



## Fortitude Smashed

*Taylor Brooke*

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After scientists stumbled across an anomalous human hormone present during moments of emotional intimacy, further research created the ability to harness the direction of living energy and pinpoint when two lines will merge. Personalized chips are now implanted beneath the thumbnails of every infant, where glowing numbers count down to the moment they will meet their soul mate.

Fate is now a calculation.

But loving someone isn't.

When Shannon Wurther, the youngest detective in Southern California, finds himself face-to-face with Aiden Maar, the reckless art thief Shannon's precinct has been chasing for months, they are both stunned. Their Camellia Clocks have timed out, and the men are left with a choice—love one another or defy fate.

*"Handcuffed by fate, this cop-and-robber duo will steal hearts; a strong start to a promising series."*

*-Kirkus*

*"Fortitude Smashed is a pleasant read that will pull on the heartstrings of readers and make them reevaluate what love truly means."*

*-RT Book Reviews*

*"The refreshingly fluid view of sexuality and Brooke's implied, off-page steamy scenes will fuel many fantasies about her two leads."*

*-Publishers Weekly*

## **Fortitude Smashed Details**

Date : Published September 21st 2017 by Interlude Press

ISBN : 9781945053368

Author : Taylor Brooke

Format : Paperback 312 pages

Genre : Romance, Contemporary, Lgbt, New Adult, M M Romance, Science Fiction

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## From Reader Review Fortitude Smashed for online ebook

### Mare SLiTsReaD Reviews says

BIG SIGH

DNF @ 26%

Sometimes I feel like if I add a book as currently reading before I reach the 50% mark I totally jinx myself.

CAUSE I ALWAYS DNF them.

Anyways this book and I didn't co-exist how I wanted us to.

Maybe I'll go back eventually.

Mare~Slitsread

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### Leah says

Words are not enough to express how much I love this book.

Read the full review on my blog!

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### Leigh Kramer says

Excellent MM romance with a hint of sci-fi! Everyone gets a Camellia Clock implanted when they're born, which counts down to the second you'll meet your soul mate. Cop Shannon catches thief Aiden in the middle of robbing an art gallery when their Clocks run out. Cue panic because these two opposites are not having it. Except they're somehow still drawn to each other and the developing relationship was absolute perfection. Watching Shannon and Aiden fall for one another made my heart grow three sizes, I swear.

Both characters had moving backstories and I particularly loved watching Aiden figure out who he wanted to be. The side characters also had a good deal of depth and their interactions with our main characters were fully realized. (And also makes for a good set up for book 2!) The novel compassionately deals with grief and mental illness and I just wanted to hug everyone. The writing! Holy hell, can Taylor write! It's the kind of writing that makes you want to track down everything the author has written. I cannot handle how much I loved this one.

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### Stephanie says

Read the full review and more on my blog!

TW: Fire, Sexual Assault

Camellia Clocks are implanted beneath every infants thumbnail, where glowing numbers count down to the moment they will meet their soul mate. It seems to work out about 98% of the time, and even though the clocks will count down until you meet your soul mate, it's still your choice what to do with that information and it still takes work to have a relationship. Honestly with that synopsis I was a bit worried about how the book would go, but i'm so glad I gave it shot as I ended up loving it!

A thief, Aiden, attempting to steal a painting, and a detective, Shannon, end up timing out when Shannon catches Aiden attempting to steal said painting. Needless to say they were both kinda confused at that.

It's own voices for bi/pan characters, and mental illness rep. Aiden suffers from Dissociative Dysthymia, a chronic depression. He gets panic attacks.

I ended up relating to Aiden so much! His depression and his reactions mirror what i've experienced exactly! My reason are different than his, but the feelings are the same and I don't believe i've ever seen these feelings described so well, that fit me like a tee, in a book before. I've seen other great mental illness rep that fit me too in regards to anxiety but as for the Dissociative Dysthymia and panic attacks, not so much. Here, I felt like I was reading my story. It's an amazing feeling to know one isn't alone in such things. To know someone else understands.

All the characters in this book are complex and very well fleshed out. It really shows you how to look beyond what you first see when you see someone. You can't tell someone's story just by looking at them and knowing one facet of who they are, people are so much more than that and I loved how this book captured that! They are flawed, and at times I got angry at some of the other characters, but everything ended up being unpacked. I was angry because I was supposed to be and for good reason. Conversations were had and stuff was called out.

Yes, there is a romance here, but it is so much more than that. And no, mental illness is NOT cured by love. Yes it has a HEA, but Aiden is not cured. (Thank you!!)

There isn't really much action or plot to speak of, this is much more character-driven. If you're looking for an action packed plot-based book, this isn't it. But if you want a story with well-fleshed out, complex characters going through their life, trying to figure stuff out, sometimes making mistakes and being human, that is sweet and will tug at your heart, i'd highly recommend this!

