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22 Orphans

Tjibbe Veldkamp
Philip Hopman, illustrator
Kane/Miller Books (October 1998)
Unknown $13.95 (32pp)
978-0-916291-81-5

Kane/Miller, which specializes in children's books from around the world, adds a sturdily constructed, beautifully crafted work of children's literature from Tjibbe Veldkamp of the Netherlands. Twenty-two Orphans, poor in play materials but with a wealth of imagination, enjoy themselves immensely - until the arrival of a well-meaning but repressive new headmistress. Their liberation over this difficult circumstance is all the sweeter as it frees the authoritarian headmistress as well, resulting in a satisfying denouement for all.

Within the short pages of this delightful book, Veldkamp narrates the story of the inventive denizens of the towering, Gothic country orphanage with stylish assurance and subtle wisdom. Both author and illustrator capture the essence of child's play, while remaining mercifully free of both sentimental slop and the smart-alecky ironical wink all too current in children's tales.

Hopman's color-washed, squiggly line drawings convey a gravity-defying zest and sense of adventure completely in tune with the narrative. The pandemonium of creative play is captured in the many small drawn details (such as 22 different expressions on falling orphan's faces), which a child is free to explore during successive readings of the story. 22 Orphans contains every bit as much panache and originality as that classic story Madeline, and provides a fine, fresh, counterpoint to the latter's simplistic rhythms and current mass-marketing effort.
JOSEPHINE ARROWOOD (September / October 1998)

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