



## The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake

*Aimee Bender*

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## The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake Aimee Bender

The wondrous Aimee Bender conjures the lush and moving story of a girl whose magical gift is really a devastating curse.

On the eve of her ninth birthday, unassuming Rose Edelstein, a girl at the periphery of schoolyard games and her distracted parents' attention, bites into her mother's homemade lemon-chocolate cake and discovers she has a magical gift: she can taste her mother's emotions in the cake. She discovers this gift to her horror, for her mother—her cheerful, good-with-crafts, can-do mother—tastes of despair and desperation. Suddenly, and for the rest of her life, food becomes a peril and a threat to Rose.

The curse her gift has bestowed is the secret knowledge all families keep hidden—her mother's life outside the home, her father's detachment, her brother's clash with the world. Yet as Rose grows up she learns to harness her gift and becomes aware that there are secrets even her taste buds cannot discern.

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake is a luminous tale about the enormous difficulty of loving someone fully when you know too much about them. It is heartbreakingly funny, wise and sad, and confirms Aimee Bender's place as "a writer who makes you grateful for the very existence of language" (San Francisco Chronicle).

## The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake Details

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Author : Aimee Bender

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## From Reader Review The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake for online ebook

### Helene Jeppesen says

This book was sweet, but also very puzzling!

It deals with 8-year-old Rose whose mother bakes her a lemon cake. As she's sitting in the kitchen, tasting the cake, Rose's tasting buds start evolving and scarily make her able to taste her mother's deep down feeling and emotions. It turns out that from that day on, Rose can taste everyone's feelings and emotions based on their food she's eating.

The book takes an even more puzzling turn later on when Rose is a lot older, and we get to follow her experiences growing up with this shocking and scary ability. However, I actually didn't quite understand why we had to follow her over so many years for the story to move on - that's one of the aspects that puzzled me a bit.

I liked how Rose's voice and observations fit her age. I also liked the book's insight into Rose's family and their dynamics (or lack thereof). I'm not really sure I yet understand the overall meaning of the story, but it was fascinating and sweet and that's good enough for me. Now I just need a piece of lemon cake to go with my reflections on this novel and its actual meaning :)

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### Kelly says

You know what this book is? It's Chinese food. As soon as it's brought up you start salivating, almost tasting how delicious each morsel is going to be. The minute you dive in, your body humming with anticipation, that first bite is everything you hoped it would be. But, after awhile, the bites become more forceful, the taste more dull and average, ending with a full belly, but still not feeling full. And the minute you put your fork down and give in to your limit, you know in half an hour you're going to be hungry again.

Now, I could write a review detailing all the shortcomings and accomplishments that Bender managed, but in the end, all this book really was was Chinese food. Good in theory, but ultimately forgettable.

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### Kelly says

This plot was built on an interesting premise - the protagonist could taste every preparational element that went into the food she ate, including the undetected, subconscious emotions of the people who handled it. But this brings pain on the protagonist, as she seems to find only one or two human beings, throughout the course of her young life, who do not possess a divided emotional self that is racked with pain or frustration that permeate the food they make(query whether that is an ultra-, or un-realistic portrayal of the emotional lives of American individuals). In exchange for this pain, which physically crumples the protagonist at one point, I'd expect the author to give us some sort of payoff - perhaps some insight. But instead we trade the rest of the world's one-dimensional perspective of the mother for the protagonist's equally un-enlightening two-dimensional understanding of her mother as cheerful on the surface, and "lost" underneath. Ok, her mother is "lost." What next for her? For us? Why is she lost? How should we reconcile that with her cheerful exterior? Is there any hope that she can unify her two selves?

I could also have done without the family of people with weird superpowers - I thought her brother's "ability" to "become" or "vanish into" inanimate objects was just plain deeply creepy, and were we supposed to think that her father could heal the sick, but refused to? Also, what a weird choice to have her grandfather walk around with a "strap" over his nose. Couldn't it have been a familiar implement, like a handkerchief or a scarf, though used unusually? Or maybe he grew his mustache out?