Thank you to the author for giving me a chance to read this.  
My Booktube Channel

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### **Annie ~ Queer Books Unbound says**

Reviewed for From Top to Bottom Reviews.

*\*A copy of this was provided via NetGalley*

There is so much I want to mention in this review because... you guys, this book! I love it so much that I'm

already reading it for the second time.

First thing I noticed (and have to do a shout-out for) was the content warnings for each respective chapter at the beginning of the book.

The characters!

I adored every character, though Aiden is without a doubt my favorite ~~cinnamon roll~~ character. His brother says it best when he describes Aiden as a teenaged tiger.

*"You're like a six-month-old tiger; people wanna pet you but they're also scared you might kill them. That's the best way to be."*

*[...] "Why a six-month-old tiger?"*

*"Because they're not totally grown yet. Still fluffy and cute, but big enough to eat you."*

*"Teenaged tiger. Emotionally constipated, brooding tiger."*

That just nails it. For those who don't know him he appears to be "hard" and prickly - and he can be those things when he wants to - but it's a safety mechanism; once you get a look behind the walls he's put up he's such a sweet and precious cinnamon roll. He doesn't think of himself very highly, but he's someone who'll buy a homeless person a meal, just to do something good. I also loved how tactile he was. And can anyone who walks his cat be bad? Because I don't think so.

I really treasured that with Shannon, Aiden could just *be*. Aiden trusts only a small circle of people, so seeing him open up to Shannon made my heart skip beats.

Shannon appears to be "perfect" compared to Aiden. He's one of the youngest people to ever become a detective - he's determined and successful in what he does. And he never expected his Rose Road to be someone like Aiden - someone who wears leather jackets and rides a motorbike. At first glance you'd think they have nothing in common, but - and that's something I really enjoyed - over the course of the book they realise, that they have more in common than it looks like at first.

Surprisingly Chelsea really became a character I liked as well. I wasn't so sure at first - ok I didn't really like her - but I've really come to care about her and am looking forward to - hopefully - see more of her in the second book of the series.

The Bi/Pan rep!

The Camellia Clock doesn't care about gender. Because of that there's no surprise when one's Rose Road turns out to be of the same sex. I don't think enby people were specifically mentioned, but the way I understood the Camellia Clock is, that it pairs you with another soul - no matter where on the binary or non-binary someone is, no matter if you're allo or on the asexual spectrum and it also does not exclude poly-relationships. It simply pairs you with the person(s) who is/are perfect for you. It was weird at first to read about a world where there is no queerphobia. Seems like such a fantastical place where no one cares about who you're with. If I could, I'd move there within the hour!

The Mental Health rep!

Aiden wasn't magically cured. He got his happy ending, yes, but his dysthymia didn't magically disappear because he found his Rose Road. We see him have bad and good days during the book, and everything in between. The author mentioned on twitter that the mental health rep is #ownvoices. I don't have dysthymia, so I feel like I'm not the best to judge, but I think that the way Aiden's mental health is handled here is good. I'm not sure if there are ownvoices reviews regarding the mental health aspect out there yet but you should definitely check those out.

(Edited to add, that Jude reviewed *Fortitude Smashed* on her website, where she talks about the mental health rep from an ownvoices point of view.)

### The Prose!

So lyrical, enchanting and consuming, Brooke created this gorgeous, layered - slightly SciFi-y - setting and filled it with life. The prose reminded me a bit of Jude Sierra's writing style. They're not the same, but both have this beautiful way with words that just leaves you in awe. More than once did I reread a passage simply because it's so beautifully written. *Fortitude Smashed* is just all around gorgeous - the characters with their struggles and hopes, the way the mental health is handled, but most of all the love and care between Aiden and Shannon. Their back and forth was sweet and delicious. This book isn't just another soul mates-story where you wouldn't know that the characters are soul mates without being told about it - it's a story where you can really feel why these characters were destined to end up together.

I also loved the way Brooke handled consent in this story. And not just consent but also how considerate Shannon is. Aiden is a virgin when he meets his Rose Road. Usually virginity is treated like something you just have to lose by a certain age - not just in fiction, but in real life as well. If you're still a virgin when you're over that age, it's talked about as if one should be ashamed of it. Losing "the v-Card" is treated like it's a status symbol and to see Shannon not react in that typical macho way was just *everything* to me. He doesn't just say that they'll do things at Aiden's pace, but actually walks the talk. And there's also not that stupid posturing about being "the first". To me there's nothing sexier than that. I don't think I could love Shannon any more than I did in that moment.

Taylor Brooke is definitely an author to look out for. All that's left to say now is: read it.

