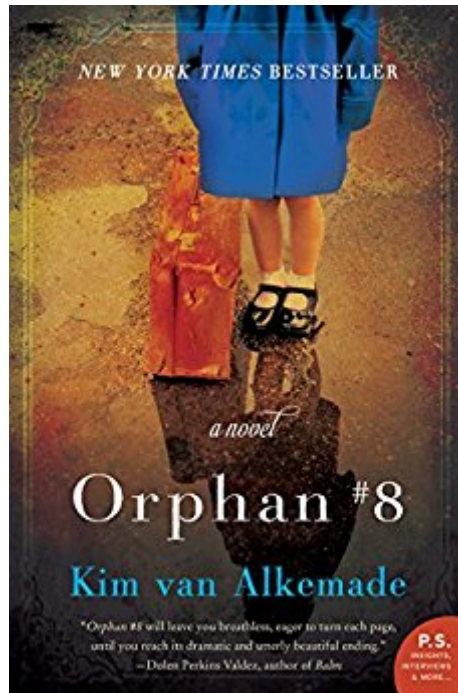




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Orphan #8: A Novel



Synopsis

In this stunning new historical novel inspired by true events, Kim van Alkemade tells the fascinating story of a woman who must choose between revenge and mercy when she encounters the doctor who subjected her to dangerous medical experiments in a New York City Jewish orphanage years before. In 1919, Rachel Rabinowitz is a vivacious four-year-old living with her family in a crowded tenement on New York City's Lower Eastside. When tragedy strikes, Rachel is separated from her brother Sam and sent to a Jewish orphanage where Dr. Mildred Solomon is conducting medical research. Subjected to X-ray treatments that leave her disfigured, Rachel suffers years of cruel harassment from the other orphans. But when she turns fifteen, she runs away to Colorado hoping to find the brother she lost and discovers a family she never knew she had. Though Rachel believes she's shut out her painful childhood memories, years later she is confronted with her dark past when she becomes a nurse at Manhattan's Old Hebrews Home and her patient is none other than the elderly, cancer-stricken Dr. Solomon. Rachel becomes obsessed with making Dr. Solomon acknowledge, and pay for, her wrongdoing. But each passing hour Rachel spends with the old doctor reveals to Rachel the complexities of her own nature. She realizes that a person's fate is not always set in stone. Lush in historical detail, rich in atmosphere and based on true events, Orphan #8 is a powerful, affecting novel of the unexpected choices we are compelled to make that can shape our destinies.

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Customer Reviews

View larger Author John Searles talks with Kim van Alkemade John Searles (JS): Could you talk about how this book started? Kim van Alkemade (KA): My grandpa grew up in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in Manhattan and I was interested in learning more about his childhood, so I went to the Center for Jewish History in New York to look at the orphanage's archives. That's where I read about a group of children who'd had X-ray treatments at another orphanage from a female doctor. I was really intrigued by this and I began to imagine a situation in which one of the children who'd had these treatments could confront the doctor who had experimented on her. JS: What sort of research did you do for the book? How much of your family's history did you put in? KA: In addition to the archival research I did, I met and interviewed people who had grown up in Jewish orphanages, and I traveled to Colorado and went to Coney Island. My family history informs a lot of the book. Harry Rabinowitz is based on my great-grandfather, who was in the garment industry on the Lower East Side and who ran off to Leadville when he abandoned his family. Fannie Berger is based on my great-grandmother, who worked as a counselor in the Reception House of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. She's the one who told me the story about a girl who came into the orphanage with such beautiful hair that she refused to cut it off. JS: What was the most surprising thing that came out of the research? KA: What was it that you hadn't expected? KA: The fact that so many women were involved in medical research on children. Dr. Alfred Hess worked with two different women in his research on scurvy and pertussis at the Hebrew Infant Asylum, and the doctor who actually gave the X-ray treatments I read about was named Elsie Fox, a 1911 graduate of Cornell Medical College. Dr. Fox went on to run a school for training X-ray technicians in the Bronx and she was a member of the New York Academy of Medicine. JS: The role of a carer is one that you explore throughout the course of the story. Can you talk about the different types of carers (from Dr. Solomon, to Mrs. Berger at the orphanage, to Rachel herself as a nanny and a nurse) you have in the book and what parts they play in the overall story? KA: Everyone involved with the orphanages takes their role seriously in caring for the children, but they

