ForeWord Reviews

JUVENILE FICTION

Charlotte Bakeman Has Her Say
Mary E. Finger
Kimberly Rose Batti, illustrator
Little Pear Press
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It's the fall semester of her sixth grade year and Charlotte Bakeman contemplates her relationship with her best friend: "We liked to be together. I think maybe it was because we sort of balanced one another. Francie gave me courage to try new things, and I slowed her down sometimes when she got carried away with a silly idea." The 1930s outside world intrudes on their small town New Hampshire lives in the form of the Depression.

It's a period of awakening for the shy Charlotte, who makes some new friends—her pesky, but talented classmate Leona Fontaine, and the down-on-his luck, but voice of wisdom Armand Boudreau. Prejudices threaten Charlotte's secure surroundings, and readers will identify with emotions of anger, jealousy, pity, bewilderment, and finally, courage.

Finger, who studied at Radcliffe and served as an editor at Harvard University Press, taught Children's Literature for twenty-five years at Roger Williams College. The illustrator, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, has captured the awkwardness and innocence of this era.

There is a fair amount of historical background. For example, Boudreau, looking for work, mentions the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and praises the new president, Franklin Roosevelt. The author incorporates difficult concepts in easily assimilated forms, like when Charlotte reflects that another classmate's father lost his job and "now he drove a rickety old truck around town collecting rubbish, and Jimmy pretended he didn't see him when the truck rattled by the school."

As the school year progresses, Charlotte realizes her own shortcomings: "Of course I was scared, but I didn't want to admit it. Being shy makes you scared of lots of things." She learns to confront this aspect of her personality and also the homegrown prejudices involving her French Canadian neighbors and their Catholic religion.

The pre-teen narrator observes and grows so much in the fall of her sixth grade year that she, indeed, is able to finally have her own say!