



Esme Dooley and the Kirkkomaki Circus

Holly Trechter

Jane Donovan

Jane Donovan, Illustrator

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Esme and Tommy's deep kinship serves as a warm reminder of the power of loyalty.

Set in Zumbro Falls, Minnesota, in 1904, *Esme Dooley & the Kirkkomaki Circus* is an eventful novel for middle-grade youth. Jane Donovan and Holly Trechter enrich the story of resourceful, eleven-year-old Esme, her cousin Tommy, and their grandmother, Papuza, through an old-fashioned melodrama that fuses peril with friendship. Delightful illustrations styled as cut-paper silhouettes add nostalgic flair.

When Papuza discovers that her lost childhood friend, Katrina Kirkkomaki, may be near, she sets out with Esme and Tommy to find the Kirkkomaki Circus Katrina had once dreamed of creating. When they arrive, the trio learns that the circus is being sabotaged. The search for the villain responsible for a series of malicious stunts takes a slow-burning route. The story unfolds in brief episodes that highlight Esme and Tommy's wonder at encountering a circus for the first time. Whether entering a mermaid tank, riding an ostrich, or joining a snake charmer on stage, Esme thrives on new experiences.

Brief chapters dart between Esme and Tommy's perspectives, with occasional chapters featuring the villain and Papuza. As the mystery gathers force, Esme's conjectures, which tend toward rapid assumptions, lead to a few red herrings. When the villain is finally found, a swift confession reveals the motive. Despite the mystery's simplicity, the work remains entertaining as an exploration of revenge and forgiveness. The denouement especially highlights a talent for tempering dark topics—which include attempted murder and arson—with exaggeration, keeping them from becoming genuinely frightful.

More than the suspenseful elements, it's the children who stand out. Esme is filled with impulsive ideas that sometimes result in comedy. She's also a resilient girl with a challenging past, an orphan, an optimist, and the leader who balances Tommy's cautious, protective nature. Together, they form a fascinating team: one rushing headlong into risky situations and the other becoming an unintentional scapegoat. Details of their lives emerge through shared memories and daily outings that focus on interactions with circus performers and animals. The liveliest episodes display Esme's tendency to leap into situations with fearless aplomb, and Tommy's near-saintly patience enduring each moment.

At times the writing turns toward exclamatory remarks that plainly reveal the children's enthusiasm and surprise. Scenes focus on continuous action rather than on descriptive, atmospheric details. The broad approach is perfectly suited to the vintage melodrama. Gorgeous red, pink, white, black, and gray illustrations enhance the novel, functioning as their own silent film running throughout the book.

Esme and Tommy's deep kinship serves as a warm reminder of the power of loyalty. This sequel to *Esme Dooley* is a worthy follow-up to an original adventure.

KAREN RIGBY (August 14, 2017)

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