



Motherhood well-served

RECENTLY noticed *Dying for Cake* included in a recommended Mother's Day book list decorated with white chrysanthemums. Well, why not? With its story about motherhood, embedded with madness, infidelity, antidepressants, insatiable cravings, suicide, bad-hair days and even a missing baby, you could consider it, in a wicked moment of black humour, the perfect gift.

Dying for Cake is the first novel by Brisbane writer Louise Limerick who, according to her biography, has several older siblings and three young children, so she knows a thing or two about motherhood. It also cites her interest in baking, borne out by the luscious, if paradoxical, role played by cake in the book.

The story is about five thirtysomething women whose friendship is forged by their bond as the mothers of small children and fostered by meetings at a local cafe in suburban Brisbane. Into this cosy, chaotic world of coffee, children, wavering self-esteem and juggling acts — a mix any young mother knows — comes a cataclysmic event. Amy, the new baby of one of the group, simply disappears, pushing her mother's postnatal depression into full-blown psychosis.

With the mother, Evelyn, now in a psychiatric hospital, the remaining four are left to cope with the mystifying event. Despite their obvious concern, however, none gives much credence to the notion that a missing child is a police or bureaucratic matter. It is more a spur to their realisation that, for all its joys, motherhood is a constraint and their deep longings begin to surface in different ways.

It is an intriguing plot, but not without an inherent tension. Daggy Joanna, an engaging character and a mean cook, finds she is perpetually "dying for cake": immaculate

Dying for Cake

By Louise Limerick, Pan Macmillan,
316pp, \$22

Andrea Stretton

Susan feels a strong urge to go back to university; Clare longs to become an artist; and good-hearted Wendy tries to blank out her intimate knowledge of Evelyn's crisis.

These desires, set against Evelyn's many tortured monologues from hospital, about the baby and her life, create a narrative that at times moves uneasily between high drama and what is close to a comedy of manners. The neat ending, without giving it away, rushes to a pleasant closure for everyone.

Where Limerick's writing shines is in her buoyant evocation of the sticky, constant, exasperating and loving realm of small children and their carers. In one chapter a child's garden-themed birthday party is attended by a whole class of preschoolers dressed as ladybugs and butterflies. Inevitably, there are tears before bedtime as the event turns into a madcap but entirely convincing disaster, including a child who swallows the poisonous garden seeds innocently wrapped in pass-the-parcel, and the mother who starts the day with Zoloft and ends it with a sigh of relief by biting dreamily into a slice of birthday sponge.

There are many such delicious scenes in this novel, even if they are too often spooned into a formulaic plot. Reading it is like enjoying the first tastings of a promising cook, who may yet discover the chef's secret of letting go of the recipe and running, like a mother, on instinct.



1300 655 191, Australian Books Direct, \$19.80