

Interview with Patti Callahan Henry



"One of the greatest gifts you can get as a writer is to be born into an unhappy family," said Pat Conroy, in one of his rare public interviews. Certainly, Southern novelists are masters of dysfunction. But sometimes, the gift of truth – which all great writers bestow upon their readers – comes not from pain but from peace. "I've tried to remember if I ever hated my parents," says Atlanta author Patti Callahan Henry. "But I come up blank. Unless you count the time she grounded me for calling my sister a bad name."

by Annabelle Robertson

She laughs, pulling at her hair as if trying to coax a wound from the auburn tangles. "My parents made me believe I could do anything I wanted to – and do it better than anyone else on the planet," she says. "I can't imagine having to go through adolescence or getting married without a mom."

Henry nevertheless writes about this in her latest book. Infused with Irish legend and the rich symbolism of the Low Country, *When Light Breaks* tells the story of Kara Larson, a PGA TOUR booker whose mother died when she was young. Just weeks before her wedding, she meets an elderly woman who challenges her to remember the past – and her first love.

"People get wrapped up in the busyness of their lives and forget the 'Of course!'" Henry says. "Of course I was supposed to be a writer. Of course I was supposed to be an artist. Life is not about finishing our to-do list. It's about rediscovering who God meant us to be."

A finalist for the Townsend Prize for Fiction (created to honor the late Jim Townsend, founder of *Atlanta* magazine) and one

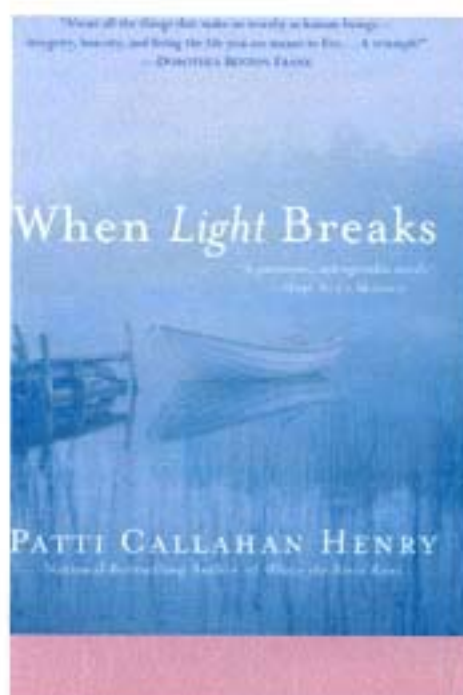
of only four authors chosen this year by the Reader's Club of America, Henry experienced her "Of course!" moment six years ago, when her oldest child told her she wanted to be a writer. A clinical nurse specialist who had quit her job to stay at home with the kids, Henry realized that she had abandoned her dream

of writing. Six years later, her first novel was published to widespread critical acclaim.

"Stories are important in all of our lives," Henry says, about the central theme of *When Light Breaks*. "But if you don't have a mom to help you interpret life, stories become even more important for guidance."

Leo Tolstoy would agree. "Happy families are all alike," he writes, in the opening lines of his classic, *Anna Karenina*. "Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Fortunately, Henry is showing us that while those happy families may be utterly similar, the unhappy ones are also a gift – to everyone.



Patti Callahan Henry will be speaking at the Margaret Mitchell House on Tuesday, May 2. For more information visit www.patticallahanhenry.com.