur detectives who call themselves the Mud Street Misfits, named after the street they live on. They want to stop their town's Orpheum Theater from being razed to make space for new condominiums. While they search for proof that the building is a historic site worth saving, Sarah worries over her family's upcoming move to Chicago.

From chasing paper trails to searching the internet to listening to a former resident's oral history, the first steps that the Misfits take are sensible and build upon each other well. Early chapters advance the plot with clear-cut actions, blending themes of local history and civic duties with those of friendship, belonging, and family.

When the logical clues run out, the Misfits turn to Cora, a small business owner and adviser to the kids, who explains chakras and gives Sarah a special crystal. Despite the text's coy playfulness about this turn of events, which it calls "woo woo," the Misfits' later reliance on spirit guides to find useful material is too convenient.

There's just enough ambiguity about the Orpheum to maintain interest, and a past fire explains why the town has no records about the theater. The building itself is a marvelous setting, portrayed as a combination of Old World grandeur and spooky disrepair. This is used to strong effect when the Misfits break in to the building for their meetings. That some of the Misfits experience ghostly visions adds to their sense of urgency about rescuing the theater. Background issues of urban development, and memories of powerful musical performances, arise in the process.

Some characters are simplified for the sake of creating conflict. The mayor, characterized as someone who "just wants to make money," is an apropos adversary from a child's perspective, though he's brusque, secretive, and cartoonish in execution. Sarah's adoptive parents are depicted as being too engrossed in the details of their family's move to notice what's happening with their kids. Their behavior is realistic but doesn't jibe with their own late change of heart, attributed to the kids' efforts.

The Misfits' relationship with each other is a stand-out feature of the story. They're coordinated, caring, and each contributes to the group's positive dynamic. Sarah is their persuasive leader, and she struggles with expressing her feelings. However, a late twist reads as a form of having an adult step in to fix the Misfits' problems. More successful is the book's quieter, touching story of Sarah finding a place to call home.

Rich and detailed, *The Mysterious Phone Call* is a winsome, supernatural middle grade mystery that combines the fun of a neighborhood club with respect for the stories that buildings can tell.

KAREN RIGBY (November 2, 2019)

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