

## An Exemplar of Novel Excerpting

Below is an excerpt from Aimee Bender's novel *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*. This is an excerpt that appeared in a baking publication, and by all appearances, Bender arranged it herself. It comes in at about 950 words. Following this excerpt is the actual beginning of her novel, from which this excerpt was taken. It's about 2250 words.

You'll be able to see that she cut out portions of the novel to create this cohesive short. Even though in this case, it was made clear that this was a novel excerpt, Bender is a master short story writer, and what she created here stands on its own pretty well.

### The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake [Excerpt] Aimee Bender

It happened for the first time on a Tuesday afternoon, a warm spring day in the flatlands near Hollywood, a light breeze moving east from the ocean and stirring the black-eyed pansy petals newly planted in our flower boxes.

My mother was home, baking me a cake. When I tripped up the walkway, she opened the front door before I could knock.

How about a practice round? she said, leaning past the door frame. She pulled me in for a hello hug, pressing me close to my favorite of her aprons, the worn cotton one trimmed in sketches of twinned red cherries.

On the kitchen counter, she'd set out the ingredients: Flour bag, sugar box, two brown eggs nestled in the grooves between tiles. A yellow block of butter blurring at the edges. A shallow glass bowl of lemon peel. I toured the row. This was the week of my ninth birthday, and it had been a long day at school of cursive lessons, which I hated, and playground yelling about point scoring, and the sunlit kitchen and my warm-eyed mother were welcome arms, open. I dipped a finger into the wax baggie of brown-sugar crystals, murmured yes, please, yes.

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At the counter, Mom poured thick yellow batter into a greased cake pan, and smoothed the top with the flat end of a pink plastic spatula. She checked the oven temperature, brushed a sweaty strand of hair off her forehead with the knob of her wrist.

Here we go, she said, slipping the cake pan into the oven.

When I looked up, she was rubbing her eyelids with the pads of her fingertips. She blew me a kiss and said she was going to lie down for a little bit. Okay, I nodded. Two birds bickered outside.



The room filled with the smell of warming butter and sugar and lemon and eggs, and at five, the timer buzzed and I pulled out the cake and placed it on the stovetop. The house was quiet. The bowl of icing was right there on the counter, ready to go, and cakes are best when just out of the oven, and I really couldn't possibly wait, so I reached to the side of the cake pan, to the least obvious part, and pulled off a small warm spongy chunk of deep gold. Iced it all over with chocolate. Popped the whole thing into my mouth.

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My birthday cake was her latest project because it was not from a mix but instead built from scratch—the flour, the baking soda, lemon-flavored because at eight that had been my request; I had developed a strong love for sour. We'd looked through several cookbooks together to find just the right one, and the smell in the kitchen was overpoweringly pleasant. To be clear: the bite I ate was delicious. Warm citrus-baked batter lightness enfolded by cool deep dark swirled sugar.

But the day was darkening outside, and as I finished that first bite, as that first impression faded, I felt a subtle shift inside, an unexpected reaction. As if a sensor, so far buried deep inside me, raised its scope to scan around, alerting my mouth to something new. Because the goodness of the ingredients—the fine chocolate, the freshest lemons—seemed like a cover over something larger and darker, and the taste of what was underneath was beginning to push up from the bite. I could absolutely taste the chocolate, but in drifts and traces, in an unfurling, or an opening, it seemed that my mouth was also filling with the taste of smallness, the sensation of shrinking, of upset, tasting a distance I somehow knew was connected to my mother, tasting a crowded sense of her thinking, a spiral, like I could almost even taste the grit in her jaw that had created the headache that meant she had to take as many aspirins as were necessary, a white dotted line of them in a row on the nightstand like an ellipsis to her comment: I'm just going to lie down. . . . None of it was a bad taste, so much, but there was a kind of lack of wholeness to the flavors that made it taste hollow, like the lemon and chocolate were just surrounding a hollowness. My mother's able hands had made the cake, and her mind had known how to balance the ingredients, but she was not there, in it. It so scared me that I took a knife from a drawer and cut out a big slice, ruining the circle, because I had to check again right that second, and I put it on a pink-flowered plate and grabbed a napkin from the napkin drawer. My heart was beating fast. I was hoping I'd imagined it—maybe it was a bad lemon? or old sugar?—although I knew, even as I thought it, that what I'd tasted had nothing to do with ingredients—and I flipped on the light and took the plate in the other room to my favorite chair, the one with the orange-striped pattern, and with each bite, I thought—mmm, so good, the best ever, yum—but in each bite: absence, hunger, spiraling, hollows. This cake that my mother had made just for me, her daughter, whom she loved so much I could see her clench her fists from overflow sometimes when I came home from school, and when she would hug me hello I could feel how inadequate the hug was for how much she wanted to give.