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### Elke says

This was literally a soulmate AU, except it had original characters and wasn't in an existing fandom. So not an AU at all, but you get me.

I have the tendency to not read the synopsis of books if I already know I'll read them because it spoils the first parts of the book. However, here, it was kind of necessary to understand the soulmate thing. I was sad to see that the science, the technique behind it and how it worked weren't elaborated on more. It would have been interesting to see what it could have been if it went more to the sci-fi side of things. Because if we can determine when you'll meet your soulmate, there should be other cool things we can do too, no?

But this is mainly (only?) a romance, a hate to love in a universe in which soulmates exist. It's very character driven, and whilst it liked both perspectives, it did seem to lack something for me. Maybe more worldbuilding, maybe more plot. Also more of an explanation of how soulmates work for aromantic and/or asexual people, and in regards to sexual and romantic attraction and gender. And in polycules. There was some mention of triads and quartets, which I appreciated, but what about V structures or elaborate constellations in which not everyone is romantically or sexually involved with all others? Those are only minor things, probably, but I'm immediately curious about the ins and outs of worlds and systems like this. And if it doesn't feel like they click, they're less believable, in a way.

The book is definitely enjoyable, and I loved Aiden. I loved the mental illness rep. How this wasn't a love cures story, but a story of loss, love, hope, support, fight, struggle and growth. It was hopeful, and I'm

grateful for the happy ending.

I would have liked to see the cop/thief dynamic played out more, but on the other hand, this way they didn't deal with dangerous power dynamics that could be unhealthy. Apart from that, it was pretty fun, but not much more. The plot was definitely an issue because it didn't actually feel like there was one? But it was a good way to pass the time this evening.

TW: off page sexual assault, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, non-graphic (mainly off-page) sex, fatal car crash, physical violence, ableist language, suicidal idolatry, called out ableism

I was very glad to see a list of trigger warnings with chapter numbers at the start of the book.

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## Miss says

you know i really really wanted to love this but at the end of the day it only managed to be okay

the tropes! it's soulmate fic with a cop/thief ship! this should have been my JAM

having thought it over (because i really didn't want my review to be just rambling about how i would have done this differently, i want to judge the book on its own terms) here are the things that prevented me from really enjoying this experience:

+ lack of early relationship building. look, soulmates shouldn't be used as an excuse to skip over people falling for each other, that is not the point of this trope. and it didn't initially seem like brooke was headed this route! when their clocks first count down shannon and aiden are mutually like tf??? nope, not about this, clearly fate made a mistake. i was looking forward to seeing how they'd overcome that reluctance! i wanted to see them start to click! i wanted conversations! instead they kissed and immediately were like ...well hey, that was good, i guess this soulmate thing wasn't a mistake after all! and i think brooke wanted to justify it by saying their soulmateship was based on physical attraction but eh. didn't work for me. the relationship building afterward left me lukewarm because the base felt so random

+ the whole thief thing was really not utilized to its maximum potential. i'm not saying brooke had to go full white collar here but it's straight up window dressing. aiden pokes at shannon a time or two by teasing him about how much he's stolen (to which shannon responds with LALALA PLEASE STOP GIVING ME THIS INFORMATION) but he quits right away and it causes like zero character conflict beyond shannon's initial no...my soulmate can't be a thief...no... reaction (which as i pointed out above he gets over REAL QUICK)

+ idk y'all i feel like at the end of the day there was just a lack of real depth to this book? like she'd throw in occasional conflict (aiden's arrested for assaulting a police officer! here's shannon ex-girlfriend chelsea who we are gonna be unnecessarily dickish towards! (view spoiler) aiden beats the shit out of a guy who tries to assault daisy! things are happening! this is plot z, why are you still so bored!!!!) but they were all just...thin

on a positive note, the basic writing mechanics are competent? also if you like the style it's probably the kind of thing you'd describe as beautiful or poetic? (alas, for me personally, there's one paragraph where said poeticism sounded almost exactly like a poem i'd written when i was fifteen and it was very hard for me to not retroactively be like ah yes, what a beautiful attempt at writing the mindset of a teenager in a twenty-something man's body) i appreciate the attempt to educate about mental health and create a world without default heterosexuality? if netgalley gives me the sequel i'll prob read it out of a faint desire to see justice for

chelsea?

2.5 stars

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### **Julian Winters says**

It's easy to be drawn into *Fortitude Smashed* by one tagline: *soulmates*. Who doesn't love a great soulmates trope? Add in the conflicted dynamic of cop/burglar soulmates? Where do I sign up?

Thankfully, this book is so much more than a tagline.

