



Orphan Number Eight

Kim van Alkemade

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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 reveal to Rachel the complexities of her own nature. She realizes that a person's fate—to be one who inflicts harm or one who heals—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.

Orphan Number Eight Details

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From Reader Review Orphan Number Eight for online ebook

Jason says

Sigh, I so wanted this to be something other than it was. The premise is intriguing and has promise. But the novel became something different for me.

Randomly, there is a homosexual sub-theme in the novel, which is essentially the main theme. Obviously I take no issue with homosexuality in literature (in fact, I don't think the representation is enough), but it just didn't need to be here. It did not work, and it did not add anything to the story. The plot should have already been interesting enough to run with. Something that irritated me was the contrived usage of "she" as a reference to Rachel's lover throughout the book. It acted as a ploy to keep us guessing who the lover was, but I didn't pick up the book expecting there to be a love story, so I felt a bit annoyed and cheated.

Something I enjoyed was the blend of narrative voices. The author uses first person narration as well as third person limited narration. She also often changes up the time line, jumping from past to present from one chapter to the next. Normally I wouldn't enjoy this, but the author managed to make it work here, and I think it's because she changes the narrative style when she changes the timeline. My least favourite narration is first-person, so it was nice to have it broken up into pieces, making it more palatable. That being said, van Alkemade sometimes inadvertently switched from third-person limited and third-person omniscient narration and it really threw me off and confused me.

The first third of the novel really had me hooked, but then it lost traction and I started to lose interest in Rachel and the story. I'm sure I missed a lot of detail because I would read pages and pages while thinking of something else and then feel too lazy to go back and re-read what I'd missed.

In the end, this was a page-turner, but for all the wrong reasons. I turned the pages to get it over with, not because I cared about the story.

Maya White-Lurie says

Though I was initially startled by the switch in point of view, the narrative has great flow. Characters are complex, and I was kept in suspense.

Also, it's excellent to see some lesbian representation in historical fiction.

Connie says

Author Kim van Alkemade was researching her own family history when she came across a purchase for wigs for eight young children who had lost their hair after X-ray treatments in a New York Jewish orphanage. The powerless healthy orphans had been used in medical research to see if X-rays could shrink the tonsils. Orphan #8 is Rachel Rabinowitz, a fictional character who received the largest dose of radiation as the subject of Dr Mildred Solomon's research.

Fast forward to 1954: Dr Solomon is admitted to the hospice unit where Rachel works as a nurse. Dr Solomon's terminal bone cancer was caused by her exposure to X-rays as a radiologist. Rachel now has a serious health problem due to the intense X-rays received when she was a toddler. The book alternates between Rachel's early life and 1954 as it reveals the secrets of Rachel's past and the choices she made. Rachel confronts the doctor, hoping for an explanation and an apology. The tables are turned in 1954-- Rachel is the person with power since she administers the medication, and Dr Solomon is a powerless patient in pain. Rachel has the choice of taking revenge or offering forgiveness.

We would cringe today over how large institutions treated orphans in the 1920s, but there was a huge need for orphanages during that hard economic time. The book presents many moral/ethical issues, a look at history during the Depression and World War II, the role of women in that era, and the difficulty of a same sex relationship. Orphan #8 is an interesting, thought-provoking book with book club material at the end of the book.

MissSusie says

I didn't feel like either the current or past storyline was fleshed out enough, at times it felt disjointed and I think it was because of not knowing enough about the characters. However I did find the story fascinating I never knew anything about these test done at orphanages' also after reading some stories on the authors website I really wish she would have went deeper into these characters I feel like she just brushed the surface and I wish I knew more.

I hated the "romance" aspect of this book every time she grabbed someone's face and pulled them into a kiss I was no longer in the story and Rachel's sexual orientation had absolutely nothing to do with it , if she had been grabbing men's faces I would have felt exactly the same. To me there was no reason for these it added nothing to the story and in fact detracted from it.

I can't put my finger on what it is I don't like about the narration, I'm not sure if it's the tone, cadence or accent that I don't like but there were times when the narration really annoyed me and other times I didn't mind it. I am not sure who narrated what either so it may be that I like one narrator over the other but I am just not sure.