I ate the whole piece, desperate to prove myself wrong.



The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake [Novel]  
Aimee Bender

1 It happened for the first time on a Tuesday afternoon, a warm spring day in the flatlands near Hollywood, a light breeze moving east from the ocean and stirring the black-eyed pansy petals newly planted in our flower boxes.

My mother was home, baking me a cake. When I tripped up the walkway, she opened the front door before I could knock.

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On the kitchen counter, she'd set out the ingredients: Flour bag, sugar box, two brown eggs nestled in the grooves between tiles. A yellow block of butter blurring at the edges. A shallow glass bowl of lemon peel. I toured the row. This was the week of my ninth birthday, and it had been a long day at school of cursive lessons, which I hated, and playground yelling about point scoring, and the sunlit kitchen and my warm-eyed mother were welcome arms, open. I dipped a finger into the wax baggie of brown-sugar crystals, murmured yes, please, yes.

She said there was about an hour to go, so I pulled out my spelling booklet. Can I help? I asked, spreading out pencils and papers on the vinyl place mats.

Nah, said Mom, whisking the flour and baking soda together.

My birthday is in March, and that year it fell during an especially bright spring week, vivid and clear in the narrow residential streets where we lived just a handful of blocks south of Sunset. The night-blooming jasmine that crawled up our neighbor's front gate released its heady scent at dusk, and to the north, the hills rolled charmingly over the horizon, houses tucked into the brown. Soon, daylight savings time would arrive, and even at nearly nine, I associated my birthday with the first hint of summer, with the feeling in classrooms of open windows and lighter clothing and in a few months no more homework. My hair got lighter in spring, from light brown to nearly blond, almost like my mother's ponytail tassel. In the neighborhood gardens, the agapanthus plants started to push out their long green robot stems to open up to soft purples and blues.

Mom was stirring eggs; she was sifting flour. She had one bowl of chocolate icing set aside, another with rainbow sprinkles.

A cake challenge like this wasn't a usual afternoon activity; my mother didn't bake all that often, but what she enjoyed most was anything tactile, and this cake was just one in a long line of recent varied hands-on experiments. In the last six months, she'd coaxed a strawberry plant into a vine, stitched doilies from vintage lace, and in a burst of motivation installed an oak side door in my brother's bedroom with the help of a hired contractor. She'd been working as an office administrator, but she didn't like copy machines, or work shoes, or computers, and when my father paid off the last of his law school debt, she asked him if she could take some time off and learn to do more with her hands. My hands, she told him, in the hallway, leaning her hips against his; my hands have had no lessons in anything.



Anything? he'd asked, holding tight to those hands. She laughed, low. Anything practical, she said.

They were right in the way, in the middle of the hall, as I was leaping from room to room with a plastic leopard. Excuse me, I said.

He breathed in her hair, the sweet-smelling thickness of it. My father usually agreed with her requests, because stamped in his two-footed stance and jaw was the word Provider, and he loved her the way a bird-watcher's heart leaps when he hears the call of the roseate spoonbill, a fluffy pink wader, calling its lilting coo-coo from the mangroves. Check, says the bird-watcher. Sure, said my father, tapping a handful of mail against her back.

Rah, said the leopard, heading back to its lair.

At the kitchen table, I flipped through my workbook, basking in the clicking sounds of a warming oven. If I felt a hint of anything unsettling, it was like the sun going swiftly behind a cloud only to shine straight seconds later. I knew vaguely that my parents had had an argument the night before, but parents had arguments all the time, at home and on TV. Plus, I was still busily going over the bad point scoring from lunch, called by Eddie Oakley with the freckles, who never called fairly. I read through my spelling booklet: knack, knick, knot; cartwheel, wheelbarrow, wheelie. At the counter, Mom poured thick yellow batter into a greased cake pan, and smoothed the top with the flat end of a pink plastic spatula. She checked the oven temperature, brushed a sweaty strand of hair off her forehead with the knob of her wrist.

Here we go, she said, slipping the cake pan into the oven.

When I looked up, she was rubbing her eyelids with the pads of her fingertips. She blew me a kiss and said she was going to lie down for a little bit. Okay, I nodded. Two birds bickered outside. In my booklet, I picked the person doing a cartwheel and colored her shoes with red laces, her face a light orange. I made a vow to bounce the ball harder on the playground, and to bounce it right into Eddie Oakley's corner. I added some apples to the wheelbarrow freehand.

