

Riders on the Orphan Train: a novel

Alison Moore

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Riders on the Orphan Train is an historical novel about a little-known piece of American history. Between 1854 and 1929, over 250,000 orphans and "surrendered" children were "placed out" across the country. They started their journey in New York and were given away in train stations across the country. The novel is the story of the journey of two children from very different backgrounds who find themselves on the same train heading West in 1918. Ezra Duval, age 11, was left in an orphanage. Ezra's father, a widower, left his son behind for an opportunity to be a part of an archaeological expedition in Egypt. Maud Farrell, age 12, arrives in America from the west of Ireland to join her father, a "sand hog" excavating the subway, and discovers she must make her own way as a singing girl on the streets. Both Ezra and Maud are scheduled to be sent out on a train to find new homes in the West by the Children's Aid Society. Their brief friendship makes a lifelong impression on them both and though they are initially taken by people in different states, (Arkansas and Texas), their experiences, like separated twins, run uncannily parallel. This is a story of dislocation, loss, and the search for home that is at the heart of the American experience. Beginning on the eve of America's entry into World War I and spanning the period of time until the Great Depression, these children encounter and learn from people also looking for a way to belong in a rapidly-changing world. The novel's locations include New York City, Arkansas, the Big Bend region of Texas, central New Mexico and southeastern Arizona. The novel began with a short story that is at the heart of a multi-media presentation called Riders on the Orphan Train that the author has been performing in libraries and museums since 1998. The program was originally developed for the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America, Inc. in Springdale, Arkansas, and now serves as the official touring outreach program for The National Orphan Train Complex Museum and Research Center in Concordia, Kansas. Author Statement: I left the tenure track of a major creative writing program in 1998 to become an itinerant performer and have never regretted the decision. Reaching the public initially with my short story about the Orphan Trains has been extremely rewarding; finding a way to have my work serve a larger purpose has become a story my own imagination could not have created on its own. The short story continued to grow until it became a novel. I chose fiction as a means for exploring the emotional truths often left out of historical facts. For me, the completion of this novel is the culmination of fourteen years of writing and research while touring and getting to know many Orphan Train Riders by participating in national reunions. Their experiences are woven through the novel. It is my hope that the stories of the children who road the trains will live on through this novel for generations to come.

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