



# The Year of Pleasures

*Elizabeth Berg*

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## **The Year of Pleasures** Elizabeth Berg

In this rich and deeply satisfying novel by the beloved author of *The Art of Mending*, and *Open House*, a resilient woman embarks upon an unforgettable journey of adventure, self-discovery, and renewal.

Betta Nolan moves to a small town after the death of her husband to try to begin anew. Pursuing a dream of a different kind of life, she is determined to find pleasure in her simple daily routines. Among those who help her in both expected and unexpected ways are the ten-year-old boy next door, three wild women friends from her college days, a twenty-year-old who is struggling to find his place in the world, and a handsome man who is ready for love.

Elizabeth Berg's *The Year of Pleasures* is about acknowledging the solace found in ordinary things: a warm bath, good food, the beauty of nature, music, friends, and art. "Berg writes with humor and a big heart about resilience, loneliness, love, and hope. And the transcendence that redeems," said Andre Dubus about *Durable Goods*. And the same could be said about *The Year of Pleasures*.

## **The Year of Pleasures Details**

Date : Published March 28th 2006 by Ballantine (first published 2005)

ISBN : 9780812970999

Author : Elizabeth Berg

Format : Paperback 206 pages

Genre : Fiction, Womens Fiction, Chick Lit, Contemporary

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# From Reader Review The Year of Pleasures for online ebook

## Sue says

From my blog:

I couldn't quite get into *The Year of Pleasures*, written by Elizabeth Berg, although the subject matter was important - how a woman begins life again after her husband unexpectedly dies.

This story was just too neat, and Bette Nolan's life during the year after her husband died just doesn't ring true to me. Nothing is so easy.

The book might be a good summer read, when one doesn't want to concentrate too much on anything. I would say it ranks very high under a list I would call romantic fiction - no, not romantic as in the sense of romance, but romantic in that it just isn't likely to happen the way the story unfolds.

To read about how one might experience the first year after her husband's death, I recommend Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Joan, in one of her final chapters, says: "I notice that I have lost the skills for ordinary social encounters.... I hear myself trying to make an effort [at having a conversation:] and failing.... I notice that I get up from dinner too abruptly." That rings true to me.

There's nothing romantic about loss.

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## Beth F. says

Elizabeth Berg has a way with words, that's for sure. Although I'm not entirely convinced that the appeal of her stories have universal draw for *all* women. I was 22 or 23 when I read *Open House* by Elizabeth Berg and I didn't particularly care for it. I couldn't identify with the main character and so the emotional aspect of the book fell flat for me.

After the passage of several years, my life at the time of reading my second Elizabeth Berg novel is dramatically different and I suspect that was a contributing factor in my higher rating this time around. However, I can't justify giving this book anything above 3 stars because even though it made me cry and even though I intend to pass it on to an older woman now that I'm done with it (either my mom or my mother-in-law), it didn't *speak* to me like it might speak to someone who was in a similar situation or similar demographic as the main character, the recently widowed Betta Nolan, age 55.

I am married, so I can imagine (to some extent) what it would be like to lose my husband to an unexpected illness. But I'm also a newlywed, married less than a year and I don't *want* to imagine what it would be like to lose my husband. Since we're both young and in good health, I have the luxury of ignoring those thoughts and what-ifs and of telling myself that the possibility of something like that happening is prayerfully still decades away. But the main character even admits at one point that becoming a widow at 55 is not the same as being widowed at 35 or 85. At 35 you could marry again. Those around you might even expect it. And at 85 there is comfort in knowing that it's only temporary and your own death isn't too terribly far off either.

One important aspect of this book that did catch my attention is the whole concept of women friends. When Betta got married, she lost touch with some of her best female friends and after his death, feels compelled to

track them down and reconnect. They do, and it turns out to be a very, very good thing.