Finally, I thought the real potential of the story was left largely untapped. At the very end, after years of alternate emotional suffering and factory-made junkfood, the protagonist actually (finally!) begins to make her own food. And it tastes like a factory, because she doesn't know herself, probably because her own emotions are as hidden from her as everyone else's she's been tasting all these years are from their conscious selves. Here's a bit of intrigue, then. The idea that we don't know ourselves, and we have to work to do that, and that knowing ourselves holds some sort of fulfillment and comfort, was, I thought, the best idea of the book. But the character doesn't get there until the very end of the story we read, and the cover closes just as she's beginning to possibly learn to do that - and after her supremely creepy brother has promised to only vanish into one chair, which she will keep in the closet, which I'm sure is symbolic of something too dark and sad to bother with. C'mon, Ms. Bender - you've used some strange, lawless science fiction to hold quite the mirror up to ordinary humanity, here - now where is our potential? What promise is there in life, in us? Just that we all learn to quietly cope with this difficult world, and carve out a careful closet for ourselves, instead of completely withdrawing from it? ...Really?

Ugh. I'm glad to be leaving this one behind.

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## Nancy says

### Posted at Shelf Inflicted

Nine-year-old Rose Edelstein discovers her "gift" when she takes a bite out of her mother's lemon cake. This gift is more of a curse, as Rose becomes privy to her mother's emotional turmoil that is masked by her cheerful and outgoing personality.

This quirky novel is certainly not for everyone, and I wasn't quite sure it was for me either, but I quickly got sucked into Rose's life as she discovers family secrets and learns more about herself. When the emotions get too overwhelming for her, Rose resorts to eating as little homemade food as possible. As Rose gets more accustomed to her talent, she experiments, explores, and grows.

Rose is a quiet girl with few friends. Her father is a decent man, but he's somewhat distant, and her brother is a loner.

I can't help but admire her father, who thinks of those who are less fortunate than himself.

*"He made a good salary but he did not flaunt it. He'd been raised in Chicago proper by a Lithuanian Jewish mother who had grown up in poverty, telling stories, often, of extending a chicken to its fullest capacity, so as soon as a restaurant served his dish, he would promptly cut it in half and ask for a to-go container. Portions are too big anyway, he'd grumble, patting his waistline. He'd only give away his food if the corners were cleanly cut, as he believed a homeless person would just feel worse eating food with ragged bitemarks at the edges – as if,*

*he said, they are dogs, or bacteria. Dignity, he said, lifting his half-lasagna into its box, is no detail."*

Overall, I enjoyed this very unusual novel. It was not depressing or heavy, but left me with a lingering sadness as I thought about my own childhood.

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### **Flannery says**

You've got to be f\*&king kidding me with this. Oh, I see, her brother has a "skill," too. HE TURNS INTO FURNITURE. What a joke. That is not a skill unless you are Professor Slughorn, and even then, it is kind of a lame one. And the fact that he either seems to have no desire to actually live a life because he didn't get into college or he chooses to be a chair forever? Nice one Aimee Bender. Well, have a nice life CHAIR in the closet of the restaurant. Lame.

And WTF was up with the fact that the whole book we are led to believe that Rose and George have some sort of amazing friendship and understand each other. It was a real kick in the metaphorical balls when she had to go to his wedding. Lame.

Oh, and the dad doesn't go into hospitals but we still don't really know why nor do we really have any growth in him or any of the other characters. So the grandma is quirky and sends crap to their house? Interesting, but we don't really know why. So the mother has an affair? Interesting, but we don't really know why. This entire book is like one long wish for more explanation and a tons of her brother turning into furniture. Just freaking cut out that entire plotline. I just barfed in my mouth a little bit.

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### **Tracy says**

Reading this so I can talk and/or rage about it with Mattie.

I left a lot of rage in my comment on another review, but I will just say this book was an utter disappointment. The lack of quotation marks was annoying, but I could have gotten past that. Rose's ability was interesting in and of itself, but the author failed absolutely at doing anything interesting WITH it ... for a good half of the book it was an afterthought, an irrelevance. And when it was mentioned, it was disjointed, incoherent and lacked any internal consistency in what she read in the food meant. The factory thing in particular was ridiculously annoying.