There is nothing understated about what Taylor Brooke does. Her writing is dynamic, her prose is gorgeous, her characters are sharp-edged but completely loveable, her dialogue is fluid and thought-provoking, and the Southern California setting is breathtaking—something Brooke reminds readers of chapter-after-chapter. I was drawn to this book by the soulmates tag and couldn't stop reading after the first page.

Shannon and Aiden are contrasting characters facing similar, but wildly different lives. They're both hesitant and anxious about meeting their soulmate, their Rose Road. They're equally trying to escape some form of shadow from their parents' lives. Shannon, a cop, does it through his work. Aiden, an art thief, does it by rebelling against *everything*. But the electric energy Brooke creates upon these two characters first meeting keeps you throughout their entire journey. It's hard not to succumb to the way these two compliment each other in a scarily honest way. How they are navigating through acceptance of their own broken pieces, but unwilling to let the other see that. Their personal growth isn't ignited by their romantic journey; it's created by the circumstances of things they've avoided, but slowly begin to see as truths about their lives.

The women in both Shannon and Aiden's lives are raw, blunt, and one of the best parts of the novel. These characters are flawed, and it feels as if Brooke is just touching the tip of their growth in this novel. There's more to their story ... and I eagerly anticipate it. But what these women bring to Shannon and Aiden's life is a reality check. They aren't characters who mysteriously unlock the answers to Aiden and Shannon's struggles, which is wonderful. Instead, Brooke gives brief glimpses of how family and friends can help guide us, but they have their own journeys to face. Not once did I feel as though Daisy or Karman or Chelsea (or Marcus, Fae, and even Broken Man) were tour guides through Aiden and Shannon's Tunnel of Love & Misunderstanding. Brooke did a superior job of making me adore (and, at times, despise) these women—imperfect and human, something I love in a great secondary character.

Brooke is a wordsmith. Having never read anything by her before, I was unprepared for how she could craft scenes, emotions, and simple actions into something that would stay with me for days. If I had a printed copy, I would have decorated in pages and pages of yellow and blue highlights. The prose is *that good*. She's fearless with descriptions, metaphors, and making the reader think. I thought I was reading a romance—I was truthfully reading an introspection of what we are outside of the expectations of love in our lives.

Another thing Brooke is brilliant at is unsettling the reader. Don't get comfortable. Don't daydream. Not for one second was I allowed to simply gush and swoon and preen over Aiden and Shannon's relationship. Yes, their banter was humorous. Of course, their sexual tension was to die for. Without question, the way they could be tender and raw (and clumsy, too) with each other in private made my heart race. But it's the way Brooke kept building this world around (and inside) them that kept my guard up. Brooke is a clever writer—never leaving one moment without a meaning. She writes life as it is—one beautiful moment filled

with many interludes and refrains and even a drum-pounding solo between the loveliness. One moment, Shannon's touching Aiden's face and Aiden is mapping out Shannon's skin ... then Aiden is withdrawn and cautious, for a reason. Aiden is in a fight behind a bar; Shannon is chasing down a perp. They're in a treehouse, teasingly sweet and honest; then Aiden is blushing and Shannon is intense and the reader is Googling *"what is the appropriate heart rate while reading a book?"*

The care, but honesty Brooke writes about mental illness, assault, and death is painstakingly real. To read an Own Voices novel that does not use mental illness or survival as a way to push the plot is comforting. It's true representation. Brooke doesn't write Aiden as a character the reader is meant to feel sorry for or hoped to be "cured." He's not living in a black hole of emptiness because of his illness. He lives with it; sometimes successfully, sometimes with struggle. He's living with his loss. A part of the novel that sticks out to me is when Shannon laments about not being there for Aiden before their Camellia Clocks destined them to be together. And Aiden rejects that mentality. He doesn't believe Shannon is in his life to fix him or to pull him out of a never-ending darkness. That's important. That is fantastic, blunt honesty about life: love is wonderful, but a partner is not meant to repair us. Aiden survived before Shannon, and he will continue to survive with Shannon by his side.

At the end, Brooke crafts perfect moments of hope between this chain of flawed individuals. Their growth, both in life and love, is inspiring. But, also, the way Brooke retains their flaws instead of magically making them perfect saints is what made me smile the most. What Brooke has is a gift; what readers walk away with is hope, strength, inspiration, and just a few butterflies circling their stomachs.

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### **ren says**

I received an ARC in exchange for a free and honest review.

I was expecting a lot from this book, then I wasn't and then, well... I was. Again.

I heard about *Fortitude Smashed* months before its arcs were out in the wild. The concept of soulmates, so popular in fanfiction, was something that drew me in as soon as I read the blurb. Despite some concerns (soulmates aus always treat aro and often ace people like crap), I couldn't wait to get my hands on it.