On several occasions, my mom has solicited advice to me on the importance of keeping female friends and making new female friends whenever the opportunity arises. They can be fun to be around when things are going okay and they can be helpful in more ways than you can ever imagine when things aren't okay. We've also discussed our own friendships with women who are in different age brackets than our own and reached the conclusion that 10-15 years in either direction, give or take, seems to be the best place to make true friends. Any more or less than that and you tend to end up with a friendship that is based more on becoming or having a mentor, which I'm not saying is a bad thing, but it is different than the kinship that can result from having a friend who is relatively close to your own age. The point being that this was how I felt while reading this book. The main character is 25 years older than I am and so reading this book I felt drawn to her in the way a daughter might feel drawn to a mother whereas there might be a bigger draw for a reader who feels connected to the main character as a friend to another friend.

So not a bad book overall, but for me it definitely read like a Lifetime movie that was filmed for the benefit of somebody else.

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### **Connie says**

3.5 stars:

I love Elizabeth Berg, she is a go to author for me. That said, I did not find this to be her best. I thought I would relate better, being a widow, with Betta and was ready to take this journey with her. I thought I would cry and laugh with her. However, I found her a bit flat and did not bond with her as I had hoped.

Everyone takes the widows journey in different ways, we are all different people, with different relationships and experiences. However, there are some things that are similar when your life changes so. I thought Berg hit the nail on the head in some places, but missed the mark in others. I had a hard time that a smart and talented woman had put her whole self into her marriage. She had not kept up with friendships, old or new and did not take steps to follow her dreams when she had a supportive partner. As she settled into a town she picked to move to and start anew, she may have some odd choices in my mind.

Was this enjoyable? Yes. One of Bergs that I will remember? Not so much. She gets an extra half star just for how easy her writing is to read.

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### **Lynne Spreen says**

This is the kind of book I MOST like to read: a novel about learning how to live differently in the second half of life. I highlighted so many passages that I ended up also buying the paperback to keep on my bookshelf. (There will be a list of those truths or observations on my blog post of April 24, 2015. After that date, click here to see them.) I enjoyed this book very much and recommend it, especially for people over fifty who are trying to figure out how to live now.

The reasons I didn't give this five stars:

1. some story threads are left hanging, and not in a literary way. As if they were forgotten.
2. Also, a huge missed opportunity: in the beginning, Betta realizes she became too insular within her

marriage, which led me to think this topic of "giving up your identity within marriage" would be addressed. It wasn't, except in passing.

But overall, I loved this book and was excited to return to it each night. If anyone knows of good reads about people learning how to navigate the second half of life, I'd appreciate hearing about them.

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### **Toni says**

I rated this novel 4 stars not because it's the most outstanding novel of all time. Surely there are more deserving books. No disrespect to Ms. Berg whatsoever. But this book is well written and speaks to us concerning the life we are living now. So many cliches have told us to, "stop and smell the roses," or "don't take things for granted," and "appreciate what you have," and on and on. The character in this book loses her husband to cancer at the age of 50 or 55. They had an incredible marriage and now Betta is alone and needs to move forward. As she tries to do this she recalls all the little things, events, places, etc. that made their life so great. As she does this it makes me think about all the wonderful people and things in my life right now! How blessed I am and to appreciate every single thing every single day. It was an awakening for me all by reading Elizabeth Berg's wonderful words. A gift. Thank you.

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### **JoAnn/QuAppelle says**

This book by Elizabeth Berg was lovely. It follows Betta, a 50-something widow, along her path of grief following the death of her beloved husband. The book, however, was a bit too "enchanted" for me....even though Betta was suffering from the loss of her husband, somehow things just fell into place too easily for her. Finding the perfect house the first day in a new town, and having friends rush to her aid after not corresponding with them for 30 years --these were things that were just too good to be true!

Many parts of the book were glimpses into the past: her college years, her courtship, parts of her marriage, her husband's dying. These glimpses helped to flesh Betta out, but she was not nearly as well-developed a character as Nan in "Pull of the Moon".

While coincidence played a bit more of a role than I usually like, Berg's lovely writing and her understanding of grief overcame the negatives.

I would recommend this book....with reservations.

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### **E says**

For unknown reasons, probably just coincidence of book pile-up, I seem to have read several books about grief in the last few months. While this one is not characterized by any particular depth of insight or profundities, I found tears running down my face several times as the middle-aged protagonist learns to cope with the early days and months after her husband's death from cancer. The focus is on her decision to move to a new town and begin a new life, which she does very quickly after his death.

