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Young Adult Fiction

Nonna's Book of Mysteries
Mary Osborne
Rachael McHan, illustrator
Lake Street Press
978-1-936181-16-2
(June 3, 2010)

"'Truly, through the process of alchemy, many miracles shall be wrought.'" Emilia Serafina, the heroine of *Nonna's Book of Mysteries*, clings to these words from her great-great-great grandmother's strange book, *A Manual to the Science of Alchemy*. Though not an alchemist, the fourteen-year-old might just need a miracle to escape a loveless marriage and fulfill her dream of becoming a painter in Renaissance Italy.

Though her passion to paint is stronger than anything, painting apprenticeships in Florence in the 1400s are not available to females, and as the book opens, Emilia's attempt to disguise herself as a boy has just failed. Utterly devastated, and faced with her father's intention to marry her off, she follows the advice of her mother to consult the old, mysterious book recently passed down to Emilia. In it, her mother tells her, she will find a deep wisdom, passed along from generation to generation of women. The words of alchemy might well come to be a guide for her everyday life.

Though initially the book seems odd, filled with science and philosophy from ancient Greece and Egypt, Emilia soon finds hope and strength from its passages, and understands that, as the book says, "[the alchemist] is charged with the responsibility of writing the story of his life." Soon, her talent and passion earn her an apprenticeship with a kind foreigner, and when a handsome and wealthy patron, Franco Villani, seeks her hand in marriage, Emilia is thrilled at first. However, she soon realizes that Francois a dangerous man, and when her treasured book is stolen, Emilia must once again find a way to break through the nigredo, the "phase of utter darkness" in the alchemical process, and find a way to find true love and happiness.

Mary Osborne's historic details and descriptions of Emilia's everyday life make Renaissance Florence a vivid and accessible place, and may even inspire some readers to learn more about the art and culture of the period. The charming characters, compelling plot, and the

suspenseful and sometimes magical atmosphere make the book an easy read for advanced tween and teen readers. Symbolic parallels between Emilia's journey and the processes of alchemy and iconography add depth. Perhaps most memorable are the strong messages of empowerment and the rewards of determination and strength of spirit.

In *Nonna's Book of Mysteries*, Emilia defies what is expected in order to create a life filled with happiness. Readers will enjoy a unique storyline, identify with Emilia's personal struggles to become a good person, and be encouraged to step beyond expectations to pursue their own passions and happiness despite the odds.

Alicia Sondhi