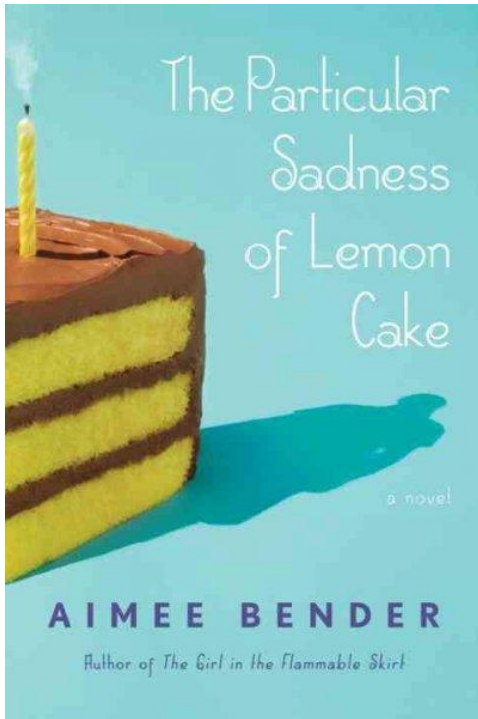


## About the book...



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 heartbreaking and 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*).

## About the author...



Aimee Bender is the author of the novel ***An Invisible Sign of My Own*** and the collections ***The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*** and ***Willful Creatures***. Her work has been widely anthologized and has been translated into ten languages. She lives in Los Angeles.

She has received two Pushcart prizes and was nominated for the Tiptree Award in 2005.

## Awards

2011 American Library Association Alex Awards for Best Adult Books For Teenagers

## Reviews

### *Booklist*

Eating the cake her mother has prepared for her ninth birthday, Rose Edelstein discovers she has a gift: she can taste her mother's emotions in the food she prepares. Soon, every bite Rose takes is filled with feelings—not just her mother's but those of other people as well—and what might have been a gift becomes a burden and then, perhaps, a curse. Because this is a novel rooted in family, Rose will learn that she is not the only Edelstein with a peculiar gift or burden. How she and others learn to cope—or not, as the case may be—is the small, sad story Rose shares. Bender's earlier work has often been described as surrealistic; however, this novel seems more informed by a kind of magical realism that struggles with transformation and sometime fleetingly succeeds, as in the case of the novel's vividly realized Los Angeles setting. But the effect soon fades, and the reader is left only with a lingering feeling of emptiness and the realization that sadness tastes a lot like bitterness.

### *Library Journal*/*\*Starred Review\**/

Rose Edelstein is nearly nine when she first tastes her mother's feelings baked into a slice of birthday cake. Her "mouth was filling up with the taste of smallness of upset." Meals become an agony for Rose, and she subsists on junk food from the school vending machine. When her mother begins an affair, Rose can taste that, too. Her brilliant older brother, Joseph, seems to have some type of autism spectrum disorder, though it is never named. Rose grows up and manages what she now considers her food skill, discerning not only the city of production but also the personality and temperament of the growers and pickers. She also draws closer to her father, finally understanding his prepossessions. This is an unusual family, even by California standards. VERDICT Bender (*Willful Creatures*) deconstructs one of our most pleasurable activities, eating, and gives it a whole new flavor. She smooths out the lumps and grittiness of life to reveal its zest. Highly recommended for readers with sophisticated palates.

### *BookPage Reviews*

#### **Tasting feelings through food**

A boy with keys for fingers. A woman who gives birth to her own mother. Imps and mermaids falling in love. If all of this sounds too strange—even for fiction—then you've obviously never read anything by Aimee Bender.

But now, with the publication of her second novel, [\*The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake\*](#), it's clearly time that you should.

In her latest literary confection, Bender introduces readers to perhaps her most dazzling creation to date: a girl named Rose who can taste the deepest feelings of others, just by taking a single bite of the food they prepare. As the flavors of the food flow over her tongue, Rose is inundated with the underlying emotions of the person who cooked the meal, even if it's something as simple as a peanut butter sandwich. All of a sudden, Rose is privy to an onslaught of sensations that aren't her own, and she realizes that nothing will ever be truly simple again.

***The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*** focuses on Rose's formative years, from the age of nine through her early 20s, as she struggles to form meaningful connections with her family and her peers. Intimidated by her austere and deeply intellectual brother, Joseph, Rose tries to understand what makes him tick. It is only with George, Joseph's best friend, that Rose feels she can truly express herself without fear of misunderstanding or judgment: the two share great tenderness, their relationship tinged with the poignant melancholy that pervades most of the novel.

Unable to stop the feelings that stem from the food she eats, it is up to Rose to discover a means of coping with her unwanted ability. Through much trial and error, Rose discovers there are alternatives to simply cutting herself off from others. With time she comes to see that her "curse" might actually have the potential to set her free, but first she must make peace with herself.

