

★ **The Little Palace****Jeffrey Erlacher****Mary P. Williams, Illustrator**

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Narcisse is the virtuoso black cat chef at Le Minipalais and the central figure in Jeffrey Erlacher's delightful middle grade novel, *The Little Palace*. Animals and humans work together at the Paris restaurant, an oasis of food, art, and camaraderie during the waning years of World War I. It is an unabashedly Francophilic tale, full of alluring descriptions of architecture, cuisine, and art, balanced with philosophic ruminations on the cruel things humans do to each other and to animals.

In Erlacher's fanciful world, animals can communicate with humans and are "attuned to humanity's needs." Even cats and dogs are fast friends. An artsy group of literarily-named restaurant regulars demonstrates each night, trading odes and artwork instead of fighting.

Narcisse's motto is "The Equality of Fraternity and the Liberty of Life," and everyone is welcomed inside Le Minipalais, whether they can only pay for their meals with poems or are dripping with pearls. Patrons include the mayor's wife and a revolutionary dog-artist, Joao, who is not above announcing that, since orphans are roaming the streets, he should pee on the wife's leg.

There is a lot of sadness during this war-ravaged tale: Narcisse worries about her father at the war front, especially when she learns that he has been wounded. When restaurant problems arise, she and her friends sensitively work to understand the unhappy backstory and motivations of a disgruntled character's actions. Important messages about kindness, animal cruelty, and the need for art, beauty, and friendship are poignant. The mood is lightened by the humorous antics of sprightly animals, illustrated by Mary P. Williams in a delightful way.

*The Little Palace* is a unique and charming fantasy that's loving when it comes to French culture and that imparts good lessons about living simply, well, and "in harmony with fellow beings."

RACHEL JAGARESKI (January / February 2020)

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