

*Kirby Larson*

AUDACITY

JONES



TO THE RESCUE

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\* BOOK 1 \*  
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# The Punishment Room

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*Audacity Jones had once again devoured every sprig of burned broccoli, even though clean plates simply were not tolerated at Miss Maisie's School for Wayward Girls.*

Miss Maisie's barley-water breath traveled the length of the scarred mahogany table, arriving well before her reprimand.

"Audacity!" The headmistress's shrill voice put a stopper on the lunchtime whispers and giggles of the Wayward Girls. "What can you be thinking?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Maisie." Audacity hung her head. "I suppose this means the Punishment Room," she added, her brown eyes brimming with melancholy.

Miss Maisie's attention was diverted by a particularly succulent morsel of tinned salmon. "What? Oh yes. I suppose it does."

"But it's Christmas Eve!" chorused the triplets, Lilac, Lavender, and Violet, who could not contain their tears.

"Serves you right," Divinity snipped, a peevish gleam of joy in her piggish eyes.

“It can’t be helped.” Audacity—Audie to her friends—cast a resigned but courageous smile at the triplets. “I broke the rule. And so I must bear the punishment.”

“Buck up, Audie girl,” whispered Bimmy.

Our heroine acknowledged Bimmy’s words with a brave nod. The tap-tap-tap of her black boots, two sizes too small, echoed pitifully through the dining room of Miss Maisie’s family’s formerly grand home, now as shabby as Audie’s footwear.

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For decades, the Withertons had stood tall in the town of Swayzee, Indiana, but that was before Miss Maisie’s mother and father perished at sea. When the news of her parents’ fate reached her, Miss Maisie wallowed in self-pity for weeks. *Months*. “Whatever shall I do?” she fretted.

Then one dark and stormy night, an equally self-absorbed young couple selling baked goods had some trouble with a balky horse near the Manor. Miss Maisie could not turn them away, not when they carried chocolate pound cakes along with a babe in arms. She allowed them to seek refuge in one of the mansion’s many spare bedrooms.

Upon rising at her usual hour of noon, however, Miss Maisie was stunned to find Cook dandling the youngster on her knee and no sign of the couple except for a note enclosing a thick stack of large bills. The note merely said, *Her name is Divinity. She is too wayward for us.*

Thus the first pupil—and Miss Maisie’s favorite—was enrolled in the School for Wayward Girls, where most of the girls were

neither wayward nor schooled except through the latest fad in education: Professor Teachttest's Apple Core Method. Even Divinity had to admit that without Audie's stories to make the dreary lessons and relentless testing palatable, Professor Teachttest's Method would have turned each Wayward mind to mush. The Professor could not be reached to defend himself: He was in the process of purchasing his third villa in Tuscany.

Now, as Audie passed through the cracked archway into the great hall, she hesitated. "I suppose I shan't come out until breakfast."

Miss Maisie paused, forkful of beef Stroganoff to her lips. "What? Oh, well, yes. I imagine so."

Bimmy gasped, "But she'll miss her Christmas Eve treat." Every year, without fail, the Ladies' Aid Society of the Swayzee Methodist Church sent each of the Girls an orange to celebrate the Lord's birth. The basket laden with the tropically scented fruit had arrived that very morning.

Miss Maisie waved her hand. "She can have it for breakfast tomorrow." She pushed the forkful into her mouth and, sputtering gravy and beef bits all over the damask tablecloth, commanded, "Off you go."

"Yes, Miss Maisie," was our heroine's stoic reply. She skirted the drooping Christmas tree, decorated with languid paper chains, before turning left at the third cabbage rose on the well-worn carpet. Audie followed footprints she'd made the day before and the day before that and countless days before that.

After twenty long steps, Audie found herself face-to-face with the heavy mahogany portal to the Punishment Room. She was the only one of the Girls ever sent to this place; generally, Miss Maisie

dealt with infractions in other ways. But Audie had been a Problem from her first moment at the School. And special circumstances called for special treatment.