Rose was boring. Maybe she purposefully made herself so, to contrast the too-interesting-mother (who also went nowhere in this story, despite a dramatic setup) and grandma (again, contrived and pointless) and brother (whose storyline I will not go into at length except to say it was a waste of space) but since none of that was ever explored, she was just boring. And, it seemed, bored. She didn't want to do anything with her life for 90% of it and it pretty much seemed to be 'because my brother didn't do anything with his life and I'm sure he had more potential than I did'

That was a disturbing trend, in a way - Joseph is more important than Rose to her mother, to her

grandmother, to George, to everyone else, including the author herself. And yet for no reason and his story is only hinted at, not told. Waste of space. (rage)

Anyway, worst book I've read so far in 2011 and possibly one of the worst books I'll ever read in my life. One star may be harsh, but it's on the scale of 'this COULD have been great, considering the premise so it gets extra penalized for failure'

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### **Katherine says**

I'm several chapters in and annoyed at the author's choice to completely ignore the style rule of punctuating dialogue with quotation marks. Hello? There's a reason for the rule, it alerts the reader that the words enclosed within those quotation marks are *spoken* words and allows the writing to flow smoothly.

Over the last few years we've seen more and more books published where writers attempt to be innovative or clever by messing with standard punctuation and in my opinion few have been successful at it. Here it's just plain silly, as if the author couldn't rely on her writing alone but had to resort to tricks to stand out.

I'll give it a few more chapters...

I finished the book and have very mixed feelings about it.

The writing is good and quite lovely at times, especially in describing the food and the emotions it evokes for Rose. However, two things keep me from recommending the book. First, that Bender chose not to use quotation marks, I was hoping that after completing the book I would see a reason for the decision but I still see none. It's confusing to the reader and adds nothing to the experience that I can determine. Still puzzles me. And second that halfway through the book the author switches the focus from Rose and her special "gift" to her brother and the two stories never fully coalesce. Where Bender takes this tangent moves the story out of the realm of I-can-buy-this magical realism to the land of truly bizarre. She does attempt to tie the two together in the end but for me it was less than successful and ultimately unsatisfying.

I'd give the book three stars for moments of wonderful writing, but I'm taking away one star for the bad choice of punctuation, which includes not only the complete lack of quotation marks but also the baffling use of "--" as a part of dialogue, *and* the strange schizophrenic nature of the story. So two stars--it was okay. Not recommended unless you're a die-hard fan of the author or enjoy more experimental writing.

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### **Oriana says**

**after:** oh dear. oh Aimee. i love you so, have loved you so, continue to love you so, but i am so sorry to say that this book was a bit of a disappointment. it felt... unfinished. hinted at. like an early draft, almost. i know how stunning you can be, and it isn't that this is *bad* or anything... it's just not up to the standard i expected. which is probably partially my fault. probably just like *The Ticking Is the Bomb*, just like *The Learners*, just like *The Great Perhaps*, just like all post-*Rant* Palahniuk, i'd even set you up for failure with this, because i was so sure it was going to be spectacular. and it was *good*, Aimee, it was *nice*, but "nice" when i was expecting "magnificent" is more of a letdown than if it'd just been bad.

**during:** ooh boy I'm so happy to be reading this!

**before:** omigod omigod omigod omigod omigod omigod omigod omigod i CANNOT WAIT for this book to be mine.

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### **Miki says**

Okay - I realize I'm not deep, and I can very seldom get the hidden meaning in what I read, but this is ridiculous. I can't find a single reason why anyone would read this book.

SPOILER \* SPOILER \* SPOILER \* SPOILER

Rose is a young girl who learns that she can taste the emotions of people in the food they cook. After some time, she can taste the "layers" in the food all the way back to where it was produced, for example, she can trace - by their taste - eggs to the actual county where they were gathered, the field where lettuce was grown, and whether the pork chops for dinner came from contented pigs. In this way, Rose finds out her mother is sad and empty, to the point she can't eat the food her mother prepares. Her father is withdrawn and distant, and her brother is a genius and just plain weird.