have very different ideas about what that means. For the doctors, they believe they are learning important lessons that will help all children, but that goal makes them lose sight of what is best for the individual children under their care. Mrs. Berger gives the children a mother's love while they are with her, but she leaves them unprepared for the strict rules of the main orphanage. When Rachel meets the Cohen family, she is used to helping children in the infirmary so being a nanny comes easily to her, but when she starts working in the tuberculosis hospital she finds she has a competence for health care that gives her a sense of identity as well as a profession. I'm not sure Rachel ever quite understands how caring she actually is. JS: Medicine, with its healing and also its damaging properties, plays a big role in the book. What was it about the duality of medicine that drew you to it? KA: I don't know much about medicine or science, so I was actually intimidated by this aspect of the story. I did a lot of research and I asked a very accomplished woman who has a doctorate in nursing to read the manuscript for me. It turned out to be a fascinating situation to explore. Doctors have power as well as knowledge, and how they use these can so easily shift from help to harm. In the novel, Dr. Hess is someone whose research agenda blinds him to the suffering of the children, while Dr. Abrams shows Rachel tremendous kindness. For Dr. Solomon, proving herself as a woman in man's profession complicates her relationship to the children even more. JS: After starting out as one of many interchangeable orphans, how does "Orphan #8" learn to embrace her differences? KA: I think for Rachel there's a gradual acceptance of her physical differences, but I'm not sure she's ever completely reconciled to the effects of the X-rays. The moment she decides to leave the orphanage and go to Colorado is when I see her claiming her individuality and beginning to make her own decisions. In her romantic life, she often feels isolated as well as marginalized because her sexuality is considered "unnatural", but there's never any question about where her heart is. JS: Do you have a favorite scene? KA: The scene between Dr. Solomon and young Rachel in the dark X-ray room is one of the last scenes I wrote for the novel, even though it happens early on in the story. When I learned from my research that radiologists used to sit in complete darkness for fifteen minutes before reading X-rays, I wanted to put my two characters together in that situation. It's my favorite because it brings the child and the doctor together in such an intimate way, yet each of them has a completely different idea of what that encounter means.

A book inspired by true events is always intriguing to me because as I'm reading it I can't help but wonder about the specifics. Who of the characters is based on real people and how much of the plot is real or imagined? There are big ethical issues at the center of this story. Rachel, a nurse at

the Old Hebrews Home in mid 1950's discovers that her new patient is someone from her past . Flashbacks to four year old Rachel in The Hebrew Infant Home show her suffering at the hands of cruel doctors who perform medical experiments . She realizes that the patient was one of her doctors. Will Rachel take revenge now that she has the opportunity? Chapters alternate between her present as an adult and as a four year old in the orphanage. The flashback chapters were very difficult to read , sickening actually. Imprisoned in a crib behind glass she becomes a victim of cruel experimentation that leaves her without hair , which won't grow as a result of exposure to X-rays as a child. There are further physical implications when Rachel discovers she may have breast cancer. The descriptions of what is done to Rachel is chilling, and so very sad to think that was done to innocent children , already enduring tragedies of losing parents . Administering chloroform, strapping them down , force feeding barium - it was heartbreaking to read what Rachel and other children endured . This is reminiscent of what we know about medical experiments done to the Jews in the concentration camps. How shameful that this was allowed here in this country . I know there are other examples of this and this is equally horrific. While all of this has happened to Rachel, she is also struggling with her brother Sam moving in and out of her life when she always thought he would be there to protect her. In addition we see her coming to terms with and understanding her sexuality as a young girl and as an adult having to hide her love for another woman from those around her . This is a terrific effort for a debut novel and Kim van Alkemade has told a heart wrenching story that grabbed me from the first chapter. The author does tell us in a note that the story was inspired by her grandfather and his mother who are indeed characters in the book . Whether or not Rachel was a real person doesn't matter since Rachel represents one of the many orphan children who suffered in the name of medical research. Thanks to HarperCollins and Edelweiss for this ARC.