I thought this was a better book than some of the other Berg books I have read, and one of the things I liked

about it - as with others - is her focus on the minute, tangible, daily things of life (the joy of a well-cooked chicken, the unexpected gush of confession that a recently bereaved person sometimes foists upon strangers, the way that just borrowing a dog for an afternoon can bring comfort and security). The book - in terms of plot, characters, story, length, substance - is a small one, yet oddly engrossing. The only thing about the story that really grated on me as hard to buy was that this woman has financial privileges that allow her to move across country, buy a house, contemplate setting up a business for which she has no background, indulge her grief with physical pleasures - an advantage that most people dealing with the loss of a long-time happy relationship don't have available to help them cope.

Still, reading the book just for the imagistic descriptions of domestic objects, scenes flying by from the driver's seat of her car as she crosses the country, snapshots of memory would be worth the effort. The protagonist's developing relationships with new neighbors and friends, including a 10-year-old boy and two college students, as well as her reunion with old friends from her past are enjoyable. This would be a good read for a plane trip or vacation.

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### **Angel says**

just an absolutely phenomenal book. if you are female, you should read this book. if you've ever been in love, you should read this book. if you've ever THOUGHT about being in love, you should read this book. I laughed and cried in the same paragraph, multiple times. please read this book, then come have a glass of wine and finish your cry with me.

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### **Relyn says**

This is a book I come back to again and again. I literally have no idea of how many times I've read it. I love Berg's descriptions of lovely things. I love the idea of being able to pick up the threads of friendships again after years of neglect. I want to shop in her shop. I love that the marriage was good. I just love this book.

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### **Paul Seymour says**

Prior to reading *The Year of Pleasures* by Elizabeth Berg I had read a couple of heavy, long novels. I had wanted something that was a faster read so my wife suggested this book. I make it a habit to read a blurb of each novel before I start it and I also enjoy reading the reviews prior to starting a book. After doing so I didn't expect much. The reviews were not very encouraging and the novel summary offered no real appeal. However, I thoroughly enjoyed this book and recommend it.....with reservation. Know what to expect before you read it so you don't obsess about the shortfalls.

In a nutshell *The Year of Pleasures* is a story about Betta Nolan dealing with the death of her husband. Before he passed they had discussed how she should handle his death and she did her best to honor his memory by moving forward.

Perhaps this review would be best served by a "pros and cons" list...please notice that the pros list is much longer.

Cons-

1.) The story tends to ramble a bit and the focus becomes fuzzy in the last 30 pages.

2.) Without spoiling the story, there is a tremendously unrealistic subplot that revolves around the main character renting a room(in the same town that she owns a house) from a college student. Makes no sense.

Pros-

- 1.) Lovely and intimate writing style
- 2.) Character driven novel with very clear intentions
- 3.) Thought provoking
- 4.) Quick read
- 5.) Exposes the heartbreak of losing a life partner.

One of the reviews I read prior to starting this books said, "this is a chick book for a women over 50". I couldn't disagree more. As someone of the male gender I found this book, for the most part, to be very moving. I particularly related to the story of her marriage as I have a marriage that is quite similar. My wife and I are connected and an island unto ourselves. We find satisfaction in doing things with each other and, while we have great friendships, we depend and look forward to time spent together.

I was able to relate to Ms. Nolan as she struggled with the loss of her husband as I dread that day. Perhaps that is the key to why this book will resonate with many readers.

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### **Kate says**

This was sort of a wimpy novel. Not bad. Not that good. I didn't hate it. It's a hallmark card of a book. Newly single woman makes a life for herself kind of a book. Not much tension. Not much deep insight. Just sort of blah, but a sweet blah. Twinkies are a sweet blah. So is "The Year of Pleasures."

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### **Laurie says**

Light feel good novel about a women's life after she losses her husband. It reminded me of a hallmark movie but good summer read.