And that's it. Neither Rose nor any member of this family ever finds any kind of resolution. Her mother has an affair - which Rose finds out about by eating dinner - her father is just sort of there, and her brother has a habit of disappearing. This, Rose learns, is because he becomes furniture. Yes, you read that right. He becomes furniture because he can't deal with the real world. Sometimes the bed, sometimes the dresser, but mostly one particular folding chair of a card table set. Rose marks this chair, and in the final scene asks her brother to from then on only go into that chair so she'll know where he is. He promises. The END.

This book was highly recommended by the library and the book page in the Columbus Dispatch. Not me.

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### **Audrey says**

I loved it. I know there are a lot of mixed reviews out there about this novel, but I loved it. (I have no prior Aimee Bender experience, so I had no expectations going in, btw).

I thought the writing was lovely and sharp, really one of the best parts of the novel. I wasn't bothered by the lack of punctuating dialogue. I wasn't bothered by the fact that this was a novel in which things didn't really happen -- because I think they did. They just happened very quietly, as quietly as Joseph turning into a chair. Just as much, though, I loved the characters and how they moved through this story -- trying to forge connections in the only ways they knew how, and trying to become who they are supposed to be (or with the case of the dad, maybe NOT become that person, as he had the "option" of working around his gift, which to

me adds another layer to Joseph's story). It's all heartbreak and evocative...just a little gem of a story, I think.

This is one of those novels that sticks with you for several days, offering up little bits and pieces until you see them in a new light and make the connections that Bender implies but never pushes.

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### **Alicia says**

This book had a great premise, but went absolutely nowhere. Ok, so she can taste people's feelings and exactly where the food came from. Seems like two totally different talents to me, but here are combined as one. I wish it would've only been people's feelings because i think the author takes an easy out with having Rose want to eat only highly processed foods because there is less human interaction. This gives Rose an easy way to not deal with her problem. I also thought the entire Joseph storyline was really weird. I know her brother was important, but he seemed to be almost more of the main character than Rose. Also the entire "no ordinary family" talk with her father was interesting, but felt wasted because nothing came out of it. Oh, your dad could smell people's feelings, i can taste people's feelings in food, that's nice. Then there was no more discussion of that until the end when we realize that Joseph has a really unique ability. I think this book was rushed and not fully developed.

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### **Kirstine says**

I have struggled for very long with how to review this book. Normally I can manage to spew out something at some point, but this has had me puzzled for so long. I simply don't know how to say what I want to say about it.

It was not what I expected at all. I expected a sweet, coming of age book. The kind of book you didn't necessarily have to take too seriously or think about for too long. Instead it was an incredibly tender and profound book that asks questions I don't quite know how to answer.

Imagine if you, whenever you ate something (no matter what it was), could taste the feelings and emotions of the person who made that particular food item. Imagine if this happened some random day, and never went away. And not just, say, "Oh, she's feeling happy" or "she's a little sad today", but every layer of every emotion they've had while making it. You feel exactly what they felt. It's a very original idea, and explains completely what people who, for some reason, feel left out, must feel like. What having a special talent or ability can do to you, what kind of pressure it puts you under.

The ability she's suddenly burdened with (because it *is* a burden) is surreal, of course, but the situations it puts her in are very realistic. How does one deal with one's family? What will your friends think? How do you explain this seemingly inexplicable thing to them? How do you live a normal life, when you have to live every day with something that seems so abnormal?

You find meaning in it, of course you do. You find a way to deal with it and you accept yourself in the end, but the how and the why and everything in between is so amazingly interesting and so well described in this.

The story with the brother is what really got to me. It was so tender and so tragic and so beautifully described. The circumstances that these people are in might seem magical or overly surreal, but they translate into something very real.

They can be metaphors for mental illness, autism, substance abuse, not living up to the expectations people have of you, or the expectations you have of yourself. Or they can be exactly what they seem. It's so normal and so surreal at the same time. And yet it showed me so many very human things, and I was incredibly touched by it.

More than anything this is about family, about making things work when they seem to fall apart, about being honest about yourself and trusting each other. And about coming to terms with who you are.

At least that's how I remember it.

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### **Jennie says**

The best thing about this book is the cover. I looked at it quite a few times before I realized the shadow wasn't reflecting the cake, but a girl; I'm guessing the narrator, Rose.

