

1-1-2007

REVIEW: We Are All Welcome Here

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Recommended Citation

Pacheco, Teresa (2007) "REVIEW: We Are All Welcome Here," *Georgia Library Quarterly*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 4 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol43/iss4/21>

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FICTION

We Are All Welcome Here by Elizabeth Berg (Random House, 2006; ISBN 1-4000-6161-X, \$22.95).



In 1964, children in Mississippi lived in segregated communities, with little idea about life on the other side of town. Parents often tried to protect their children from racial struggles that were happening “somewhere else.” Also living separately from the larger community were many people with disabilities. In this novel, Paige Dunn avoids institutionalization for polio to raise her daughter. This could have been a tearjerker, but Berg instead insists that the reader view Paige Dunn and daughter Diana as they see themselves: tough, intelligent survivors. Like many teenagers, Diana daydreams of being an actress, spends time reading fashion magazines and running around with a “wild” neighborhood friend. Always there to rain on Diana’s parade, it seems, is Peacie. Peacie, Paige’s African-American friend and caregiver, has helped to bring Diana up since she was a baby and allows no self-pity from the girl. Peacie and Paige’s friendship and Peacie and Diana’s love-hate relationship form the heart of the story.

In this passage, Peacie asks Diana to go to the grocery store, and Diana at first refuses:

“You can’t spank me anymore, Peacie,” I said. “I’m too old.”

“You too old, you say.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what. If you so old, you don’t need no one beg you to get groceries that is mostly ate by you.”

“I said I’d go!”

“That’s what I said, too. We in agreement, ain’t that something. Now see if your mother done with that bedpan.”

Together, Peacie and Paige are formidable. Diana will accept life as it is, and not as she wishes it might be. Also in the story are Peacie’s courageous boyfriend, LaRue, who decides to join freedom marchers in his Mississippi hometown; Brooks, a local hardware store owner who has always seen Paige as the beauty that she is; Dell, a handsome drifter who appears in town much like a movie star; and Suralee, Diana’s on-again, off-again best friend. *We Are All Welcome Here* is a terrific story showing how racism, disabilities, and daily humiliations are overcome by bravery and sincere compassion for one’s neighbor. Recommended for all public library adult fiction collections.

— Reviewed by **Teresa Pacheco**
Chestatee Regional Library System

When Light Breaks by Patti Callahan Henry (Penguin, 2006; ISBN 0-451-21834-5, \$12.95).

Set in the South Carolina Low Country, Patti Callahan Henry’s novel focuses on a few months in the life of Kara Larson, a young socialite in the small town of Palmetto Pointe. As the novel opens, Kara is rushing around,