But when I started reading the eARC I got through Netgalley, my excitement evaporated. First, because it was so awfully formatted. I mean, it's an ARC. It's not supposed to be perfect. But the change of POV, the lack of space between words and dots and so on, started to grate on me a little. And the story wasn't that interesting. Disappointed, I set the book aside for some time and days later got back to it more out of stubbornness than anything else.

But then I hit 20% in the story and boom!, I was hooked.

I couldn't stop reading it. The writing became so more lush and, I don't know, lyrical? I must be honest and say I'm usually not a fan of what most people call "beautiful, evocative writing". It always end up feeling like purple prose to me, or at least like the author is trying to manipulate me into feeling something (which, as a writer myself, I know it's true, but I don't want to notice what is happening). So you can imagine my surprise when the more evocative writing of *Fortitude Smashed* really got to me.

Still, the strength of this book lies in its characters. I love it when a book manages to treat its secondary

characters well and Fortitude Smashed definitely did this (also, I think I already know who the next book is going to be about and I really hope I'm right). All of them had convincing personalities and had their own stories, problems and life.

The main characters, though, were the best of all. Shannon and Aiden are complex and completely real, and even though they are so different they still managed to convince me of their love for each other, which is the main problem for me in most romance books. I still can't explain exactly how they did it because even though I do like soulmates aus I hate instalove. And even though Aiden and Shannon fall in love kinda quick, it never felt like instalove. Does that make sense?

Anyway, Fortitude Smashed was a beautiful, pleasant read. I can't wait to see what the next books will bring. 4.0 stars.

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### **Avery (Book Deviant) says**

I would like to thank Taylor Brooke and the people at Interlude Press for providing an ARC in exchange for an honest review.

I love this book so much. Check out my full review [here](#).

**Trigger warning** for sexual assault/rape, depression, suicidal ideation, alcohol, violence, dissociative episodes, panic attacks, and mentions of drugs.

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### **Jude Sierra says**

Fortitude Smashed is the first and only book I have ever read for review that I re-read and took notes in the margins of with a pen and a highlighter. That I loved so much I wanted to wallow in on every level I would be allowed to. That's been sitting on my nightstand for months just so I can keep savoring tiny moments.

I read the book in one go; I fell in love with Aiden and with Shannon, I fell in love with them falling in love. The beauty of the conceit of fated people learning to be together in Brooke's hands is this: These men are both ready and not, are willing and unwilling, and prickly but open. Their Rose Road gives them the space to struggle, as we do, but with the safety of understanding that this is meant. In this way, we are privileged to witness Aiden and Shannon as they go through a particular journey of personal growth that only this situation, this Rose Road, this circumstance could bring.

In Fortitude Smashed Brooke built a family of secondary characters that I both adored and was incredibly irritated by at times — in short, she gave these men family and friends that were fleshed out humans, not just foils or plot devices to move particular aspects of the story around. A great cast of secondary characters is hard to pull off and Brooke does it. I love the gender/sexuality/identity representation we see thus far in this series — I'm excited to see what comes in the next few, as I've seen the author address questions related to this in blog tour interviews and on her twitter. I'd like to articulate my feelings on this well, but my friend Annie at From Top To Bottom Reviews has done a better job of capturing it here in her review.

I read this book the first time fully knowing there was even more to the story under the layers Brooke

created, but unable to stop because I was so caught up in the story. The point of this being: if you don't feel like you want to do any literary analysis to enjoy the shit out of a beautiful book, you don't. This book, I promise, will be a lovely experience regardless.

That said...the first time I read *Fortitude Smashed*, I knew it was special. I knew I loved it a few pages in, but it was on page 26 when Aiden first speaks to the Empty Man that I knew that what Brooke is crafting in this series is literature.

“Aiden thought the heart of the world, like fate, was buried in the sea and, despite his hunger, he would never find it.” (26)

*Fortitude Smashed* is filled with some really heart stopping prose. I mean, the kind of phrase turning that makes you stop and re-read just to enjoy the sheer poetry of it. None of Brooke's words or images function as still art alone. Rather, she deploys every image with precision.

“Spread out on the bed with a blush creeping from his chest to his face, Aiden was still a cluster of knives. Shannon's willingness to bleed defied every shred of control he had left.” (135)

The second time I read this book, I had a pen, a highlighter, and lots of quiet. I savored it. I really let myself look at how Brooke used images, names, words, flowers to tell us more about Aiden (whose name, consequently means “little fire” or “ardent”) and Shannon (whose name means “wise river” or “possessor of wisdom”) (I'll just let you sit in that lovely tidbit for a moment, take it with you when you read the book and it'll just add a lovely layer).