The room filled with the smell of warming butter and sugar and lemon and eggs, and at five, the timer buzzed and I pulled out the cake and placed it on the stovetop. The house was quiet. The bowl of icing was right there on the counter, ready to go, and cakes are best when just out of the oven, and I really couldn't possibly wait, so I reached to the side of the cake pan, to the least obvious part, and pulled off a small warm spongy chunk of deep gold. Iced it all over with chocolate. Popped the whole thing into my mouth.

2 After my mother quit her job, she spent those first six months or so beautifying the house. Each week, a different project. First, she grew that strawberry plant in the backyard, fastening it on the fence until the berries popped points of red in a wavy row. When she was done with that, she curled up on the sofa in heaps of old lace, placing her best new doily beneath a bowl of fresh-picked strawberries. Then she whipped the cream to put on top of the strawberries picked from the vine and put it all in the ceramic bowl she'd made in college that rested on top of the doily. It was red and white and delicate and elegant but she was always bad at accepting compliments. After the vines slowed for fall, she wanted to do something more rugged, so she called up a friend who knew a contractor and hired him on the promise that she could assist while they installed the side door in my brother's bedroom, just in case he ever wanted to go outside.

But he hates outside! I said, following them into Joseph's room for measurements. Why can't I have a door?



You're too young for a door, Mom said. My brother held his backpack to his chest, watching, and he gave a short nod when Mom asked if the location was okay. How long will it take? he asked.

We'll only work on it while you're in school, she assured us both, pulling out a notebook list of supplies.

It took three weeks of sawing, sanding, destroying and rebuilding, my mother in jeans, her ponytail tucked under the collar of her blouse, the contractor giving long explanations on sizing. Joseph slept under an extra quilted comforter once the wall had broken open, because he preferred his own bed. They worked day after day until the wood was finally fitted, and the window at the top installed, and the doorknob attached, and cheerful little red curtains hung partway down the frame. Mom presented it to Joseph as soon as we came home from school. Ta-da! she said, pulling him by the wrist and bowing. He put his hand on the doorknob and exited through the door and then circled back through the front door of the house and went into the kitchen to eat cereal. Looks good, he called, from the kitchen. Mom and I opened and closed the door fifty times, locking it and pulling the curtains shut; unlocking it and pulling the curtains open. When Dad got home at his usual time, six feet tall and nearly ducking under door frames, he made a few calls in the bedroom, and when Mom dragged him out to see the finished product, he said nice, nicely done, and then folded his arms.

What? Mom said.

Nothing.

It has a key lock, I said, pointing.

Just funny, said Dad, wrinkling his nose. All this work for a door in a room only one of us goes into.

You can use it, Joseph called, from the kitchen.

In case of a fire, I said.

We did so much sanding, Mom said, tracing the new calluses on her palms.

Very smooth, said Dad, touching the curtains.

After dinner, while Dad finished the rest of his work in the bedroom, Mom stretched out on the living-room carpet in front of the red brick fireplace, and even though it was warm out still, almost seventy degrees, she lit a fire using an old pine log she'd found in the garage. Come sit, Rose, she called to me, and we nestled up together and stared as the flickering flames licked the log into ash. I had nightmares that night, since they say you have nightmares more easily when the house is too warm. I dreamed we were plunging down frozen rivers.

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upset, tasting a distance I somehow knew was connected to my mother, tasting a crowded sense of her thinking, a spiral, like I could almost even taste the grit in her jaw that had created the headache that meant she had to take as many aspirins as were necessary, a white dotted line of them in a row on the nightstand like an ellipsis to her comment: I'm just going to lie down.... None of it was a bad taste, so much, but there was a kind of lack of wholeness to the flavors that made it taste hollow, like the lemon and chocolate were just surrounding a hollowness. My mother's able hands had made the cake, and her mind had known how to balance the ingredients, but she was not there, in it. It so scared me that I took a knife from a drawer and cut out a big slice, ruining the circle, because I had to check again right that second, and I put it on a pink-flowered plate and grabbed a napkin from the napkin drawer. My heart was beating fast. Eddie Oakley shrank to a pinpoint. I was hoping I'd imagined it—maybe it was a bad lemon? or old sugar?—although I knew, even as I thought it, that what I'd tasted had nothing to do with ingredients—and I flipped on the light and took the plate in the other room to my favorite chair, the one with the orange-striped pattern, and with each bite, I thought—mmm, so good, the best ever, yum—but in each bite: absence, hunger, spiraling, hollows. This cake that my mother had made just for me, her daughter, whom she loved so much I could see her clench her fists from overflow sometimes when I came home from school, and when she would hug me hello I could feel how inadequate the hug was for how much she wanted to give.

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[There's more in Chapter 2, but this is where the excerpt ends.]

