In *Can’t Buy Me Love*, first-time novelist Summer Kinard introduces Vanessa Fauchon, who learns that the path to true love can take a person to unexpected places—including the bottom of a dumpster.

Vanessa is a bartender, freegan, and sustainable-living devotee who resides in Durham, North Carolina. On one of her regular dumpster diving expeditions, Vanessa finds a discarded scrapbook and comes to admire a man whose life she knows only from the pages and pictures of the book. Soon after, a twist of fate and a mutual friend bring her face-to-face with Javier, the man from the scrapbook. From there, the main plot follows a tried and true pattern: Vanessa and Javier fall for each other, obstacles come between them, and Vanessa must decide whether or not she is willing to fight for the relationship.

The story’s over-arching themes will be familiar to readers of contemporary romance and women’s fiction: learning to love one’s self, finding true romantic love, and the importance and power of friendship. While the main plot arc of love found, lost, and regained is well-worn territory, other plot and character elements diverge from expected, staid tropes. Characters come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and depict diversity in regard to age and sexual orientation. While some characters, including the story’s main villain, feel less than fully realized, others are more clearly drawn. Among the stronger characterizations are Vanessa’s female friends, who bring wisdom, love, and humor to the book.

Other details that fill out the story come in a combination that readers will be hard-pressed to find together in another piece of fiction. In addition to dumpster diving, characters engage in yarn-bombing, *luchadora* matches, and opera singing; a sub-plot involves Vanessa’s journey of Christian religious re-discovery. But in bringing together so many niche interests, sometimes with only sparse explanatory details, the author risks losing readers who are unfamiliar with some or all of these interests. With frank discussions of sex and sexuality throughout the story, this book is not recommended for readers who prefer their romances on the chaste side. The author addresses other “adult” concerns as well, including ethical, financial, and environmental considerations.

North Carolinians, especially those familiar with the Triangle, will recognize real-life locations that the author incorporates into the story. Characters visit Duke Gardens, the Durham Museum of Life and Science, and the American Tobacco Trail. Other local institutions receive mentions throughout the story, such as Durham’s Carolina Theatre and the Triangle’s local weekly *The Independent*.

This is the first novel for Durham-based author Kinard, and at times the author’s newness shows through in the writing. Vanessa’s third person limited narration is occasionally disrupted by point-of-view discrepancies, and at times events and characterization suffer from a lack of clarity that may leave readers with questions about logical timelines and motivations. But these weaknesses aside, *Can’t Buy Me Love* could be a breath of fresh air for romance readers looking for variety of experience and diversity of characters while still desiring the traditional narrative
arc that leads to requited love. Recommended for public library collections, particularly in the Triangle region.

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