Brooke's use of metaphor and imagery, particularly in reference to the two pieces of art, *Fortitude Smashed* and *Catalyst*, as well as the Empty Man Aiden meets on the beach at the beginning and near the end of the novel, are brilliantly situated, used, and executed. We begin the book with Aiden and Shannon meeting just as Aiden is attempting to steal *Fortitude Smashed*, a piece of art made of flowers and flower parts (lilies, dandelion and baby's breath, all of which represent particular things. For example, lilies represent restored innocence after death). Aiden later tells Shannon he wanted to steal it because it reminded him of himself. When Shannon goes to buy it for him, after they've fallen in love, he actually sees it for the first time, and in it:

“...a containment of life in death in one piece...The lily's stem was snapped from the rest of the petals, which gave the flower a sense of detachment. It was nature's grenade in the midst of detonating, a slow-motion explosion...” 147

It is in this moment that Shannon really understands — this was who Aiden was in the moment they met. This is how Aiden understood and saw himself.

As fate would have it, Shannon is unable to buy *Fortitude Smashed* — instead he buys another piece, which we don't get to see until the end of the book: *Catalyst*, which is made of ivy and dandelion, calla lily and tulip: flowers that represent youth, rebirth, perfect love, fidelity, affectionate attachment. What I loved so deeply about this is that Brooke doesn't tell us any of this — she doesn't give the reader the meanings. She's given the reader gifts inside her prose. Aiden and Shannon's struggle to understand, walk, and love one another as their Rose Roads is done gorgeously, with care and depth and understanding. And underneath it all Brooke infuses her language and images with depth and symbolism that make the story all that much richer.

Before I finish with my high high praise for an #ownvoices story about mental illness, I want to go back to the Empty Man and how he functions as a catalyst at the beginning of the story when Aiden is really struggling with the idea that his Rose Road is a cop; when he's struggling with his self worth and his demons; when we're learning that despite his hard exterior, Aiden is terrified of not finding his heart. How deeply he wants that Rose Road and love.

“‘Someone told me I would eat the heart of the world one day,’ Aiden said....’I’ve always loved the world, but I never thought I’d find the heart of it, the best of it, the center of it. I did though. I found it,’ he added quickly. ‘Or it found me, I’m not sure which.’

‘I don’t know either, but you’ve completely consumed it.’

Aiden offered a shy smile, one of his gentle rarities, and he kissed Shannon again.” (315)

To summarize there, thank you Taylor, for this really heart wrenching, human, gorgeous love story.

And now, the part I really, really want people to leave with. This is an #ownvoices story in regards to mental health rep, with both Brooke (author) and Aiden having mental illness. Personally, as someone who also not only struggles with but survives with mental illness, Aiden’s story and representation meant the world to me. Shannon doesn’t cure Aiden. Fate, love, romance, sex — none of it “fixes” Aiden — because there’s nothing to be fixed. Aiden is beautifully imperfect, he’s human, he has a mental illness, but he isn’t his mental illness. People living with depression or bipolar, with dysthymia or cyclothymia (me) or any other number of MI — our MI’s don’t define us. Stories where love “cures” or “fixes” characters with MI really bother me because that’s not how life works. My husband loves and supports me, his presence has helped save my life, but at the end of the day, I save my life. I make it through each day. I am the center of my survival and recovery. Brooke writes a love story with healing, with hope, and where the characters are ultimately the primary agents of change and wellness in their own lives, which they then bring to each other and their love. I can see this theme in Daisy’s story; I can see this agency in Chelsea’s story — I look forward to what Brooke will do with them in future books in this series with utter trust in her skill.

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### **Laura says**

*3.5 stars*

***Thank you very much to Interlude Press for providing a copy of the book in exchange for an honest review.***

Fortitude Smashed by Taylor Brooke was not an anticipated novel for me this year, but I had seen quite a few of my fellow blogging friends reading and enjoying it, and so I, excitedly, requested it.

Taylor Brooke should be praised for so effortlessly creating a world where queer sexuality is the norm. From my understanding, everyone in this semi-contemporary world has no problem with sexuality, and in fact most of them are queer; in fact, the main characters are queer too: Shannon is bisexual and Aiden pansexual. There was also a brief mention of non-mongamy and the inclusion of three or even four soulmates. The queer rep is fantastic and something many other authors should strive for in their novels.

The main characters, Shannon and Aiden, felt quite individual with distinctive character voices. Shannon is a

cop who is trying to live up to his father's police reputation, but feels as though he is failing. Aiden is a thief who suffers from disassociated dysthymia, and who constantly feels inadequate. I adored their relationship and even swooned a few times at the romantic scenes. They fit well together as a couple, despite their many differences, and I enjoyed reading about how they learn to overcome their issues.

Brooke's writing was quite beautiful. There were many sentences that just blew me away. She has a great gift for writing and encouraging the reader to keep reading.

