

A Recipe for Love

Spotlight on **Romance**

Capetta's groundbreaking romance makes magic by centering queer and trans characters and relationships

by Alaina Leary

In the vein of many contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult novelists—among them Malinda Lo, Alex Sanchez, Kacen Callender, Leah Johnson—A. R. Capetta's *The Heartbreak Bakery* delivers on the idea that queer and trans teenagers can find hope, love, community, and maybe even a little bit of magic. And there's plenty of magic to be found at the Proud Muffin, a queer-owned bakery that doubles as an LGBTQ+ community space in Austin, Texas, where our headstrong protagonist, Syd (no pronouns, please), has worked ever since convincing owners Alec and Vin to let a high-school senior be a full-time baker.

The story begins with Syd, fresh off a painful breakup, baking brownies and serving them to customers of the Proud Muffin. Confused and hurt, Syd is too lost to realize this batch of brownies has become infused with magic of a heartbreaking nature—thanks to Syd's emotional state—and certainly doesn't expect everyone who eats one to begin seeing their own relationships falling apart. The brownies wreak havoc, starting arguments between romantic partners and even threatening to split up Alec and Vin. It's up to Syd—with a little help from the Proud Muffin's cute bike messenger, Harley—to fix things before relationships crumble, the bakery closes, and Syd's only true safe space is lost.

Throughout the book, Capetta emphasizes the importance of community. Syd's world is populated with a chosen family of vibrant LGBTQ+ characters whose personalities and identities also develop over the course of the novel—all in a way that feels as sweetly earned as a decadent dessert. It's easy to fall in love with side-kick turned love interest Harley, who loves dancing and their younger siblings; caring mentors Vin and Alec, who value boundaries and honesty; intense baker Marisol, who views Syd like a kid sibling; creative, funny erotica novelist Jessalee, who writes at the Proud Muffin; Syd's thoughtful older sister, Tess; and even Syd's parents, who have their own compelling love story.

When Syd veers from determined and inspired to stubborn and shortsighted, Harley and the others are there to help with the parts of life and love that Syd is still figuring out. Meanwhile, Syd is also coming to terms with being agender and the exhausting reality of coming out over and over again in a cis-heteronormative world, all while navigating a close-knit family

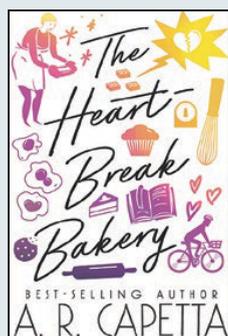
that is supportive but doesn't always get it right. Capetta's writing—via Syd's colorful, sympathetic voice—shines brightest in the moments when Syd is wrong, messy, and uncertain, and as the baking magic intensifies, Syd finds that, with the power of magic-infused baked goods (which include everything from Breakup Brownies and Very Sorry Cake to Shiny New Scones and Agender Cupcakes), it's possible to inspire breakups as well as truth telling and make-out sessions.

In trying to save both the Proud Muffin and other people's relationships, Syd learns that not every love lasts forever—or is supposed to—and that sometimes it's OK to design new dreams when your original plans don't work out. Problems can't be fixed by steamy whipped cream or apologetic cake;

rather, the beauty of relationships—romantic or otherwise—is in being unafraid to go to uncomfortable and difficult places with the people you care about. Through this new understanding, Syd builds a connection with Harley that goes deeper than surface level, allowing each of them to be fully seen by the other as they figure out what a romantic relationship looks like when you create it with intention instead of defaulting to what you think it has to be. The romantic moments between Syd and Harley are tender, and the heartbreak they contend with satisfyingly nuanced.

Of course, heartbreak abounds in *The Heartbreak Bakery*, but so, too, does love, and crucially, Capetta holds more than just romantic love up to the light. Relationships with chosen family, friends, and community are given equal weight here, polyamory is considered just as valuable as monogamy, and the titular heartbreak doesn't surround anyone's

identity. LGBTQ+ characters are allowed to experience joy, fall in love, and break up. Between all that, a groundbreaking agender protagonist, a love interest who uses both he/him and they/them pronouns, and a cast of complex queer and trans characters, this book proves a necessary addition to the young adult romance genre. Every scene involving magic baking is pure perfection, and the romance is as mouthwatering as Syd's recipes, all of which will make readers want to pull out a bowl, a baking sheet, and a sprinkle of their own magic.



 **The Heartbreak Bakery.**

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