

10-1-2014

Book Review - Waking Up in Dixie

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Recommended Citation

Rizer, Jasmine (2014) "Book Review - Waking Up in Dixie," *Georgia Library Quarterly*: Vol. 51 : Iss. 4 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol51/iss4/21>

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Off the SHELF

Waking Up in Dixie by Haywood Smith (St. Martin's Griffin, 2011: ISBN: 9780312614218, \$14.99)

The *Waking Up in Dixie* protagonist Elizabeth is the wife of wealthy, but philandering and cold, Howell Whittington. She feels utterly trapped in the life she once dreamed of, when Howell unexpectedly suffers a stroke. After a lengthy coma, Howe experiences a spiritual as well as a physical awakening, changing things for everyone around him.

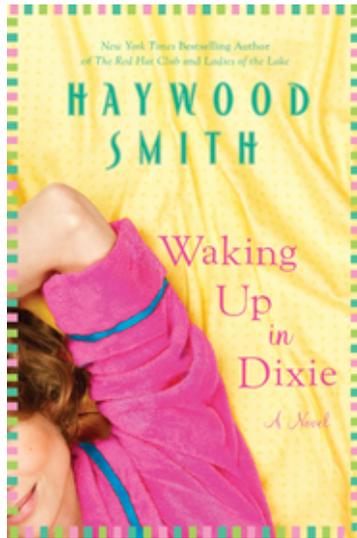
Loss of brain health is no laughing matter, and while *Waking Up in Dixie* is the story of a woman's madcap adventures after her husband has a stroke, author Haywood Smith does not gloss over the distress that Howell's stroke causes his family. Their lives are upended for months as he lies in a coma, and once he regains consciousness, he is, himself, horrified by the sudden loss of control over parts of his brain that would ordinarily filter certain thoughts and impulses from being spoken aloud. Though transformed after the stroke, both Howell and Elizabeth are plagued by anxiety that as he recovers from his stroke, his old, uncaring personality may slide back into place.

In the wake of the chaos caused by her husband's illness, Elizabeth is also forced to re-examine her own life, including harm she has

unintentionally caused, and times when her judgments have been perhaps too harsh. Smith accomplishes this without excusing Elizabeth's family's often genuine ill-treatment of her.

For readers who have spent time in Atlanta, beloved local institutions like the Varsity turn up often enough to lend the story a real sense of place, without feeling forced. A few characters speak in phonetically spelled Southern speech patterns, which some readers will find charming, and others will find annoying, but either way, the technique is not used so frequently as to distract from the narrative.

Readers who are not fans of "feel-good" reads will probably not enjoy *Waking Up in Dixie*, but this is by no means a condemnation of Smith's storytelling ability. Although many rifts in Elizabeth's family have been closed by the end of the book, Smith does not offer a painless solution for every problem in her heroine's life. Some story lines are still ongoing by the story's end, and there are some fences that Elizabeth never quite manages to mend. *Waking Up in Dixie* is a largely good-natured, optimistic read that resists the temptation to strain credulity by granting its heroine a perfect life at the end.



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