Audie paused as she confronted the solid wooden door. Great carved snakes slithered from the top rail to the bottom. Each panel featured a different mythical monster; having experienced a small growth spurt, Audie was now eye-to-eye with a cyclops. Slowly, slowly, she turned the blackened brass knob and with great effort pulled the massive door open. Meanwhile, back in the dining room, Miss Maisie's attention had been fully diverted by the toffee custard that Cook had prepared for dessert.

Taking in a great breath, the girl stepped through the foreboding doorway. Quick as a flicker, Audie locked herself in, nice and tight.

When Mr. Witherton, Miss Maisie's father, had been alive, this room had not been deemed the Punishment Room, but the library. As a young lass, Miss Maisie considered every moment spent in the library to be pure agony. She had no use for the dry and dusty books that lined the walls, from the tip-top of the coved ceiling to the worn oak floorboards. "Words, words, words," she would grumble when her father invited her in.

"Perhaps *Jane Eyre*, or *Persuasion*," Mr. Witherton would suggest. "Or, my favorite, *A Tale of Two Cities*?"

"No, no, and no," Miss Maisie would answer, time and again. "Books are utter wastes of paper that could be put to better uses, like wrappings for presents for me."

Mr. Witherton did love his daughter, but as he and his wife had gurgled down to Davy Jones's locker that fateful day, he had mused, *Well, I shall never have the disappointment of Maisie turning*

*down a book again, shall I?* That thought provided soggy comfort until an unfortunate encounter with not one ravenous bull shark but two.

On this winter night, as was her habit from the time Mr. Witherton was still in residence, Cook had laid a fire in the grand Dutch-tiled fireplace, with one match set by. Because she had read through Mr. Witherton's copious collection of books on survival in the wilds, one match was all Audie needed to nourish a warm blaze, which soon chased the chill from the bright and windowed room. As also was her habit, Cook had set a plate of Gouda, ginger-snaps, and grapes on the table next to the reading chair, for Mr. Witherton had so appreciated a tasty treat while he read.

Audie nibbled on a gingersnap while pondering which section of the vast and varied library to tackle next. Her eye was drawn to Horton Halfpott's forty-volume memoir, a series our dear girl found compelling, even after numerous readings.

Or should she read about South American botany, complete with references to poisonous plants? Some were undetectable even in toffee custard. Not that *she* would ever harm a soul. Revenge was beneath Audie's dignity, though Divinity had provoked her to drastic action at times. But we shall refrain from mentioning the incidents with the live toad and the dead garter snake.

As Audie contemplated which of the hundreds of books to select, Miniver wriggled in through one small leaded-glass window, left enough ajar for the sleek cat to come and go as she pleased. The chocolate-striped feline immediately set to licking clumps of snow from her paws. Cat and girl had been fast friends since Audie's arrival at Miss Maisie's five years prior, when Audie was a slip of a

six-year-old carrying a stuffed giraffe named Percy, and Miniver a runt chased away from her mother's teats by five greedy and guzzling brothers.

Audie had been sent to the Punishment Room her first day at Miss Maisie's, not wayward, but orphaned—guardianed by an uncle who could not seem to tell the difference. He had presented Miss Maisie with a tidy sum before striding off without one backward glance at the waif who'd been in his care less than a fortnight.

Even at the tender age of six, Audie had been resourceful. In the pockets of her little pink pinafore she had stashed a nubbin of cheese and two biscuits against possible hunger. And what foresight! Shortly after Miss Maisie had dispatched Audie to the Punishment Room—her offense had been to inquire as to the location of the School's classrooms—Miniver squeezed in through the library window for the first time and was delighted to share that bit of cheese.