Kim van Alkemade has written several articles in magazines that have been described as "creative non-fiction", whatever that may be. While researching her family genealogy, she came across a reference to a Medical Journal article that shocked her and she felt compelled to tell the story, but in a fictionalized novel. Some of the people in this book are actually real. Some are actually her relatives. While the girl, Rachel Rabinowitz and her brother Sam are works of fiction, what happens to Rachel, is not. This is an important book that raises questions about science and its practice, and whether you can forsake justified vengeance and forgive the unforgivable. In 1919 the Jewish family, the Rabinowitzs, which consists of Harry, the father who works in a shirtwaist factory, who is saving for the chance to have his own contractor business, goes to Society meetings to make contacts,

and is hoping to move his family up to the nicer neighborhood of Harlem; Visha, his wife, who wants another child and dreams of moving out of their three room tenement, where she looks after two borders and the two children, Rachel, four (who is known for her temper tantrums that only her brother can seem to stop) and Sam, six, who just started school. When Harry forgets his lunch, Visha and Rachel go to the factory, which Harry has forbidden them to do. When they return home, an angry Italian mother and her eighteen-year-old daughter show up at her house telling her that Harry, who met the girl at work, has been courting her daughter and has gotten her pregnant. It's hard to tell which ticks her off more: that her daughter is pregnant by a man already married or that he is really Jewish. Visha realizes that he has lied to her. There is no money being saved up. When he returns home, the two get into a fight and Harry accidentally cuts Visha's neck, in front of the two children. While she bleeds to death on the floor, Harry quickly packs up and runs away. The children end up going to social services, where a nice woman is determined to find a foster home for them. Unfortunately, the two will have to be split up for now due to their ages, until she can find a home. Sam goes to the Hebrews Orphanage Home and Rachel goes to the Infant Hebrew Home. When she gets there, the social worker is told that Rachel will have to spend a month in isolation to make sure she does not have any diseases. This was 1919. Many of the diseases that we have vaccines for now, could kill children back then. A month later when the social worker returns with the news that a nice Jewish couple in Harlem is willing to take them both, she finds that Rachel now has both measles and conjunctivitis and will not be well enough to be taken in by this couple anytime soon, so she looks for another placement for the couple. The Infant Home would be seen as perhaps, hellish, to those of us today, and I have to admit it rather is. The nurses do not believe in touching the babies. Dr. Hess (a real person, who was the son-in-law of Strauss, the founder of Macy's, which is where the Home gets its money for fancy equipment) runs experiments on the children. He sees them as no better than lab rats, in that they are actual human subjects whose situations, such as home life, background, diet, etc...are the same and therefore variables can be controlled, which is a rarity in scientific research. Rachel's life changes when she meets Dr. Mildred Solomon a female doctor, an oddity of the time, who is there to do her residency and wants to run her own experiment, get published, establish herself, and get out of there. This book goes back and forth between Rachel's past growing up and her present as a nurse in the Hebrews Home for the elderly. Rachel has many secrets. One is that she is a lesbian whose partner is away in Miami, for some unknown reason. When Dr. Solomon arrives on her floor, the hospice ward, terminally ill with bone cancer, she recognizes her and talks to her and finds out that she was a doctor at the Infant Home when she was there. She has always wondered what disease she had that necessitated some form