Upon first glance and the reading of the synopsis, I'm reminded of *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood which I haven't read in years and would like to skim through again.

And it was all downhill from there. I can't decide if I should go into detail here about how much I disliked this book or not. I probably should because this book is the first read for a new book club I'm in and I'm worried about sounding like a negative nelly when I first meet these new people. I could get out all my bad feelings here. But then part of me was thinking, why am I worrying, why can't I go and just be totally honest about how I feel about this book.

Rose has the weirdest eating disorder I've ever heard of: she can taste the feelings and true emotions of the person who prepared her food, as well as those who have handled the ingredients. One of the things I asked myself immediately was, why doesn't she cook her own food? I forgot about this question until I reached the end of the book where she does finally cook and attempt to eat her own food. It's hard for her, I guess she was facing her true self? I felt like there were so many missed opportunities about the food world. There are a few mentions of Rose tasting the exhaustion of strawberry pickers, etc. but no attempt to address the vast food problems we face today like fruit pickers, factory farms, and processed food.

This book has virtually no setting; I have never missed setting so much in a book. And listing street names does not count as describing a setting. I have no idea what time period this was supposed to take place in! I tried to not let it bug me, but it did. I guess I focused on it so much because this story was as dry as an overcooked piece of lemon cake. It was obviously contemporary, but since there is not a single mention of cell phones, and there are home phones and pay phones, my guess is it could be the 80s or 90s.

I felt like so much of this novel was trying to be weird, just for the sake of being weird. There were several things that I found intriguing: the door installed in Joseph's bedroom, the discarded objects sent to Rose's family from her grandmother, Rose's mother's affair with Larry, Rose's father who detested hospitals so much that he missed out on the birth of both his children. But I felt like these things were introduced and then dropped, or not enough attention was paid to them in general they were never fully realized. I took notes

in the margins in case I have to point to specific examples at book club and I found myself thinking and writing "?" over and over. There were whole passages that I just did not understand. I kept feeling like I was missing something.

Speaking of missing things, let's talk about quotation marks. Cormac McCarthy can write without quotation marks, but Aimee Bender, you are no Cormac McCarthy. I like to think that I have a progressive view of punctuation usage, but it's all over for me if your writing is not clear and I have to read many sentences over and over just to comprehend them. Most of the time I was okay with it, but there were enough times that I wasn't, that I feel it's necessary to mention it here.

Okay, and the worst part: Joseph turns into furniture!?!? I felt like I was taking crazy pills. Rose's affliction is almost believable (especially when we learn that her paternal grandfather suffered from a similar disorder), but turning...into...furniture? UGHHHH!

Normally I would have stopped reading this book a long time ago, but it's for book club and, honestly, I kept hoping it would get better, but it never did. I literally threw this book across the bed when I finished reading it.

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## **Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says**

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When I looked at my friends' reviews for THE PARTICULAR SADNESS OF LEMON CAKE, I noticed that almost all of my friends who read it gave it negative reviews. **After reading this book for myself, all I have to say is that this book proved to me that you can't always trust your friends.** (Sorry, friends!) Reading is such a highly subjective experience, and what works for you doesn't always work for someone else (and vice-versa).

After reading the summary, I will admit to rolling my eyes a little. "Oh goody," I thought, "an all-white retelling of LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE." Of course, my skepticism didn't stop me from wanting to read it anyway. Like LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE, TPSOLC is about emotions and food, and how they influence the characters around them. Unlike LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE, the main character, Rose, is a passive individual in the experience. She doesn't cook the food and transfer her emotions to others; she receives those feelings. There also isn't much in the way of romance, so it lacks the passion of LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE.

But did I think it was a *bad* book? No. Absolutely not.

When Rose eats a piece of food, she can immediately tell how the person was feeling when they cooked or prepared it; where the food was from; and whether it was organic or processed. **Can you imagine how bad your coffee would taste if the barista who prepared it was in a bad mood and you tasted her frustration and annoyance?** As you can imagine, this often results in highly unpleasant experiences and she avoids eating her own family's cooking after she tastes her mother's unhappiness in a piece of lemon cake and, later, the guilt she's feeling about an extramarital affair in a piece of roasted meat from dinner. The only safe food is processed food, because that's food that's made by cold, unfeeling machines, and therefore doesn't result in any unwanted feelings.