Speaking from her home in Los Angeles, Bender recalls where the ingenious idea for the story originated. "I think I was primarily interested in the food at first," she says. "I kept going back to the idea of 'what if food was carrying more than just food?' [So] the idea was sort of floating in my mind for years, and then when I hit on that character [Rose] it was all about developing her."

Although Rose's story plays center stage, if readers dig deeper, they will see that her brother Joseph's extreme reclusiveness, her father's intense aversion to hospitals and her mother's newfound obsession with carpentry all tell their own stories, each filled with pain and longing. The family is like a concert of tops, spinning together, but each ultimately orbiting its own axis. And yet, Bender balks at the idea that she has depicted a dysfunctional family. "I can see how some would think about this as a dysfunctional family," she allows, "but it's not a term I would pick because it can be a kind of catchall. My hope is that the family is experiencing a unique unhappiness."

When it comes to the author's own family, however, nary a storm cloud is in sight. Bender credits her mother, a modern dance instructor, as a critical influence on her willingness to defy convention. She recalls, "[My mother] would always take me to these concerts, and modern dance can be so bizarre! She also pointed me toward theater of the absurd writers when I was in junior high and high school; I loved that they were funny and weird and this was literature, and there was some feeling of permission in all of it that felt very good to me."

Perhaps her mother's gift of promoting the bizarre is something Bender is passing on to her readers. The wild and fanciful worlds of her imagination have been showcased in two short story collections, *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* and *Willful Creatures*, and in her acclaimed first novel, *An Invisible Sign of My Own*. Asked about her ability to ground the

outlandish in a place that is real, Bender says that writing this way is the only way she knows how. "My impulse is always to take an idea that is a little off-center, which means I can kind of get my hands in it, and then I can use that to climb into the character," she says.

Although *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* is liberally frosted with the foreign and the fantastic, the emotions at its center are undeniably real. Readers who like to give their imaginations a workout are in for a satisfying treat that is both bitter and sweet.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Taking her very personal brand of pessimistic magical realism to new heights (or depths), Bender's second novel (following *An Invisible Sign of My Own*) careens splendidly through an obstacle course of pathological, fantastical neuroses. Bender's narrator is young, needy Rose Edelstein, who can literally taste the emotions of whoever prepares her food, giving her unwanted insight into other people's secret emotional lives including her mother's, whose lemon cake betrays a deep dissatisfaction. Rose's father and brother also possess odd gifts, the implications of which Bender explores with a loving and detailed eye while following Rose from third grade through adulthood. Bender has been called a fabulist, but emerges as more a spelunker of the human soul; carefully burrowing through her characters' layered disorders and abilities, Bender plumbs an emotionally crippled family with power and authenticity. Though Rose's gift can seem superfluous at times, and Bender's gustative insights don't have the sensual potency readers might crave, this coming-of-age story makes a bittersweet dish, brimming with a zesty, beguiling talent.

### **Discussion question...** (<http://www.randomhouse.com>)

1. Rose goes through life feeling people's emotions through their food. Many eat to feel happy and comforted. Does this extreme sensory experience bring any happiness to Rose or only sadness?
2. What does Rose mean when she says her dad always seemed like a guest to her? How does this play out in the rest of the novel?
3. "Mom's smiles were so full of feeling that people leaned back a little when she greeted them. It was hard to know just how much was being offered." What does Rose mean and how does this trait affect her mother's relationships?
4. Why do you think Rose's dad liked medical dramas but hated hospitals?
5. Rose says, "Mom loved my brother more. Not that she didn't love me— I felt the wash of her love everyday, pouring over me, but it was a different kind, siphoned from a different, and tamer, body of water. I was her darling daughter; Joseph was her it." Do you think Rose is right in her estimation and why do you think her mother might feel this way?

6. What does the grandmother suggest when she tells Rose “you don’t even know me, how can you love me?” How has the grandmother’s relationship with Rose’s own mother affected the family dynamic?
7. What is Joseph trying to accomplish by drawing a "perfect" circle when it, by very definition, is impossible? How does George’s idea to create wallpaper out of the imperfections affect him? How does validation and affection through art recur in the novel and what does it signify?
8. Why does George suddenly conclude Rose’s gift isn’t really a problem and stops investigating it?
9. What is the significance of the mother’s commitment to carpentry (compared to other, short-lived hobbies)? How does this play out in the rest of the novel?
10. What is the impact of Rose's discovery about her father's skills? Did this change the way you see the father?
11. Joseph is described as a desert and geode while Rose is a rainforest and sea glass. Discuss the implications.
12. Why does Rose want to keep the thread-bare footstool of her parents’ courtship instead of having her mother make her a new one?
13. Are the family dinners—with Joseph reading, the dad eating, Rose silently trying to survive the meal and the mom talking non-stop—emblematic of the family dynamic? How has it evolved over the years?
14. How did you experience the scene in Joseph's room, when Rose goes to see him? What did that experience mean to Rose? Is there any significance to Joseph choosing a card table chair?
15. What does the last image about the trees have to do with this family? How do you interpret the last line of the novel?

