Clarion Review

Juvenile Fiction

The First Secret: A Magic Recipe
Elina Stamatatou
Lydia Venieri, illustrator
CreateSpace
978-1-4752-1671-4
Four Stars (out of Five)

Cooking is a common metaphor used in literature for both adults and children and in humorous works and serious ones alike. In *The First Secret: A Magic Recipe*, Elina Stamatatou offers a spiritual, contemplative take on the classic cooking metaphor.

The story is narrated by Katerina, a five-year-old girl who lives with her sister, Ios. One day, the girls bake a cake with their mother, and the simple experience gradually transcends into a feeling of pure happiness and tranquility: "We laughed and hugged each other tight. We had learned the first secret…LAUGHTER, that old, magical recipe: Each day, with the people you cherish the most, mix peacefulness, joy and love, adding laughter and inner strength to light up the world."

The First Secret is an emotional book. It is not tragic, but it is also not solely about good things happening to the characters. Rather, Stamatatou compels the reader to examine his or her own life in the same way Katerina does, as a means to find the happiness within.

The story is both expansive and grounded in realism. As a collaboration of text and art, it attempts to set a tone and move the reader into a contemplative state of mind. From this place, even younger readers will be able to step back and look at the big picture, allowing for a space that lets them truly appreciate their families, friends, and the simple joys of a good day.

There are several sweet moments here as well as a few that extend a bit too far toward the saccharine. The illustrations, by Lydia Venieri, are rendered with heavy and powerful blacks that lend substantial depth and weight but can also make the images appear murky.

Overall, Stamatatou's book is well done. It will be best enjoyed, however, by those readers who can easily adapt to a story where narrative is not the whole experience nor even, perhaps, the primary one. The volume is just the thing for a family reading on a cold, wintry

night, but maybe less so for solo readers looking for a chapter-book style of excitement.

Peter Dabbene