Rose also has a brother named Joseph who appears to be on the Autism spectrum, and a good part of the book is about her tempestuous relationship with him. He's her mother's favorite - a fact that she doesn't even try to hide- and that gets to Rose, especially since Joseph appears largely indifferent to his mother's affection. He also is largely indifferent to Rose, ignoring her, shunning her, or sometimes even being outright mean to her. It isn't until later that Rose finds out that he has a special ability of his own, which he has been using to withdraw further and further from the world.

I really enjoyed TPSOLC. I think one of the biggest issues that people had with it is that it's **largely character driven and not a lot of stuff happens.** Luckily for me, I enjoy character-driven novels (assuming I like the characters) and am fascinated by people living out their daily lives (I'm really nosy). The family dynamic was incredibly well done and I really liked how Rose's ability was blended in. It was similar enough to LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE that I kind of felt nostalgic for LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE and wanted to read it again, but it wasn't similar enough that I felt like I was reading an outright copy, either. TPSOLC really provides an interesting perspective on where food is coming from and how it's prepared and distributed. Also, **the sensory descriptions are amazing.** There's a scene close to the end that's probably my favorite part in the story, where Rose does a "food tasting" of a quiche, and man, I have never wanted a quiche as bad as I did then.

If you enjoy stories of magic-realism and character driven stories that make you work for it a little, I think you'll like THE PARTICULAR SADNESS OF LEMON CAKE. It was weird, but charmingly so, and a very gentle, pleasant story that was surprisingly deep and moving. I really liked it!

4 stars!

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### **Will Byrnes says**

Bender uses magical realism in a coming of age tale, as young (9) Rosie begins to taste emotions in her food, which can make it a bit tough to keep down a meal. Her first taste of her new talent arrives with an empty feeling when Mom and Dad are going through a difficult time. Rosie must also cope with an older sibling, Joseph, to whom her mother attributes near-mystical qualities. In addition, as her talent has given her

unnatural insight, she becomes the keeper of her mother's darkest secret.

There is no inherent reason I am aware of that magical realism must remain a South American monopoly, or that it should be limited to stories of a particular sort. That would be like saying pencils could only be used for writing essays. And coming-of-age seems a likely fit, given that so much of what we all go through in traveling from childhood through adolescence to adulthood can seem inexplicable.

Yet, the story never really clicked for me. Maybe I was unclear on whether or not Bender intended the magical element to be a stand-in for specific emotions. It is my impression that the literal disappearances in the story stand in for emotional absence, whether somewhere on the bell-curve of psychological pathology or maybe as a symbol of just growing apart. Maybe the author knows a person who suffers from severe depression or autism. Rosie's increasing ability to taste feelings could certainly be seen as the product of increasing perception with age.

Overall, I was only ok about the book. Bender applies an interesting toolkit here, but I found the product not ultimately as engaging as I am sure the author intended.

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### **Hannah Jane says**

Wow. Extremely disturbing and haunting. And it was so depressing for most of the book but only because I didn't understand it until much too late.

I will list my most favorite parts.

#1. On page 64 - "...The punching bag tucked inside every chocolate chip." Also on the next page when the sandwich is telling her to love it. So funny and so incredibly inventive.

#2. Chapter 20 - This page was the very first time it hit me that no one ever sent anything to the grandma. And it really hit me. I had to stop reading for awhile because it was so disturbing. Totally didn't help that the grandma's very last package actually showed her love. That was another kick in the gut.

#3. On page 170 - The little story Rose tells her father really defines their relationship, and I completely dismissed him until the photo album.

And let's not forget the last page, the acceptance and closure.

To me this book was about how people love each other differently, and how it's easy to shrug off the types of love that don't make sense or may not feel right, or are not enough or rational.

Brilliant.

