

The Cake Chronicles: Finding Sweet Hope in This Crazy World

Jayne B. Robinson

Dandelion Seed Press (January 2010)

Hardcover \$21.95 (225pp)

978-0-9830850-0-3

One devilishly hot July day, Robinson quotes Dean Koontz in response to her family's depression about the weather: "Where there's cake, there's hope. And there's always cake."

Thus was born "Cake Day," designated as Saturday by the author, although she stresses that it can be celebrated on any day one pleases. Every Saturday from that hot mid-summer day, Robinson or another family member baked a cake that was shared at about seven o'clock in the evening, when many neighbors found it convenient to drop by. Robinson attributes her cake obsession to her mother's utter disregard for sweets; she apparently left her children "dessert-ed."

Cakes, "the peak of pastrydom," are meant to be shared, and their glorious panoply of fillings, frostings, and layers provides both perfect reliability and unending variety. Butter cream, chiffon, meringue, nuts, and even tomatoes all contribute to the confectionary heaven Robinson writes about, a place in which one can always find relief from worldly woes.

Refreshingly free of worries about calories and fat (although gluten-free recipes are included), Robinson's selection ranges from simple to complex. The Girl Scouts' recipe for "Dump Cake" requires all ingredients to be poured into a cast-iron Dutch oven and baked, unmixed, on hot coals; there is also a version for the home baker.

Although Johnny Carson claimed that there is "only one fruitcake in the world, and people keep sending it to each other," Robinson insists that her recipe, rescued from a dead woman's thieving caretaker, is worth the trouble. It requires twenty-three ingredients, and is best when "let to cure, soaking in spirits, for a few weeks." After baking for nearly four hours, it is wrapped in cheesecloth and steeped in rum or brandy. The finished project, which will surely intoxicate all who partake of it, weighs five pounds.

Robinson marks all holidays and life cycle events in her year-long tribute to cake: Red Velvet Cake for Valentine's Day, Orange Marmalade Cake for D-Day, when her father helped to storm the beaches, and Peach Upside-Down Cake to mark the effects of gravity on a body sore from biking.

Robinson's recipes are clear and easy to follow, and her invitation to join in the celebration of Cake Day is lusciously tempting. Seemingly frivolous and light-hearted at first, this book ultimately combines recipes with love and laughter to provide a surprisingly moving meditation on a thoughtful life.

ELIZABETH BREAU (September 9, 2011)

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