There was a lack of world building in *Fortitude Smashed*, which lead to many occasions of confusion. My only knowledge about the soulmate pairing and the technology implanted under people's thumbs came from reading the blurb. Embarrassingly, I just skimmed the blurb when I requested this book; basically, I just saw a few of my friends enjoying the book and assumed I would too, so I thought that everyone was born with this Camellia Clock imbedded under their thumb, not that technology had advanced enough for scientists to calculate the exact time soulmates will meet. Part of this confusion was my fault – read the damn blurb next time! – but there wasn't much explanation of the Clock within the novel, aside from brief descriptions, and nothing about the history behind it.

An issue I had with the novel is considered a major spoiler, but I feel like I can't adequately explain my problem with the book without including this in my review.

(view spoiler)

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I did except a little more from *Fortitude Smashed*, but for the most part – putting aside personal issues – I did enjoy the novel. I found the characters engaging and their romance beautifully plotted out. I really hope Brooke features Aiden and Shannon in the next book in the series, even for just a chapter or so.

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### **iam says**

4.5 stars

This was somehow very different from what I expected, but I also can't really say what I did expect.

This is not a plot heavy book. Looking back, barely anything happens, especially considering the whole cop/art thief thing.

What there is a lot of is making out. It's nice.

The writing is very beautiful, very unique, and very breathtaking, and I think that's what made the book for me, even though it was a bit confusing at time regarding the flow of consciousness and jumps in time.

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### **Natasha says**

Review also on my blog

twitter

bookstagram

**I received an arc from the publisher via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review**

If you're familiar with fanfiction you'd likely be aware that soulmate AU's are popular.. And that's exactly what this book is, a soulmate AU.

The book follows Shannon, a detective with a careful nature, and Aidan, a criminal and burglar who is more daring but is also secretly soft.

I really loved both of the characters. Shannon was very clearly not expecting someone like Aidan as his soulmate and when they meet at the start of the book his shock is clear. He initially doesn't know what to do with the situation, which is what made the book so interesting to read. Watching the two navigate their less than ideal match together was interesting.

I really loved Aidan too. Aidan has a reputation of stealing art and overall, a notoriously hard to catch criminal and burglar. However, he is also rather insecure, as well as secretly soft. He also has a form of depression and anxiety which is exhibited throughout the book. He also has a great relationship with his brother, Marcus, and is shown to be less brash than his appearance would tell one. He's also obsessed with his cat which I loved. Something this book did that I really liked was that, rather than doing what'd be expected and have Aidan be experienced with sex and Shannon not, it was the other way around. Aidan hadn't had sex before meeting Shannon while Shannon was the one who'd had a girlfriend and previous sexual experience. I loved that as it played with the readers expectations.

The book is pretty character driven, which I liked but it was a little dull at times. The world is also interesting. It's briefly explained why the system was put into place but that's about it. This kind of lack of world building doesn't bother me too much but I know some people need to know the ins and outs of their sci-fi. This also appears to be a worlds where everyone is pansexual, as the concept of the gender of one's soulmate is never put importance on and both characters were shown to have been attracted to women, so that's something I liked about the book. I will say one thing I was curious about the book was if there was mind to aromantic people or if everyone is pansexual like implied. That was one thing that kind of bothered me with the book.

Overall, this was a fun read and I do recommend it, especially if you're a fan of soulmate AUs.

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**? Silvia ? says**

*I was sent this book as an advance copy by the publisher via NetGalley for reviewing purposes, but all opinions are my own.*

**Actual rating 2.5 stars**

So, fun story (skip this part if you only care about my review) I requested this ARC because my buddy Rin

said it was cute and it was kind of a soulmate AU (I mean it's not an AU since it's not fanfiction but you get the idea) and most importantly one of the protagonists owns a cat and he *walks* her on a leash, like how could I not want to read it?

And I'm glad I did read it, you know. But the funny part of this story is that I finished reading it while having a fever, then proceeded to dream about writing this review (and my dream self even made up a few extra chapters of this book in her head, which she proceeded to read while dreaming, giving the book a completely different epilogue)..... Well I hope I'm not the only one having weird/obsessive dreams while being sick.

Anyway, perhaps the negativity of being sick made my dream self start to see only the negative sides of this book, so that's why I'm writing this review after having distanced myself a little, but there is one word that dream-Silvia kept thinking about to describe elements of the plot of this book, and awake-Silvia will use it.

I don't want to start with the negatives though, so I'll talk about what I liked. The core idea, while not extremely original, was good. I think everyone has read a soulmate AU in their life once, and there's a reason why they're really popular. The idea that there is someone (one person only) out there who is perfect for you is appealing for those who believe in it, and soulmate AUs give life to this belief in different shapes. Here, it's thanks to a timer that people find their soulmate.