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### **Leah says**

Ohhhhh, so, so good! At nine, Rose bites into a piece of cake and discovers that she can taste the emotions of whomever made the food she is eating. I kind of felt like Rose while reading this book - I could feel the emotions of the characters, which made it an intense, moving, slightly overwhelming experience. I feel like I've been run over by an emotional tractor, but not in a bad way...just in that my-god-life-is-messy-and-beautiful-and-how-the-hell-do-we-make-sense-of-it kind of way. Phew. Now I want to go take a bath and cry and maybe eat some Doritos. Rose would approve.

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### **Erika Gill says**

I'm not sure I have it in me to go into a really descriptive review of this novel. But I will say a few things about my response to it.

- 1) It made me sad. Well, sadder. I was already pretty sad for a number of reasons and this book did not help. It's about a girl who is a victim to all of the emotions in the world. Her brother is mentally and later physically absent from her life, her dad gives up, and her mother is an incredibly selfish, self-absorbed woman, and Rose suffers a lot of disappointment.
- 2) It did not give me any closure. There is not a single event in Rose's life (including her discovery of the French cafe with lovingly made food), that gives her any (seemingly) real happiness, nor does it give the reader fulfillment or catharsis.
- 3) I was totally engrossed. This book is really very well written. Just don't read it when you're down in the dumps.

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### **TK421 says**

\*\*\*\*THIS REVIEW CONTAINS SPOILERS\*\*\*\*

Every so often a book comes along that creates a divisive turmoil in me. Sometimes these books make me angry; sometimes they make me shake my head in wonder as to why exactly I read it; sometimes it takes months for me to really understand just how impactful the book was to me, which helps clear some of the fog or guilt or happiness or sadness or whatever I felt while reading it. **THE PARTICULAR SADNESS OF LEMON CAKE** is such a book. Let me first say that this is my first Aimee Bender experience, and though I will rant and rave about certain issues I had with the book, I will more than likely seek out other works by her.

Ultimately, this novel is about family, and the peccadilloes and quirky aspects of being a part of a family. Normally, I love books like these. In some way they make me feel as if my family was "normal."

Rose Edelstein receives on her ninth birthday a gift that is more akin to a curse: she is given the ability to taste what people feel through whatever food they have created. Loneliness. Despair. Happiness. Sadness. Guilt. Hate. Anger. Embarrassment. Preoccupation. Whatever the person was feeling comes alive on her taste buds. At first, Rose finds this newly found talent as a burdensome weight, who wouldn't at nine years

old? She tries to tell her brother, Joseph, a neurotic science obsessed teenager, but gets nowhere in the process. (We'll discuss Joseph in a few minutes.) What she does find in telling Joseph is a refuge in Joseph's best friend George, an equally neurotic science obsessed teenager, but one that is rooted firmly in reality. Together, Rose and George, begin to test her abilities by tasting different cookies made at a bakery. This part of the book was fun. I was eager to know just how Rose's tasting abilities were taking shape and what she would do with her powers.

Ms. Bender had different ideas for me. About this time in the narrative, different details about Rose's mother and father begin to take shape. Her father has an overpowering fear of hospitals. Her mother begins an affair with a guy named Larry. These aspects are touched upon routinely within the narrative, but they are never fully given the pages needed (in my opinion) to fully blossom. Simple one-line explanations are tacked on as if in an afterthought, which detracts from what the real storyline seems to be: Why exactly does Rose feel that her family is crumbling like one of the dry chocolate-chip cookies she ate at the bakery? (Again, we'll come back to this in a moment.)

Life continues for Rose and her family. Her power continues to grow. During this time I found the writing to be beautiful, full of descriptive language that could not only be seen, but could be touched and smelled and, yes, even tasted. Through these vivid descriptions, I was able to really empathize with Rose and the others...then the wheels came off. Chaos ensued. Confusion reigned. Absurdity elevated its position of court jester to king.

