

***We Are All Welcome Here* by Elizabeth Berg. 2006, Random House 187 pages**

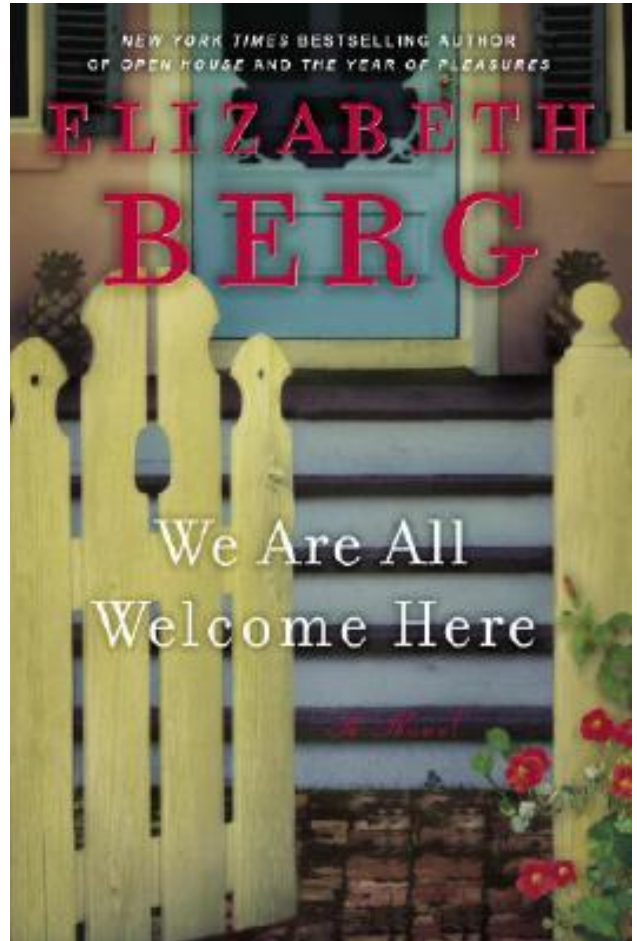
On the surface, fourteen year old Diana Dunn is no different from the other girls her age. She wants money for new clothes, magazines and nail polish. She enjoys spending carefree time with her best friend, Suralee. She is desperately trying to understand boys. She longs to escape the oppression of small town life and her mother's strict rules. Diana's life, however, is nothing like other girls'.

Diana's mother, Paige Dunn, is beautiful, intelligent, passionate, and trapped inside an uncooperative body. In 1950, Paige contracted polio. She was in the last month of pregnancy, and delivered her baby in an iron lung. Unable to cope, Diana's father abandoned his wife and infant daughter when he learned that Paige would never fully recover. His last act as a husband and father was to suggest putting the baby up for adoption; an offer that Paige vehemently rejected. She struggled to gain the strength to use a portable respirator and a wheelchair, spurred on by a burning desire to go home and raise her baby. Three years later, she did exactly that.

In the summer of 1964, Tupelo, Mississippi (known best as Elvis' birthplace) is simmering. Across the Southern United States, Civil rights demonstrations are occurring more frequently and ending more violently. Paige and Diana are living in a tiny mill house just north of downtown. Peacie, the tough black caretaker hired to bring baby Diana home from the hospital, attends to Paige's needs during the day. Mrs. Gruder, the evening caregiver, comes in when Peacie leaves and stays until Paige goes to bed. Because they are unable to afford an overnight nurse, Diana is responsible for her mother's care every night.

Paige and Diana's relationship is a strange balance of power. Paige is completely dependent on her daughter and caregivers for everything. If she has an itch, she has to ask someone to scratch it. To read, she must have someone to turn the pages. If she wants to shift her legs or move her arms, somebody must adjust them for her. She must be fed, bathed and dressed each day. She is unable to put on her own makeup or brush her own hair. She can't hug her daughter, put a band aid on her cuts and scrapes, or walk her to school like other mothers. Despite her limitations, Paige lives her life fully every day. She deeply appreciates the sights, sounds and scents of her world. She is determined to raise her child as well as any other mother – or better. Diana sometimes chafes at the responsibility, but she seldom questions her mother's authority.

Things in the Dunn household seem to be looking up when one of their sweepstakes entries pays off. \$2500 is a king's ransom – enough to purchase some of the luxuries they both long for. But when Peacie's husband, LaRue, is badly beaten in a voter registration drive in Meridian, Paige decides to give the bulk of the money to Peacie to cover his medical bills.



Peacie leaves immediately to be with LaRue, and Diana is responsible for more of her mother's care than ever. Suralee, who is angry with Diana, tells her mother, Noreen, that Diana is now taking care of Paige nearly full time. When Noreen calls Social Services things go from bad to worse.

Before she got sick, Paige worked as a nurse. In fact, she was the nurse assigned to take care of Gladys Presley during a hospital stay before Elvis' music career took off. In a moment of hopeful desperation, Diana writes a letter to Elvis, telling him their story and reminding him that her mother had once cared for his mother. She includes a song written by her mother years earlier. She doesn't really expect anything to come of it, but in the end, it's the answer she and her mother have dreamed of for years.

*We are All Welcome Here* is a touching, tender story of an extraordinary woman. Paige Dunn is an inspirational character. She is not at all resigned to her fate. Paige never forgets that every minute of every day is a blessing, meant to be fully appreciated. It is not enough for her to simply survive. She lives.

Elizabeth Berg is a sensitive, skilled author. Her descriptions are picture perfect and sometimes heartbreakingly clear. She has a real understanding of her characters' hopes, dreams and motivations. I felt as if I knew these people. She made me care about them.

Berg brings 1964 Tupelo alive for her readers. I could feel the sticky summer heat and the hard, parched earth. I could see the crisp white sheets Peacie so diligently starched and ironed. I could sense the fear and prejudice hanging heavy in the air, as the Civil Rights Movement pushed at the boundaries of segregation. It's a terrible, terrifying time.

This book is a great companion read for *Blue*, the Alamance Reads selection, allowing readers to further explore the themes introduced Hostetter's book. Twenty years have passed, and the more things have changed, the more they've stayed the same.