This book was okay; I liked the storyline about the Orphans Home even though I wish I knew more. I guess in the end this book just fell flat for me.

2 ½ Stars

Nancy says

Orphan #8 is based on historical events that occurred in orphanages, much like the LSD testing on soldiers and prisoners in the 1950s to determine the effects on the men. Instead of LSD, the children had horrible experiments performed on their bodies, ravaging them using introduced measles, pertussis, scurvy, and radiation to track digestion to possible use as a noninvasive tonsillectomy.

There are two timelines; 1954 and beginning in 1918 or so. The problems I had with the story begin when Rachel is 4 years old and the circumstances that lead to her becoming orphaned. Sure, it could happen, but it seemed very forced and her father was pigeon holed into an unbelievable caricature who was selfish and had no real regard for his wife and children. It was like the author objectified the father figure without developing him. Interesting that Freud is later brought up. The story lacks character development of any male figure beyond the perfunctory, one dimensional.

So Rachel grows up to become a nurse in a geriatric Jewish home and a new patient shows up. The very doctor who subjected her to the worst of the radiation exposure. Great moral dilemma as more of Rachel's horrific childhood is told in alternating chapters and, knowing the common knowledge of extended radiation exposure, cringing at the horrors she endured. On top of the medical experimentation, children were not people and their social and emotional needs were discarded.

That really was enough story to engage the reader but then the author contrived the story of Rachel's homosexuality into it. Ummm, okay? I'm not a big fan of gratuitous heterosexual scenes that seem arbitrary and don't contribute anything to the storyline. But the sudden homosexual scene at the library, although not gratuitous, it was sudden and didn't fit the rest of the book. Was the author educating the reader about the medical experimentation on helpless children or was she making her own political statement? Was her purpose information or affirmation? It didn't fit in this particular story.

As much as I found the information about the experiments on the orphans to be enlightening, I found the lack of character development and the introduction of homosexuality to weaken the story. I realize it's politically unpopular to share an opinion contrary to accepting all kinds of love, but for once I would appreciate some degree of respect for having a differing opinion. Had I known about the homosexual aspect, I wouldn't have read the book. Once it was introduced, I wanted more information about the experiments and the children but was very disappointed in having to wade through Rachel's love affair and sloppy fondling of a strange woman in the library. Otherwise, I would have recommended it to book clubs. Now, not so much.

?Karen says

Book club read #9 Sept 2017.

If you had a chance at revenge for something awful that someone did to you, and you wouldn't get caught, plus no one would ever suspect what really happened, would you go for the revenge or opt to show mercy instead? Rachel Rabinowitz, raised in a Jewish orphanage where experiments with radiation were performed on the children, years later finds herself nurse for the doctor who carried out the "treatments." Rachel has had many issues in her difficult life, but this may be the biggest yet.

I've read this for a book club discussion that is coming up, and what I want to discuss most is not the revenge aspect, but what makes up Rachel's character -- how she went from a sweet little four year old to a deceitful teenager and adult. She was a conundrum to be sure. I think our discussion should be most interesting.

Jennifer says

Orphan #8 is a standalone, historical fiction novel written by English professor and now author: Kim van

Alkemade. This is her first published novel.

The synopsis of Orphan #8 immediately intrigued me and as I began the audiobook, I felt engaged right away. The main character: Rachel Rabinowitz is a work of fiction, but her story is based on very real people, places, and events from 1920's America. Orphan #8 follows Rachel through alternating timeframes, first when she is a young child who has been committed to an orphanage and then as an adult who continues to be physically and emotionally haunted by her young life experiences. This setup creates two distinct storylines that alternate as the story progresses.

In her book, Ms. Alkemade has layered many important elements for readers to reflect on. The ones I noted include: the treatment of children in social services, the loss of cultural/ spiritual/ familial identity often experienced by children in care, the emotional and social stressors commonly associated with appearing physically different than others, historical views towards women's independence and sexuality, the beautiful sense of connectedness felt among the Jewish people, and the power we all possess to hold blame or let go, to seek retribution or offer forgiveness, to inflict harm or show mercy. I enjoyed Orphan #8 and am so glad I read it. Check it out!