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### **Jill Kalz says**

I'd wanted to like this -- I thought the book synopsis sounded interesting, I'd heard good things about the author -- but unfortunately, nothing rang true in this story for me, not the characters, their situations, the details, nor the dialogue. I felt as though I were reading a screenplay for a shallow, sanitized Lifetime made-for-TV-movie: instead of people, characters; instead of a community, a set; instead of conversations, lines of poorly scripted dialogue. Of course the small midwestern town the main character moves to from big-city Boston after her husband dies is charming and quaint (coming from a small midwestern town myself, I bristle when authors romanticize it), and there's a crotchety old lady, and an eccentric friend (who, yes, works in theatre), and lots of stereotypical "folksy" folks ... Since Berg IS such a best-selling author (she was even an Oprah pick back in the day), it's clear many readers do love her style, but it's just not my cup of tea.

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## Holli says

I really enjoyed reading this book, could hardly put it down, but after it was over I did feel a little dissatisfied. The review below has some good points, the plot does wander a bit, but the story kept me interested. I enjoyed reading about their marriage, a marriage that was happy and fulfilling (like mine) and I could easily put myself in Betta's place and experience what it would be like to grieve the loss of a soul mate. I liked the fact that she had all the money she needed, at least that part of her life was in place. I liked the descriptions of her house and her domestic activities, baking and cooking, etc. I also enjoyed fantasizing about going to a shop like What A Woman Wants. It was a great summer time read. I also like the way Berg writes; she has a certain depth:

*How are poets able to unzip what they see around them, calling forth a truer essence from behind a common fact? Why, reading a verse about a pear, do you see past the fruit in so transcendent a way? There are circumstances under which food is not just food—Jane Hirshfield, in her poem "Pillow," calls a provolone sandwich just that. But this is always true about food, as it is always true about a thousand aspects of daily life that we do not, cannot, fully appreciate—there is only so much room inside, and we are a busy species. It takes the poets to make for a divine displacement. The poets and death. Before, cookbooks were interesting to me, comforting. Now they served as testimony to my own kind of faith. , p. 112.*

*In a grocery store, I'd once heard a woman who looked to be in her eighties say to her companion, "Every day I think I'm back in my thirties, and then every morning I get up and look in the mirror." her companion, a woman at least as old as she, leaned over to grab her friend's wrist and confide with a Parkinsonian tremble, "You know, I always say this: I still feel like a girl inside." I'd looked at their bowed backs, their tight perms, the single-sized cans of baked beans in their carts, thinking, "Me too." It seemed impossible that I was so far away from standing sleepily before my dresser drawer, pulling out white cotton underpants and a T-shirt, then dressing quickly and racing out the door without so much as a key to weigh me down. P. 123-124.*

I love that. She says so much with that image of the girl and the white underwear! I also like the way she tells these little stories throughout the novel, seems so much like real life. Something reminds her of something she overheard or someone she knew and she tells the story and it makes such a beautiful connection and provides such depth and authenticity to the character.

### From Publishers Weekly

The familiar protagonist of Berg's 13th novel (after *The Art of Mending*) is a Boston widow of several months, 55-year-old Betta Nolan, who fulfills her dying husband's dream of moving out to the Midwest and starting a new life. "It will give me peace to know that what you will do is exactly what we talked about," says John commandingly before dying of liver cancer; Betta, an author of children's books, sells their Beacon Hill brownstone and takes off, buying an oversized Victorian in the small town of Stewart, Ill., 49 miles from Chicago. Lonely, she finds herself tracking down three former college roommates from the late 1960s, Lorraine, Maddy and Susanna, whom she ditched once she met John. The women reappear one by one and help give her the courage to open a shop called What a Woman Wants (it'll sell "all different stuff that women loved. Beautiful things, but unusual too. Like antique birdcages with orchids growing in them"). Meanwhile, she begins to make friends in town, notably with attractive young handyman Matthew and natty oldster Tom Bartlett. Berg is a pro at putting together an affecting saga of interest to women of a certain age,



yet here she seems to be writing in her sleep. There is little effort at cohesion—rather, a kind of serendipitous plot that goes every which way and a series of tentative, aborted romances. The impression readers will be left with is of a woman endlessly nurturing and rarely satisfied.

