



## TLC SHOWCASE

Tara Crowe

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## Introduction to *Little Mice*

In the Canopy Complex, no one grows old. Age is for the little mice – the donors far below who bleed so the privileged can thrive. Seventeen-year-old Astra Fairwood has never questioned the system. Why would she? As the daughter of the Chief Enforcer, her future is secure: a life of parties and privilege. Until everything is taken from her.

Cast out of the Canopy and condemned to the Donor Zone, Astra is forced into the very world she was raised to fear. But the Canopy taught her to fear the wrong thing. The real threat was never the Zone...

I wrote the first draft of my debut novel *Little Mice* in about a year, with no previous novel-writing experience and no creative writing courses behind me. I'd always dreamed of being a writer, but unfortunately, my manuscript just wasn't very good. I managed to make it marginally better with some editing, then put it in a (metaphorical) drawer while life, work and family carried on.

Then one day I heard about TLC manuscript assessments, and I realised this was exactly what I needed. Not a friend or relative telling me my project was great, but honest insights from a real writing expert. I was matched with the wonderful Wendy Meddour, who was hugely encouraging and able to laser in on exactly what needed work. She advised me to further develop certain themes and lean into what made the book original. This advice transformed my manuscript. The following year, *Little Mice* won a writing competition, which led directly to a publishing contract – and this is in large part thanks to Wendy and TLC. I am forever grateful to them both, and I am hugely excited that my creation will be out in the world this autumn.

## Extract from *Little Mice*

Stark white walls. No furniture. A collection of girls slumped on the floor. I pause at the entrance of the holding room, absorbing the scene of silent figures before finding a vacant spot among them. As I lower myself down, the frigid tiles seep through my flimsy skirt, dimpling my legs with goosebumps. *I can't believe I'm here.*

During the journey, I confronted the Enforcer. "Why was my transfer date changed?"

"I don't know anything about altered dates," the Enforcer said flatly. "I'm just following orders."

*Following orders!* I wish my father had heard that. I imagined him appearing, bellowing at the Enforcer, 'Where do you think you're taking my daughter?' But of course no such rescue came.

The journey was swift. With the Enforcer's priority pass, the lift cabin didn't stop. The landscape flashed past quickly – glass spires gleaming among lush green skygardens. I glimpsed the circular balcony of my Academy, the rotating museum dome, the Founder's great tower spearing the sky.

We reached the ground, and the Enforcer gripped my arm, dragging me onto the dingy street. Above us, Canopy skyscrapers loomed like watchful giants, their shadows creating a perpetual twilight. Flashing advertisements pierced the gloom as competing music blared from cluttered shop fronts. Pairs of Enforcers stood guard at each tower entrance, their opaque helmets reflecting the neon signs.

The Enforcer shoved me into a black vehicle, and we sped through the city, past security checkpoints and tower bases, finally stopping before an ugly, squat building with a pokey line of windows. And now I am here, in this bare, soulless place. Having queued, been health-scanned, and queued again. Now I am here. Waiting.

I glance at the other girls in the room. One fiddles with her FLiX in an agitated manner, as if baffled by its dormant blankness. Another picks her cuticles until spots of blood appear.

It's strange to think we all share the same blood type. In the Canopy, I rarely met another AB. I search for other similarities, but we're a disparate group. Some are tall, others short. Pretty, plain, dark-skinned, fair. Many wear bright make-up, have tattoos and piercings. It's startling – Canopy people never indulge in such displays, preferring

to emulate the elegance of the past. As Lucile likes to say, 'Classic never goes out of fashion.'

Only one thing stands out. We are all young.

"Hello, I'm Ashley, your Transition Officer." A shabby man enters the room looking like an oversized teddy bear. His navy uniform is untucked, with a small stain on the lapel.

"I know this must be difficult," he says, "but I'll try to make your transition as smooth as possible."

He asks us to form a line and we obey, shuffling our feet reluctantly. I wonder what would happen if someone refused. Ashley's language is soft and conciliatory, implying we have a choice. We don't.

Ashley moves between us with quiet efficiency, issuing donor codes and transition packs. A black mouse mark is imprinted on our left hands.

When my turn arrives, Ashley pauses. "I met your father once," he says softly. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

After the formality of the process so far, this personal touch is unexpected. Tears prick my eyes, but I blink them away. I can't cry here.

He removes my FLiX, replacing it with a new ID band with a dull grey screen, and a code etched in the bottom corner. "You'll receive your schedule through this, along with any orders or announcements," Ashley says, "but it's strictly one-way communication."

I stare down at my hand mutely. The skin looks alien with the mouse mark upon it, and I miss the silver FLiX which held my whole life – photos, movies, memories. Without it I feel strange, disconnected.

We are told to change into one of the outfits in our transition packs, and Ashley leaves the room. I open the pack, pulling out a pair of plain trousers and a grey button-up shirt. I'm not obsessed with fashion like Lucile, but as I gaze down at the clothes, my spirits sink. Grey. *Could they pick a more depressing colour?*

I feel the fabric with my fingers and suddenly I'm back at the last donor fundraiser. My task was sorting through second-hand clothing, and as I sifted through the discarded items, I wondered which donors would receive them. How they felt, what their lives were like...

## About the Writer

Tara Crowe spent her childhood with her nose buried in a book and loves all types of fiction, from historical epics to futuristic dystopia, devouring anything that transports her to another world.

After university, she spent a decade in publishing sales at The Guardian and New Scientist before moving into early years education, where she taught phonics using storytelling, puppets, and a fair amount of enthusiastic (if questionable) singing.

More recently, Tara worked at Ingenious, a company making collagen supplements. She was fascinated by the increasingly clever ways science can trick our bodies into looking and feeling younger, and the inspiration for her novel *Little Mice* came from a news segment about young blood plasma being used to rejuvenate older people — a concept she found both intriguing and unsettling. The idea lingered: What happens when youth itself becomes a commodity?

*Little Mice* is Tara's debut novel, and she is currently working on a sequel. She lives in South London with her husband, teenage children, an adventurous cat, and a spectacularly lazy dog.