I read other reviews that stated this novel was a version of magical realism. I cannot disagree enough about this assertion. Magical realism is something more than the absurd mixing with reality. It is a powerful style that helps illuminate or criticize certain aspects of society. Gabriel Garcia Marquez writes magical realism. Salman Rushdie writes magical realism. Isabel Allende writes magical realism. Jorge Borges wrote magical realism. Even Toni Morrison writes in magical realism. Having a character turn into a chair, one that can taste people's feelings, and another that can smell what a person is like IS NOT MAGICAL REALISM. This is merely a great example of surrealism. Or, better yet, science fiction. Yes, I said science fiction. If science fiction doesn't float your boat, then choose the word fantasy. But I am getting off track here. My real problem is this: A chair? That is all that Aimee Bender could come up with? Joseph is so depressed, so isolated because of his faux-romantic relationship with science that he manipulates his body into a piece of furniture? This device, to me, seemed too contrived because of Rose's mother's new hobby of woodworking. And the fact that we, the readers, are never given any insight as to why Joseph felt the overpowering need to turn into a piece of furniture gives his "power" a silly cartoonish quality.

But the vagueness of Aimee Bender doesn't stop there. Why does the affair take place? There is nothing to suggest as to why this happens. Rose's father seems to be a typical, hard-working father. He doesn't drink. He doesn't beat his family. He might be labeled as emotionally distant, but that would only be conjecture on the part of the reader. If anything, he seems to be defeated by his wife. She is the one that seems to have all the issues. She has problems with committing to a career. She seems to be constantly living in a world of daydreams and nostalgia. Still, these assumptions on my part, do not qualify the affair. I think an action of this kind needs to be explained, dissected, poured over within pages, not single sentence add-ons that satisfy the objective of not having any loose ends.

What it comes down to for me is: This book seemed unfinished. Thought about, but never fully realized. Rushed. Perhaps I am wrong about all this. Perhaps I missed the point. I'm willing to concede that. But I am not willing to concede the fact that there was a very interesting story within these pages that was given a very abrupt, almost casual execution.

But as I said, time will tell for this novel. Perhaps I'll amend my thoughts once time has given me the chance to ruminant, order, or even change them.

RECOMMENDED (with reservations)

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### tee says

If this book was a person I would fuck it with the sensitivity required of banging a lithe, twee hipster who loves cats, typewriters, sunshine and forests. Then I would take an overexposed photo of our intertwined post-coitus naked bodies whilst we wear bunny masks and straight into the wank bank it'd go. Though I must say, this book if it were an IRL person would be like Lee Holloway, all presumed innocence but in fact kinky as hell. Not that the book is kinky, it's deranged. A little off. So more like E. Edward Grey. A dude creepily (view spoiler) and it *makes you feel fucking weird*. Like you want to touch yourself but there's a portrait of your mum or Jesus on the wall. Or maybe both. And they're staring at you. And if you proceed, you'll never forget what you did. Every time you pass that picture of Jesus you will feel his eyes bore into your fucking soul. Even if you're atheist.

If I was a book I would want to be this one. I would like to be this book in the hands of Kat Dennings whilst she licked salt off her fingers because she's eating buttery popcorn whilst she reads me. And then she'd fall asleep with me in her sweet little hands and perhaps break my spine but that would be okay. And if Michael Cera came anywhere near her, I would be thrilled if she threw me at him and injured him in some way. Then she would pick me up and kiss me all better and perhaps lie in the sunshine with me, using me to shade her face and perhaps spread me open, pages pressed against her stomach. Then she'd find it impossible to be parted from me and drag me everywhere with her.

If I wrote a book, I'd be pretty satisfied with pumping out this delightful tale. I want to both BE Aimee Bender and BANG Aimee Bender. I want to be Aimee Bender and bed MYSELF. I would write stories like these and roll around in the manuscript papers like pimps lounge around in dollar bills yo.

Everything about this book just went down right. Like that perfect cup of tea - it's not too hot but almost too hot, and not too milky, no sugar. It goes down and you want to gulp it but you want to sip it too and you don't want to finish it because you know your next cup of tea won't be anywhere near as good. And you kind of want to convince everyone that there's whiskey in your coffee mug instead of tea, it's a little embarrassing but it doesn't change the way you feel about it. Not one little bit.

I see all you haters hating on this book and all I can think is that my magic spell is working and I will have her all to myself. She will come on goodreads one day and see me, her one loyal fan, and will carry me off into the sunset where our loyal steeds will be waiting. And Kat Dennings. And we will live happily ever after.

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