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## **Trea says**

Not sure why I finished this book. Maybe because it was short. A few hidden gems in it. Too few.

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## **Ronnie says**

Elizabeth Berg's newest novel, *The Year of Pleasures*, finds its central character, Etta Nolan, devastated by the death of her husband. The two of them had been so devoted to each other, so compatible and so self-contained. "Complete unto yourselves," in the words of Sheila, her neighbor, who found this off-putting. Unable to have children, Etta and John decided not to adopt, although they both loved children. She lost touch with her college roommates, from whom she had been inseparable, and had no close friends other than her husband. No wonder she felt adrift.

What does she do? She follows the plan she and her husband had for their senior years – she sells their house in Boston which they loved, puts her possessions in storage, gets in her car, and drives to the mid-West looking for a small town in which to put down new roots. She finds a great house, just like the one she and her husband had dreamed of. She makes new friends of various ages and, amazingly, reconnects with her college roommates, who embrace and support their old friend despite the fact that she severed all ties with them after college.

But most of all, she finds the strength to embrace life anew, to grow and take risks, and create a new life for herself alone, relying on her friends, old and new and, more importantly, on herself. Despite its somber starting point of where-do-you-go-with-the-rest-of-your-life-when- you- most-significant-oth- is-gone, it is an optimistic and up-beat book. It is a fast and easy read, punctuated by tears and burst of recognition as Etta rediscovers her own strength.

Aside from Etta, who we see from numerous angles and in different situations as she reaches out to and responds to those she chances to meet in her new circumstances, the characters are only roughly sketched. This leaves it to us to fill in the blanks ourselves, making the story more personal and satisfying.

Though not a new theme, *The Year of Pleasures* is a satisfying book for women of a certain age who await a new phase in their own lives with some uncertainty yet hope their future brings the joy and satisfaction that Etta finds.

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## **Lain says**

Over the past few years, there have been some standouts dealing with women rediscovering themselves. Lolly Winston's "Good Grief" comes immediately to mind, as does Sue Monk Kidd's "The Mermaid Chair." Going back a bit further, Berg's own "Pull of the Moon" is a classic in its descriptive realism -- one of the

author's many strengths.

Unfortunately, "Year of Pleasures" comes nowhere close to Berg's best. It is shallow, even with its topic -- the death of a spouse. It is unbelievable, even with its thousands of details (the reader is almost overwhelmed with memories, thoughts, and feelings, all of which Berg seems compelled to dump on the page). It is disjointed and, to me, an unfinished work.

I just don't buy the characters, their development, or the way they're all thrown together -- and then abandoned like so many Barbie dolls that Berg got tired of manipulating. Not worth the read. Opt for one of her others, like "The Art of Mending" or "Open House." It was a relief to be done with this book.

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### **Laura says**

4.5 stars. I read this book pre-GR (over ten years ago) and had forgot a lot of it. It's a wonderful book that will make you feel the grief of, and recovery from, the death of a spouse. It takes place for the most part in the Chicago suburbs. It's not exactly a feel-good read throughout, but a worthwhile one, and the reader is left with hope by the end.

Some of the themes include friendship, marriage, death, aging, life stages, community and healing. The audiobook is performed by the author, who does a good, not great, job. Probably not an audiobook to buy, but to borrow from the library if you can.

I enjoy this author's books. They have more depth than typical chick-lit, and I enjoy her quirky characters. A recommended read.

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### **Nicki says**

There is something really comforting about this book and in the way that the author has written this. I know its about death and new beginnings which is emotional, but its also like putting on your favourite snuggly clothes. I really like the way Elizabeth Berg describes the ordinariness of life in such a sumptuous way. I think I could read this book more than once and that I'd feel satisfied every time I read it. The characters and situations are so real and easy to like and get involved with. Perfect really.

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### **Swanbender2001 says**

I believe this story delved into the whole wide range of emotions involved with grieving the passing of a loved one and attempting to move on with one's life. This was a deeply satisfying story with characters I would love to have in my life.

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