In the toes of Audie's kid-leather boots, once lovingly polished by her parents—her father always buffed the left, her mother, the right—rested a pair of gold coins. Not that Audie gave a fig for money, but there are many that do place great importance on silver and gold, and, as has already been mentioned, Audie was nothing if not one to plan ahead.

Her toilette now completed, Miniver padded on four snowy-white paws to greet her long-time friend with a loving head tap.

"You smell of catnip, Min," the ever-observant girl observed. "Been in Mr. Schumacher's greenhouse again, have you?" Audie tsk-tsked but Min took no offense, weaving in and out of Audie's legs



as the girl slowly circled the library floor. Sharing the gingersnap with her feline friend, Audie mused aloud about what to read next.

“I will admit to being weak in geography, Min. I know the forty-six states and the seven continents, and the seven seas, but, bees and bonnets, I can never remember the difference between Liechtenstein and Luxembourg.” She took another nibble of gingersnap, with Min thoughtfully dispatching the crumbs. “And my mathematics are appalling. Here I am eleven and I can barely do calculus. I should be more diligent in that regard. But I have a longing, Min. A longing for something entirely different.” Audie ran her fingers across the section of bookshelves that held Mr. Witherton’s prodigious collection of adventure stories.

Her hand reached for a particularly exciting tale, then dropped, heart shriveling with misery. How could our intrepid girl bear to read yet one more story about those who were *not* confined to places such as Miss Maisie’s, who had futures holding possibilities greater than growing as unsweet as Divinity? Where was the adventure, the challenge, the fun, for one such as Audie?

As Min was wont to do, she leapt up onto the library table, tail twitching, ready to weigh in with her own literary advice. After a nibble at the wedge of Gouda, she shifted herself around, away from Audie, to face out the window.

“Don’t scold,” Audie begged. “That’s not in the holiday spirit.”

But the cat did not budge; she had firmly turned her back on the girl.

“Oh, all right.” Audie stepped toward the mathematics wall. “I shall push on with that old calculus.”

Min rumbled a low-throated warning, her gaze fixed on something through the panes of leaded glass.

“Are you saying my plan doesn’t meet with your approval?”

Min hissed, tail flicking sharply.

Audie stepped to the window and drew aside the dust-coated brocade draperies.

“What’s the matter, Min? Now, remember, you promised to leave those thrushes alone.” The girl peered out to discover what had set her friend aflutter. A touring car, painted the most charming shade of robin’s egg blue, was gliding down the long drive to the house. Few vehicles ever ventured their way. And hardly any came that were of the motorized variety.

“A visitor?” Audie exclaimed. “Or perhaps another Wayward Girl?” It had been nearly two years since the last Wayward, Katy Van Aken, had joined the household. It was tight quarters for the seventeen of them but they would make room for one more. Always room for one more.

Min jumped to the nearest shelf, dislodging an entire row of books. Audie scooped them up, intent on returning them to their rightful places. She could easily resist the temptation of paging through *Mrs. Paul’s Manners for the Modern Young Lady*, but it was not as easy to avoid the siren’s call of the other titles: *Nethery’s New World Atlas*, *The Peoples’ Proverbs* by Professor Helen Moon Kettelman, *Fair Criminals*, *Foul Minds* by Detective P. Gardella, and *Conversational French* by D. Curtis Regan and V. Sathre.

Her reshelving task had scarcely begun when a bell sounded. It was not the doorbell, which had mysteriously ceased working the very day Mr. and Mrs. Witherton disappeared at sea, but the

Gathering Bell, which sounded when Miss Maisie gave a sharp pull on the purple velvet rope in the parlor. At that chime, the girls were trained to stop whatever they were doing and assemble in the parlor, no matter where they were in the house or yard.

Min bounded out the window.

“See you tomorrow!” Audie called. Like her fellow Waywards, she, too, ran to the parlor, unaware that she still cradled the above-mentioned titles in her arms. She was equally unaware of one other important fact: that she would not see her feline friend on the morrow.

All because of the Commodore.