Note: Ms. Alkemade spent eight years researching and writing this novel and it appears to be a deeply personal project for her and her family. I read her entire website, amazed at the multiple true stories that inspired the direction of this book. If you end up reading Orphan #8, I highly recommend that you check out Ms. Alkemade's website [HERE](#) to gain some insight into how personal this was for her. I like the book even more now because of it.

My favorite quote:

*"To Sam I said, "Sometimes I ask myself if there's any limit to the harm that people can do to each other."
"No", he said. "There's no limit."*

Raven Haired Girl says

I was hoping the narrative would concentrate primarily on Dr Solomon and Rachel's encounter along with flashbacks to her orphanage days, instead it laid a heavier hand on Rachel and her relationship with her girlfriend. I wasn't expecting a plot focusing on romance, needless to say I was letdown.

The plot was too busy for my taste. I wish Sam and Rachel were developed more, we were merely granted a sampling of their personalities limiting our familiarity on a personal level, a picture painted of what they endured not their essence.

Disturbing to realize medical experiments were performed on orphaned children. The entire orphanage experience is heartbreaking. I found myself questioning what would I do if in Rachel's shoes, love it when a plot possess a dilemma, forcing me to question my thoughts and actions to those of characters involved.

Super fast paced read with lots going on posing several questions and what would you do scenarios.

For this and other reviews along with giveaways visit <http://ravenhairedgirl.com>

Angela M says

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 .

RoseMary Achey says

When Rachel Rabinowitz is four years old a tragedy befalls her family and she and her older brother are sent to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in New York. Rachel remains at the Asylum until age 15.

The Hebrew Orphan Asylum was one of the best known and most generously endowed American orphanages. Between 1860 and 1919, some 13,500 children were admitted to the home. Few children, however, were adopted, since most were actually half-orphans, members of a family which one parent (usually the father) had deserted and which the surviving parent could not support.

The orphanage had a capacity of 1,755 children. It was self-sufficient enough that it was able to survive for a week on its own after it was cut off during the Blizzard of 1888. After a dysentery outbreak in 1898, caused by impurities in the city's water supply, left seven children dead, the building installed its own water filtration system. During the influenza epidemic of 1918 not a single child in the orphanage died.

In this fictional account, while at the Asylum Rachel is the subject of several dangerous medical research experiments that leave her permanently disfigured. We follow Rachel's life through adulthood and continue to see how these medical tests have a profound and lasting effect on her life.

As an adult nurse, by chance, Rachel is assigned to care for the dying Doctor that inflicted so much pain and suffering on her as a small child. As Rachel cares for the old doctor, she teeters between revenge and mercy all the while praying for some form of acknowledgment and apology.

There is so much for a book club to discuss with this novel! The only potential stumbling block I see in this book moving to the top of various best sellers lists is the protagonist's personal life. As the publishers write-up states "A stunning debut novel in the vein of Sarah Waters' historical fiction.....". If you have read Sarah Waters, you will understand what I mean.

This book is scheduled to release on July 7, 2015. Place it on your wish list now, submit an pre-order, you will thoroughly enjoy this historical fiction.

Alison says

Seems to me that the jacket summary of a book should include the major themes of the book, but this one does not. The fact there is a major lesbian story line in this book isn't a spoiler but should be made known to potential readers. Then, the author decides to include explicit bedroom scenes and that ruined it for me completely. I liked the premise of Rachel coming face to face with the Dr. who performed x-ray experiments on her as a child but this arc was overshadowed and treated as almost an afterthought.

Ashley says

I really enjoy historical fiction books that expose me to real history I never knew about. I can't say that I'm surprised that medical *professionals* exploited orphans for medical research. It's much easier to use someone who cannot fight back for themselves and has no one to fight for them. I understand that Dr. Solomon and the real doctors like her thought the good that would come from the research would outweigh whatever bad things may have happened to these children, but to dehumanize even one person for the sake of the common good is not worth the cost.

My husband and I have considered adopting a child instead of having a child who is biologically ours. This story most definitely made me want to make that a reality even more than what I was already considering. I cannot even begin to image how difficult and possibly damaging it must be to grow up with no one. It was clear from early in the story that Rachael craved female affection... and how could she not? Even when her mother was alive, they weren't especially close.

