

Mice And Rats Star in The Tale of Despereaux

Small rodents shine in this movie based the on children's book.

By Angela Pham

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Big-eared, big-hearted and boldly heroic, the mouse Despereaux is making the jump from the books to the big screen.

Straight from the pages of the award-winning children's book *The Tale of Despereaux*, the film features the characters familiar to the readers: Despereaux, the admirable mouse; Roscuro, the scheming rat; and Princess Pea, the beloved princess with whom Despereaux falls in love.

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With small animals dominating the main character set, the book and the film alike are packed with appeal for rodent lovers. But author Kate DiCamillo said she didn't plan for the characters to end up how they did; rather, after being inspired by a friend's son who asked her to write about "an unlikely hero with exceptionally large ears," she let the characters form themselves along with the unfolding story.

"A mouse is the unlikeliest of all possible heroes," DiCamillo said. "Once Despereaux showed up, then, all of a sudden, the rats came along too."

However, this was no ordinary mouse. From his birth, Despereaux is a unique rodent. He is born with open eyes, unlike the other mice, and his ears are distinctively larger, setting him apart from the other mice.

"There's a wonderful literary tradition of having the hero be visibly different from the outset," DiCamillo said.

Mice played a part in DiCamillo's life growing up, starting with her pet mouse, Pinky. Raised in Florida, DiCamillo also recollected the many mice that came inside her house as the local orange groves developed. But her memories of the mice are all fond, as she said she always found them "too cute to kill."

And although her rat character in the story, Roscuro, is the antagonist, DiCamillo said she also has fond feelings for the small animals. The same friend's son who asked for the unlikely hero story idea had a pet rat that DiCamillo said was intelligent and good company, but "not as cute as mice," she admitted.

DiCamillo said her characters weren't based on her real-life rodent encounters, though. Rather, she said the characters took on a life of their own that she felt she wasn't in control of.

"There's this wonderful thing that happens when you write, when the characters aren't something that you're imagining," she said. "They just become themselves, and you follow them."

With the book's transformation into a motion picture, DiCamillo said she loves the retelling of the story from a slightly different angle. While she said it is not absolutely faithful to the storyline she composed, she said it is still true to the book, and said the animation is "absolutely gorgeous."

"The movie vision is so beautiful, that's what's in my head now," she said. The upcoming video game versions of *The Tale of Despereaux* feature the same animation.

Fans' reactions to the tale have been equally enthusiastic. Though DiCamillo said there is occasionally a passionate rat-owner — usually a young boy — who comes to a book signing holding a bit of a grudge against the slightly negative portrayal of rats in the story, she said the small-animal owning population for the most part is appreciative of the rodent characters made famous in the tale.

Stories like *The Tale of Despereaux* can be a great public service message for mice everywhere, DiCamillo said.

"It's also a wonderful message that the movie gives about the power of insisting on being yourself," she said. "That holds true for mice too, right?"