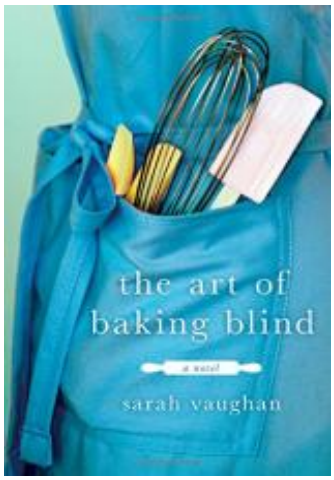
The Art of Baking Blind

by Sarah Vaughan



About the Book

There are many reasons to bake: to feed; to create; to impress; to nourish; to define ourselves; and, sometimes, it has to be said, to perfect. But often we bake to fill a hunger that would be better filled by a simple gesture from a dear one. We bake to love and be loved.

In 1966, Kathleen Eaden, cookbook writer and wife of a supermarket magnate, published *The Art of Baking*, her guide to nurturing a family by creating the most exquisite pastries, biscuits and cakes. Now, five amateur bakers are competing to become the New Mrs. Eaden. There's Jenny, facing an empty nest now that her family has flown; Claire, who has sacrificed her dreams for her daughter; Mike, trying to parent his two kids after his wife's death; Vicki, who has dropped everything to be at home with her baby boy; and Karen, perfect Karen, who knows what it's like to have nothing and is determined her façade shouldn't slip.

As unlikely alliances are forged and secrets rise to the surface, making the choicest pastry seems the least of the contestants' problems. For they will learn --- as Mrs. Eaden did before them --- that while perfection is possible in the kitchen, it's very much harder in life.

Discussion Guide

1. Blind baking is a technique for ensuring a perfect pastry case yet, as Jenny muses, ?so much can go wrong.? The impossibility of perfection is a major theme of this novel. Who, in your opinion, is the character that personifies this trait most clearly? And what lies behind the ?be perfect? compulsion exhibited by many women?

2. The germ of this novel came when the author started baking with her small children. At the same time, she noted the competitiveness of mothers running school cake sales. Is this an expression of a hankering for a simpler, gentler --- and perhaps fictitious --- time? Or is it about a need for validation particularly among highly-educated, stay-at-home

mothers?

3. At the heart of the book is the idea of family. For most of the women, baking, or cooking, represents the idea of ?home? --- or an idealized home. Why do we invest food with such significance? And what do you think of the characters in the novel who fail to perceive food in this way?

4. Food can also be about control, as exemplified by Karen, who ?had long known that the brief elation of surrender just cannot compare with the thrill of denial.? What do you think of the depiction of disordered eating in the novel? Is the portrayal sympathetic --- do we understand Karen?s behavior?

5. ?Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.? The Yeats? epigraph is recalled by Jenny as her sponge curdles and she thinks of her disintegrating marriage. Where else is baking used figuratively to represent personality traits, or to mirror a character?s experience?

6. Many of the women in the novel are struggling with a change in their lives --- and it?s this dissatisfaction that leads them to apply for the competition. Jenny has lost her old role of wife and full-time mother; Karen is struggling with the idea that her body is aging; Vicki is struggling to adapt to being a stay-at-home mom who may only have one child. Only Claire --- whose mother applies on her behalf --- is not at such a crossroads. Does this make her a less dynamic, or less sympathetic, character? If not, why?

7. Are there any characters in the novel that you found unlikeable? What made you feel that way?

8. Did you expect Kathleen?s story to end as it did? Did you find that satisfying?

9. In my own family, we have passed down favorite recipes. What are yours, and is there an equivalent of an *Art of Baking* in your life: the culinary Bible that has shaped the way you bake?

Author Bio

Sarah Vaughan studied English at Oxford and went on to become a journalist. She spent 11 years at *The Guardian* as a news reporter and political correspondent before leaving to freelance and write fiction. Her first thriller, ANATOMY OF A SCANDAL, was an instant international bestseller, translated into 24 languages, and is available to stream on Netflix as a worldwide number one series starring Sienna Miller, Michelle Dockery and Rupert Friend. Her bestselling novel, LITTLE DISASTERS, has also been optioned for television, as has REPUTATION, her fifth novel.

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Critical Praise

"Warm, wise and inspiring, an utterly delicious novel."

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