The explanation for the whole soulmate thing wasn't very extensive and it wasn't anything supernatural apparently but more of a result of science and technology, which I really liked. I would have liked to find out more about it but ok.

Now, another thing that made me want to read it is the fact that the two protagonists are a cop and a thief. I really liked both characters individually and I also liked them together, so in theory I should have loved the dynamic that was supposed to be there (or that I expected to be there) thanks to those two roles (cop/thief screams enemies to lovers to me, which is my absolutely favorite trope ever). That dynamic was actually one of the things that I was most looking forward to, but I'm sad to say that there was no such thing.

There was such potential to explore both the soulmate thing and the cop/thief thing, and I feel like I only saw 1/10 of what I was expecting. And here comes the word that dream-me thought of when trying to describe this: **half assed**. Admittedly dream-me might have been a little harsh with her wording (it doesn't help that I don't actually know a nicer equivalent word for that? #EnglishAsSecondLanguageProblems), but with no offense to the author, this is the best word that fits what my feelings towards many elements of the plot that were barely there and not explored, or not as much as I'd have liked to see them.

The soulmate stuff was basically only an excuse to justify insta-lust, without really focusing on why these two people are perfect for each other. There was a lot of focus on their interactions, which should have *showed* me why and how the MCs are perfect together. Well, together they were cute I have to admit, but they didn't scream "soulmates" to me. After all, a lot of the page-time of soulmate AUs is spent with one or both characters before their clock times out, and the reader gets to know them individually, their fears and expectations of their future soulmate, and only later sees them interact as soulmates. I'm not saying that all "AUs" need to be like that, but to me that's the beauty of them, and here the two MCs interacted almost right away.

As for the cop/thief dynamic, it wasn't even there. Aiden (the art thief) wasn't really a morally grey character, and his "hobby" (view spoiler) was never truly a point of conflict between the MCs. It was actually never solved (I mean Aiden has more than a dozen paintings he has stolen and nobody cares about those anymore? (view spoiler)).

That's why this word kept coming to mind: half assed worldbuilding (the explanation for the soulmate thing), half assed them being soulmates, half assed cop/thief dynamic. Everything was much more focused on the domesticity of their relationship, which works very well with some books (friends to lovers for example) but it's not how I personally expected this story to go.

Now, I don't only want to be negative, because I truly enjoyed a lot of this book, especially the beginning. I kept reading because it was cute and light and I liked the MCs and it kept me interested in seeing their interactions as their relationship developed. I was in that mental space where you see that the book is not perfect but you're still enjoying it without being too emotionally invested, but at some point it just kept dragging and I was honestly bored.

Nonetheless, I kept reading, and that's where even more half assed stuff was added to the plot (well, there wasn't really a plot, was there?). Stuff that actually pissed me off, like the use of the trope "the bitch blond ex girlfriend who's still in love with her ex and is super mean to her ex's new SO, who is also filthy rich and doesn't get why the MC is with someone that she sees as much lower than her in status". That was literally only used to create unnecessary conflict (*the conflict was right there right under your nose???? Cop/thief dynamic hello????*) and prolong the book.

Then, there tried to be some art theme (that's what the title is about, if you were wondering). Guess? Also kinda half assed. (view spoiler)

What I'm trying to say is that this book had the potential to be awesome (or at least even good) if it just stuck to its premise and stopped adding 3573730 details that were barely touched upon, taking away page time from originally sounded interesting just by reading the blurb. Sometimes less is more, and it could have been a nice 150-pages story, but dragging it to be much longer than that is what eventually made me dislike a big part of it.

Which is a shame because as I said, I really liked the beginning, and I even think that the author's writing style, while a little raw, has a lot of potential (I'm not allowed to quote because it's an ARC but some sentences were really nicely written, almost poetic).

One thing I liked was the representation though, and the fact that because of the clock system everyone seemed to be pansexual since the gender of their soulmate wasn't previously known and both characters were shown to also be/have been attracted to women previously. There was also talk about how sometimes the system isn't limited to two people, so even poly relationships are contemplated in the worldbuilding (I just wonder what the deal is with aromantic people since there didn't seem to be an explanation for them. I assume that since it's mentioned that sometimes the clock is wrong that would be their case).

There was also representation of chronic depression which I feel was done well but I can't speak for it since I haven't experienced it myself.

So, overall: I think the author can grow a lot and I'm going to keep an eye on her next works, but this one didn't 100% work for me. I would still recommend it if you're a fast reader (not my case sadly) and you don't mind spending a few hours on something mostly really light, cute and queer-positive.

**TWs:** non graphic sexual assault on a woman, depression, anxiety, dissociation (most TWs are listed at the beginning of the book)

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