### **Readalikes** (*NoveList*)

#### [Like Water for Chocolate](#) by Laura Esquivel

At the beginning of the 20th century, Tita, the youngest of three daughters, is expected to serve her mother for the rest of her life, but in order to show her love to Pedro, who is engaged to her sister, Tita cooks for him

#### [Caramelo](#) by Sandra Cisneros

During her family's annual car trip from Chicago to Mexico City, Lala Reyes listens to stories about her family, including her grandmother, the descendant of a renowned

dynasty of shawl makers, whose magnificent striped shawl has come into Lala's possession

**Unaccustomed Earth: stories** by Jhumpa Lahiri

Exploring the secrets and complexities lying at the heart of family life and relationships, a collection of eight stories includes the title work, about a young mother in a new city whose father tends her garden while hiding a secret love affair

**After This** by Alice McDermott

A portrait of an American family during the middle decades of the twentieth century evokes the social, spiritual, and political turmoil of the era as seen through the experiences of a middle-class couple and their children

**The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao** by Junot Diaz

Living with an old-world mother and rebellious sister, an urban New Jersey misfit dreams of becoming the next J. R. R. Tolkien and believes that a long-standing family curse is thwarting his efforts to find love and happiness.

## **Readalikes** (*Books & Authors*)

**Atmospheric Disturbances: A novel** By Rivka Galchen

Dr. Leo Liebenstein has a patient named Harvey, who believes that he receives coded messages from meteorologists informing him how to control the weather. Leo's wife, Rema, suggests an unusual method to cure Harvey. She tells her husband to pretend that he is one of the secret meteorologists sending Harvey messages, and he gives it a try. Then, one day, Rema and Harvey both suddenly go missing--sort of. Leo believes that an imposter has taken his wife's place. She looks like his wife, but she is not the woman he loves. To find her, Leo tracks down a real meteorologist, whom he believes can help him. His search takes him halfway across the world. Ultimately, Leo discovers that nothing is quite what it appears to be.

**Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close** by Jonathan Safran Foer

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, bestselling author Jonathan Safran Foer tells the imaginative story of Oskar Schell, an unforgettable nine-year-old with passions for everything from inventing to tambourine playing. But Oskar is also dealing with tragedy: his father was recently killed in the September 11 World Trade Center attacks. Left behind in his father's affects, the boy discovers a key that sends him on an odyssey of personal, spiritual, and cultural discovery in 21st-century Manhattan.

**If I Told You Once** by Judy Budnitz

Ilana lives in a Eastern European village that is so small it doesn't even have a name. She longs to escape from the hand-to-mouth existence that has defined the villagers' lives for several generations. Her flight from the village and her amazing journey to the New World are fraught with fairy tale adventures. As an immigrant, Ilana settles in New York where she struggles to build a new life. Her daughter Shasa wants nothing to do with her

mother's stories, superstitions, and home brewed remedies. She yearns to be totally American in looks and actions. But Shasa cannot shake her mother's old fashioned ways. Shasa's longing for a life of refinement and prestige alienates her daughter Mara. The three adult women, each now single, continue to live together in an apartment located in the immigrant neighborhood where Ilana first lived. When a twist of fate brings Mara's niece Naomi "Nomie" to live with them, the elder women see in the infant a fulfillment of their own dreams. But it's the bond between Ilana and Nomie that's the strongest as Nomie intuitively understands the truths within Ilana's fantastic familial stories. A book that's part fairy tale, part fantasy, and totally magical.

**The Red Garden** by Alice Hoffman

Author Alice Hoffman's *The Red Garden* is a collection of short stories, all of which center around the settlement of a Massachusetts town named Blackwell and a plot of land known as the Red Garden. The author describes the town as it progresses throughout two centuries, and tells of the people and creatures who inhabit the town. Hoffman does not limit her characterization to that of the human persuasion, instead telling the stories of those in the spirit world and even a group of bears. Hoffman is also the author of **Blackbird House** and **The Story Sisters**.

**Swamplandia!** By Karen Russell

*Swamplandia* is a novel by author Karen Russell. The book features a dilapidated Everglades tourist trap called Swamplandia, which is headed by an alligator-wrestling family, the Bigtrees. As Swamplandia begins to fail, the Bigtrees disband and scatter in different directions of Florida. Ava, the youngest at 13 years old, has the strength and determination to get her family back, but she must literally go through hell to retrieve them. Russell is also the author of *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*.



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