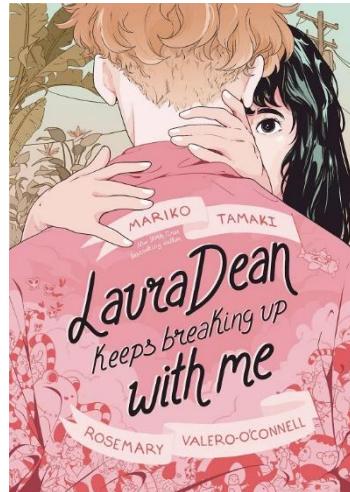




Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me by Mariko Tamaki & Rosemary Valero-O'Connell

[Young Adult]



Exquisitely beautiful and wickedly funny, yet in places so poignant it's painful!

"I've been in love with a girl named Laura Dean. Which is the hardest thing I've ever been."

Now, why would that be? Is it because Freddy and Laura are both young ladies? No: Berkeley High School is as enlightened as you'd like. Is it because love-struck Freddy can only swoon from afar, her love unrequited? No: the couple are fully fledged *girlfriends*! Is it because Laura's a fractious outcast, angry at a world which chooses to shun her? No, it's most *definitely* not that, for Laura Dean is chic, deliriously up-tempo and comports herself with such charisma that wherever she wanders a crowd gathers round of equally exuberant acolytes. Laura has presence! Even when absent.

"Because Laura Dean... Keeps breaking up with me."



Worse still, she's wont to do so during public celebrations by pairing off with another girl none too secretly. She then responds to Freddy's texted heartbreak with such offhand affection that it's almost impossible to argue: "Don't be mad. xoxo". And Freddy doesn't argue, especially when she's asked back (charmingly, disarmingly by a radiant, unapologetic Laura) much to the growing dismay of her friends. Because they've seen the damage done to their friend's self-confidence, as well as her reputation after she barfs up drunkenly in Doris' Donuts *upon* Doris's donuts. Right in front of the cafe's surprisingly forgiving, stoical waitress, Vi!



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Valero-O'Connell's cover's a stunner but the insides are every bit as passionate, gentle and nuanced. Hands held or touching tenderly, tentatively are just-so, and the eyes-shut smiles of blissful delight are as perfectly perceived and rendered whether they're during a shared confidence or basking in the affection of friends. The fashions are fabulous too, like Vi's luxurious, bleached-white curls, eyeball earrings, bracelet and snake-coiled black summer top as she sits down with Freddy for a thankfully barf-free, catch-up coffee. They bond swiftly over what have already become shared, self-effacing, running jokes. I love the way Freddy plays with her hair there. Berkeley appears to be well lush: fronds by front doors under shady awnings, sprays of waxy leaves in cafe courtyards, virile climbers crawling up metal mesh fences, blooms abounding while outside every window, tall trees can be seen. Speaking of windows, some of the backlit panels cast a pall over those who aren't faring so well, and the arrival of some characters casts shadows over others. The mood control is very precise.



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If I haven't delved deeply into the supportive cast it's because I want you to discover them for yourselves. I wish Freddy would. Doodle, Buddy and Eric are no mere chorus, but individuals who will surprise... one so completely because I'd made unwarranted presumptions about an alternative revelation which I thought I'd seen coming, so I can also assure you that this is *all far from obvious*. Almost everyone is going to experience some degree of heartache, whether it's a friend carelessly neglected or the bewilderment of being invited to what you'd supposed was an intimate evening to enhance reconciliation, only to discover a full-blown party with the wild set, and then being given the lose / lose option of staying or leaving, because your girlfriend honestly doesn't care either way!

If your protective eyebrow has just arched through the ceiling, then *I know...*! Regardless of what I'm about to type... same here! But this is what's so refreshingly complex about Tamaki's writing: Laura Dean isn't one of those manipulative nightmares consciously messing with Freddy's heart and mind for the sheer, smile-inducing, smug satisfaction of it all in order to boost her own ego. (I've known some of them.) Her bad behaviour isn't calculated to hurt. It's not even calculated. She's simply oblivious to any pain that her genuinely carefree, attach-less attitude causes because it's a quality which has always works out for her. She's never been on the receiving end.

There's a killer final reprise, though. You may find yourself punching the air. That's allowed.