I was a little put off by how the author made just about every man Rachael came into contact with a jerk to the extreme. Are there bad men in the world? Absolutely. But there are also a lot of good men who would never dream of exploiting or hurting anyone for personal gain or personal desires.

Amy says

Although I give credit to van Alkemade for bringing history to light, this book would have been so much better in the hands of an author such as Kristin Hannah or Jodi Picoult - an author who can tell the story without alienating or even offending the reader. This book had such potential, and for me it was ruined by the characters and lack of development. Very jarring scenes stuck in the storyline that broke the flow of the story and took away from the historical knowledge she was sharing. I felt almost like the author hated men - and maybe she thought we would feel that way as she tries to make amends by having Rachel reflect toward the end that not all men are bad, like her brother and Vic. That was a last minute "Hail Mary" to save face in a book where men are depicted horribly. I only kept reading this book for the historical information and that ended a little over 1/2 way through the book. And, I disliked Rachel from the very first pages when I found her to be an annoying, screaming, brat of a child. Her lying, manipulative, deceitful ways continued. I never felt sympathy for this character. I did feel sympathy/empathy and anguish for those in real life, but this character did nothing to endear me. The only character interaction that was remotely believable and satisfying was when Rachel stated to the doctor that she felt the treatment she endured was similar to what the Jews in concentration camps endured. This could have been such a wonderful book had it been developed properly. It seemed almost like she tried to infuse too much of the 2015 society into 1950's to advance her own agenda. Read this only for the historical knowledge that is being brought to light. Better yet, just flip to the back section and read her research and check out some other books about it.

v says

On the back cover the publisher describes this as "A stunning debut novel of historical fiction set in the forgotten world of New York City's Jewish orphanages". And while this novel does deliver a degree of "historical fiction" on that subject, I felt like there was a hidden agenda being presented that the publisher chose not to mention.

Perhaps the author felt that making the Rachel, the main character, a lesbian, would garner more sympathy to her plight as an abused orphan. It actually detracted from the events that seemed more crucial to the story. Silly, contrived scenes had me rolling my eyes. By the end of chapter 6, I wasn't sure I wanted to continue reading. However, I was interested in what drew me to the book to begin with, so I forced myself to continue. But by the last chapter, when the writing turned needlessly explicit, I was just done with it and gave up.

The author does have talent, but I feel like she allowed a personal agenda get in the way of what could have

been a more meaningful novel. I would have liked to have read more about her relationships with her brother and those who helped her along the way. There was so much more depth that could have added regarding the aspects of vengeance vs. forgiveness. It just felt like the author breezed past these opportunities.

I appreciate that goodreads does ask for and allow us to give our honest opinion freely and hope that you'll keep that in mind. I realize not everyone will feel the same way about this novel and that's okay. But, I do wish I had found a review that had revealed the direction the story goes in before buying this book. I can't help but feel this book belongs in another genre than historical fiction. A better written cover synopsis on the part of the publisher would be appreciated too.

Nancy says

Great historical snapshot of orphanages and the medical experimentation occurring on the orphans at the time. Told in two timelines; when Rachel is 4 and enters the orphanage and experimentation begins, and then Rachel is forty something and working as a geriatric nurse when a new patient comes under her care - the very doctor that caused so much suffering for Rachel in the orphanage.

Both stories unfold and the reader quickly realizes the horrible conditions of said orphanages, although they may have been preferable to living in the street. Rachel is flooded with memories of her time in the orphanage and how she suffered, particularly subjected to radiation exposure over and over again. She is then faced with a dilemma of showing payback to this doctor or forgiveness and professionalism.

Great historical information, well written in the perspective of a child hungry for attention. The downside was the lack of character development and contrived situations like the way Rachel becomes an orphan. Can a father figure be more flat and predictably selfish? Just not believable. Then there is a surprise storyline that Rachel is a lesbian. Surprise sloppy groping with a stranger yet longing for her lover to return to her. Soooooo, was this a story that informed the reader about the medical experiments on children in orphanages or was the author contriving and inserting her political statement? The latter? I'm just not a fan. More than that, it just didn't fit with the story. It was a meandering that distracted from the core of the story.
