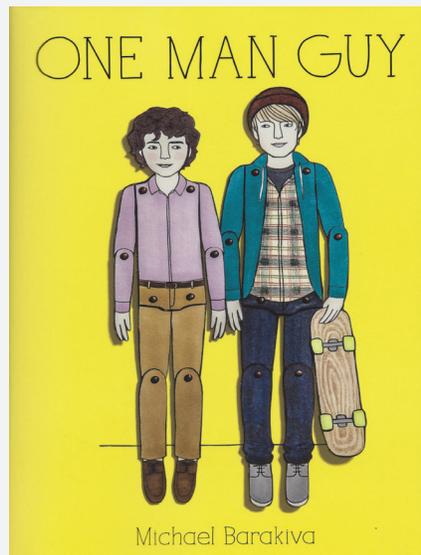


## Second Reaction: One Man Romance

Barakiva, Michael. *One Man Guy*.  
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Print.

Sara Leady



Forced by his parents in order to take summer classes to stay on the Honor Track, fourteen-year-old Alek Khederian cannot think of any worse way to spend his summer break. Alek, however, does not expect the kind of summer education that he gets from ultra-cool classmate, Ethan. Alek learns not only of love, but also acceptance of self and the importance of fighting for what he thinks is right.

Michael Barakiva's *One Man Guy* offers a dish of your typical fairy tale teen romance served in the streets of New York City summer, with a sprinkling of Armenian spices. While Barakiva's romance is perhaps a bit stereotypical for a young adult love story, what makes it unique is that it features the love shared between two teen boys. Given the title, I was fully expecting tragedy to strike at every turn. Barakiva, however, shattered my expectations in the best way possible by giving Alek not just a happy story, but most importantly, a plausibly real one.

When Alek's very strict Armenian parents walk in on him and Ethan in bed together, I anticipated fireworks and a disowning of the main character, but Alek's parents are far more concerned that Alek has lied to them than about the compromising position in which they find him. His parents' resistance to Ethan also relates more to their concern about his being

a bad influence than about his sexual orientation, since Alek has skipped school with Ethan and then lied about it. I appreciate that Barakiva depicted both Ethan's and Alek's parents as accepting of their sexual identity. We often only hear horrifying "coming out" stories rather than ones with parents who embrace and love their children for who they are.

Alongside Alek's story of self discovery and coming out, Barakiva provided teen readers a look into the world of being an Armenian American and what it entails. While the opening dining-out scene featuring Alek's mother's vocal dissatisfaction with the restaurant, the food, and the waitress serving the family is mortifying to read, it sets the cultural stage for the important role that food and hospitality play within Armenian culture. As readers learn more about Armenian culture and history, they gain an understanding of why Alek's mom remains so critical and how their culture affects the way his entire family interacts with the world. Through Alek's experiences and insecurities, Barakiva, who is himself Armenian American and gay, allows readers to experience being a cultural outsider within one's own neighborhood.

I asked my student Zelda, who is an avid reader and a member of the Fuse volunteer group at school, to read *One Man Guy* with me. She and some of her high school friends agreed, and they all really liked the book. They did question whether the plot was too neat and fairy tale-like in its romance. One student, Max, stated, "It was beautiful in all its gayness," but also criticized the neatness of the story because he did not feel like a coming-out story could be so free of drama. Max is a sixteen-year-old who identifies as gay but has not come out to his parents because he fears their reaction; he did not take comfort in a happy coming-out story, feeling life does not happen that way.

On the other hand, another reader, Kamala, a lesbian, took comfort in finally seeing her life reflected in a title. Kamala appreciated that LGBTQA (the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and asexual community) teen readers are finally getting happy romance novels not riddled with the typical tragedy she has come to expect from gay titles. Kamala also noted that titles like *One Man Guy* make her feel less weird because it reflects the queer community in a positive light like straight novels do, which she finds encouraging. Kamala especially appreciates how Barakiva parallels a typical YA heterosexual romance with a gay one, thus normalizing these relationships.

We all critiqued the actual set up of the relationship, unconvinced that Alek and Ethan's romance reflects reality. Zelda was a bit taken aback by how fast Alek and Ethan move sexually with their relationship, especially given that Alek has just acknowledged his gay identity himself. She questioned whether or not someone who does not realize he is gay until his best friend tells him he is would actually be that comfortable moving so quickly into an intimate physical relationship. While we were all critical of the quick progression of their relationship, my readers said that high school couples becoming official after just meeting is actually pretty common. Despite our nit-picky criticisms, we all enjoyed the book immensely and would recommend it (and in some cases already have).

### **Works Cited**

Barakiva, Michael. *One Man Guy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Print.

### **About the Author**

**Sara Leady** has a degree in English literature from Seattle University and is a master of Library and Information Science candidate at the University of South Carolina. She avidly collects comic books, loose-leaf tea, and literary t-shirts when she's not out adventuring with her rescued dog, Azelynn.