of treatment. When she goes to the Medical Library she uncovers the horror of what happened in the Home and to her. She was "material # 8". She also discovers that because of that she is in grave danger of developing a serious disease that could kill her. After leaving the Infant Home almost two years later, Rachel goes to the Hebrews Orphan Home, where she meets Mrs. Berger at reception, who works there while her son, Vic, is housed there. Vic's best friend just happens to be Rachel's brother Sam. While finally reunited, Sam has become hardened by his years in the Home where the bells ring constantly for every possible thing and the orphans respond like Pavlov's dogs sensing exactly when the bell is going to ring and making sure they are where they are supposed to be so they don't get slapped by the monitor (an orphan who is in charge of level and is usually two years older) or worse. There are 1000 kids in the home [my alma mater Catawba College, in Salisbury, NC, only had a little over 800 students and much more space], which is a large castle that takes up a whole city block in New York City. The book has a photograph of it. It may seem really bad, but actually, a state home is so much worse. At least here they receive dental care, medical care, three meals a day, and decent clothes and shoes to wear. Sam, determined to look after his sister, bribes one of her monitors, Naomi, to look after her. Naomi gives her an "acceptable" nickname because it's better to pick what others call you than to have them call you something worse. Naomi is good to her and treats her almost like a friend and it's not just because Sam bribes her. The years pass and more things happen in Rachel's life, some good and some bad.

[Reviewer's Note: a character in this book, Amelia, is given special treatment because she has long, beautiful red hair. I, too, have always have had long red hair, but I have not received special treatment for it. From fifth grade to middle school, I was teased for it, until I took a hardback book, corner-side pointed out, punched Scott Baker in the stomach with it. Guys wanted to date blondes, not red-heads. In college, I discovered men who felt differently, and I admit, that now, I am a bit vain about my hair. But I have never forgotten the teasing or the seeming obsession by the world for blondes]. This is an incredible book. Is Dr. Solomon a Dr. Mengele? She thinks a bit like him, but what she does (and Dr. Hess for that matter), while inexcusable, is nothing compared to what Mengele did. Rachel wants an apology, but it does not seem that she is going to get it. She is given an opportunity to work the night shift where it's just her and one other nurse and she has already been holding back on the amount of morphine she has been giving Solomon for days. Now she is in control. She has the power. She can cause Solomon to suffer and then kill her for what she has done to her. But is Rachel capable of such an act? Can she really do this? The question you find yourself asking is what would you do. And the answer is not an easy one.

Quotes

“You listen to me now,” Mrs. Giovanni

said, "Nothing is your fault. Never think that again. God can see inside you, right into your soul, and He knows you did nothing wrong. Remember that, Rachel, if you ever feel alone or afraid." Looking at the C-ray images, Rachel imagined this was what God saw when he looked at her. Where on the radiograph, she wondered, did it show right from wrong?--Kim van Alkemade (Orphan # 8 p 90) If good only came to those who deserved it, the world would be a bleak place.--Kim van Alkemade (Orphan #8 p 336)

Orphan # 8 was Rachel Rabinowitz, but she didn't start out as an orphan. This story follows Rachel's life, through all of the ugly twists and turns at the beginning, to the kindness of strangers who helped her along the way and eventually to Rachel herself as she must come to terms with her own past in order to face her uncertain future. Rachel's story exposes some of the ugly truths about our society, including medical experiments on groups of orphans, to the exclusion and negative societal attitudes about homosexuals, but her story also inspires hope through the kindest of strangers or even the hopeful advice from a holocaust survivor. Ultimately Rachel must decide for herself how to deal with the woman who inflicted cruel and unnecessary experiments on her as a child, when that same doctor is admitted to her ward in the hospital. In her treatment of this doctor, Rachel must confront the ghosts of her past and find the courage to deal with her own health issues that she has been neglecting. The writing was well done, but felt somewhat repetitive at times. The story switched easily from past to present with great historical details. Rachel's story is all the more tragic when considering that while the novel is fiction, according to the author's website, medical research on children in orphanages was a common practice, and that there really are children who grew up like Rachel. I really enjoyed this story and would recommend it to any fans of historical fiction. Orphan #8 is a challenging subject matter and the author does a good job of exploring the themes of abandonment, betrayal and forgiveness.

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