Its unprecedented popularity during the Victorian period owes much to its appeal to working-class or artisan audiences and to a ready-made nexus of so-called illegitimate theatres (theatres forbidden by law to perform drama involving the spoken word unaccompanied by music). Despite the decline in the popularity of melodrama on stage by the end of the 19th century, its influence both during and after its heyday has been immense. For a century, melodrama was virtually ignored by literary criticism. Its popular cultural status was anathema to the Arnoldian tradition of literary criticism dominating approaches to “literature” from Matthew Arnold’s day to that of his disciple F. R. Leavis, so influential in English studies until the 1960s. How come lesbo-Victorian romps are suddenly so popular? Sarah Waters tells all to Stephen Moss. As reviewers like to point out, Waters puts into her Victorian melodramas all the sex that contemporary writers could only hint at. “Victorian writing doesn’t have any explicit lesbian sex,” she says, “but it does have a lot about gender and sexuality. I’ve been reading a lot of fiction from that period and there’s something very grown up about it compared with all the Victorian melodrama,” she says, “so I’m hoping it’s going to make for a more grown-up sort of novel about relationships.” Fingersmith is the third slice of engrossing lesbian Victoriana from Sarah Waters. Although lighter and more melodramatic in tone than its predecessor, Affinity, this hypnotic suspense novel is awash with all manner of gloomy Dickensian leitmotifs: pickpockets, orphans, grim prisons, lunatic asylums, “laughing villains,” and, of course, “stolen fortunes and girls made out to be mad.” A damning critique of Victorian moral and sexual hypocrisy, a gripping melodrama, and a love story to boot, this book ingeniously reworks some truly classic themes. -Travis Elborough, Amazon.co.uk. From Library Journal. In Victorian London, the orphaned Sue Trinder is raised by Mrs. Sucksby, den mother to a family of thieves, or “fingersmiths.”