



Classics in Short No.28: Madeline

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Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on Ludwig Bemelmans' **Madeline**.

?She was not afraid of mice; she loved winter, snow, and ice ?? Who else but ?

Madeline <!--break-->

Memorable incipits No. 1

?Alice was beginning to get very tired ?? etc. etc. ?

Memorable incipits No. 2

?In an old house in Paris / that was covered with vines / lived twelve little girls in two straight lines ??

Well ? anyone can do it

Desk drawers up and down the land are surely stuffed with unpublishable mss. with wonderful opening sentences. The difficult bit comes with trying to sustain the inspiration down to the end. The old house in Paris with its 2 x 6 occupants may never have escaped out of its own gates had not Ludwig Bemelmans succeeded in making Something out of his Almost-Nothing tale. (Madeline gets appendicitis, awakens envy among her eleven school-fellows when they visit her in hospital ? ?on her stomach was a scar! ? ? and they all want appendicitis too.) Construction and execution blend to make an organic whole, enhanced rather than fractured by Bemelmans?s quirky mannerisms.

The text

is not, as is sometimes said, in rhyming couplets but rather follows a wayward progression of rhymes and rhythms that the author adjusts, sometimes disconcertingly, to meet the pace of his story. Those hypnotic opening lines are soon modified to more jog-trot measures which can vary from the famous *accelerando*: ?? and afraid of a disaster, / Miss Clavel ran fast and faster? to the Key Stage One plonking of ?Madeline soon ate and drank. / On her bed there was a crank.? But the gears shift with the movement of events and there are subtleties such as the coda reprise of the bedtime verses and the *diminuendo*, both vocal and typographical, of the four closing lines.

The pictures

seem similarly eccentric, with eight pages of full-colour included in the first half of the book and none in the second. But that too is governed by pacing, since the colour-work is mostly scene-painting (right from the start the publishers presented the book as select *scènes de Paris* as well as a simple storybook ? and that dodge was repeated with **Madeline in London**). The line ? and wash ? drawing though, brightened only by a two-tone yellow, sweeps gleefully along with the action, the apparently casual images containing ? as with all the best cartoonists ? more subtlety than you expect. (Compare, for instance, the varied treatment of the two bread-breaking and teeth-brushing scenes.)

is the essence of **Madeline's** success ? he was his own man in all things, rather than the product of any system. Born in 1898 in the Austrian Tyrol, he was the son of an hotelier (and became one himself for a while, *vide* **Hotel Splendide**, 1941) and for his first six years he spoke only French. Schooled in Regensburg ? the setting for his delicious satirical novel, illustrated, unusually, with colour plates, **The Blue Danube** (1945) ? he necessarily learned German, only having to switch to New York English when he emigrated to America in 1914. He claimed to speak no language without a foreign accent, which helps to account for his distinctive style as a writer. His wish, in some measure fulfilled, was to become a painter and part of the fun of his dozen or so children's books (for him and his audience) was the dynamic matching of word and illustration. **Madeline**, first published in New York in 1939 and London in 1952, displays his natural gifts as draughtsman and Dufy-ish colourist, but he couldn't be doing with the technology of the thing and the colour-separating was done by Kurt Wiese.

Successors to ?Madeline?

were predictable (and there was one precursor, for she appears briefly ? with Proustian spelling ? along with her eleven companions and Madame Severine, their tutor, in the now long-vanished Bruges of Bemelmans's richly individual **The Golden Basket**, New York 1936). **Madeline's Rescue** is the best of the sequels, justly winning the U.S. Caldecott Medal for 1953, and it introduced verbal and graphic echoes from the first book ? a practice that continued with decreasing spontaneity in four further stories: **Madeline in London** (1953), **Madeline and the Bad Hat** (1958), **Madeline and the Gypsies** (1959) and **Madeline's Christmas** (rechauff  of a magazine story ? 1961), all available from Scholastic.

Miss Clavel meets Barbie

At least two short films have been made of **Madeline** and these, along with the commerce in character-merchandising, have inevitably led to the production of various dolls and doll-dressing kits for separate sale. Miss Clavel features in the range but I know not what lies beneath her habit.

The illustrations are taken from the Scholastic edition of **Madeline** (0 590 13337 3, £6.99 pbk).

Brian Alderson is Chair of the Children's Books History Society and the chief children's book consultant for **The Times**.

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