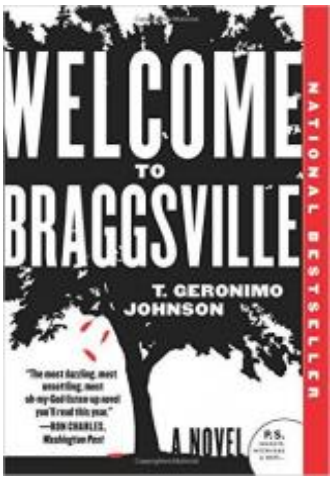
ReadingGroupGuides
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Welcome to Braggsville

by T. Geronimo Johnson



About the Book

From the PEN/Faulkner finalist and critically acclaimed author of HOLD IT ?TIL IT HURTS comes a dark and socially provocative Southern-fried comedy about four UC Berkeley students who stage a dramatic protest during a Civil War reenactment --- a fierce, funny, tragic work from a bold new writer.

Welcome to Braggsville. The City that Love Built in the Heart of Georgia. Population 712

Born and raised in the heart of old Dixie, D?aron Davenport finds himself in unfamiliar territory his freshman year at UC Berkeley. Two thousand miles and a world away from his childhood, he is a small-town fish floundering in the depths of a large, hyper-liberal pond. Caught between the prosaic values of his rural hometown and the intellectualized multicultural cosmopolitanism of Berzerkeley, the 19-year-old white kid is uncertain about his place until one disastrous party brings him three idiosyncratic best friends: Louis, a ?kung-fu comedian" from California; Candice, an earnest do-gooder claiming Native roots from Iowa; and Charlie, an introspective inner-city black teen from Chicago. They dub themselves the ?4 Little Indians.?

But everything changes in the group?s alternative history class, when D?aron lets slip that his hometown hosts an annual Civil War reenactment, recently rebranded ?Patriot Days.? His announcement is met with righteous indignation, and inspires Candice to suggest a ?performative intervention? to protest the reenactment. Armed with youthful self-importance, makeshift slave costumes, righteous zeal, and their own misguided ideas about the South, the 4 Little Indians descend on Braggsville. Their journey through backwoods churches, backroom politics, Waffle Houses and drunken family barbecues is uproarious to start, but will have devastating consequences.

Discussion Guide

1. The main settings are Berkeley, CA, and Braggsville, GA. What are the primary characteristics of these towns, and

why does the author juxtapose them? Is there significance to the nickname "Berzerkley"? What about Braggsville?s town motto, "The city that love built"?

2. The main character is introduced as D'aron, but he drops the apostrophe when he reaches college. What do you think this signifies about his changing self-identity? What is the implication later in the book when both spellings are used in his internal monologue? Do you think these two parts of his identity are reconcilable?

3. What does the story of Ishi, the Native American who lived in a museum exhibit, symbolize for Candice? Can you think of a historical figure or event that has had a profound influence on your world view?

4. At Berkeley, the students are encouraged to utilize "performative intervention" to shock onlookers into engaging with uncomfortable topics they might otherwise ignore. Do you think this type of political performance is a worthwhile and eye-opening approach, or is it too avant-garde to ever be useful?

5. In the beginning of the book, D'aron views his parents as uneducated and unworldly, but later his perception of their world view seems to evolve. Do you think the author intended the reader to like or dislike them? Can they and the other Braggsvillians be categorized as simply "good" or "bad"?

6. Compare and contrast D'aron's personality with his cousin, Quint. Have you ever had a friend or relative with a wildly different world view? Were you able to make your relationship work in spite of your differences?

7. Louis' brand of humor frequently makes light of issues around race and culture, but he isn't characterized as a racist. What differentiates his jokes from Quint's? Does his stand-up routine help him get along with D'aron's family? Under what circumstances do you think it's "okay" to joke about race?

8. After the staged lynching, when Candice returns to the Davenports' home in torn clothes from the direction of the black neighborhood, D'aron assumes she was raped and picks up a gun to retaliate, even though she never states this herself. What do these actions suggest about D'aron's internalized prejudice? How do his prejudices affect his behavior toward Charlie when Charlie later makes a personal revelation?

9. In the aftermath of the ?Incident at Braggsville,? the Davenports come under scrutiny, and it's suggested that D'aron may have masterminded the entire event. Does this warped interpretation of the facts parallel the way real news is reported through media channels today? Can you think of a news story that you felt misrepresented or omitted information to serve the agenda of the author or reporting agency?

10. The militia touts itself as a well-meaning group of concerned citizens, but their stronghold on the city is extreme, as evidenced by the abrupt shift in the way the Davenports are treated after D'aron visits the hunting lodge. Have you ever belonged to a group in which the majority's viewpoints were so strong you felt you could not disagree with them? Did you choose to leave the group, if you could?

11. Jo-Jo and D'aron are forced into a startling and severe punishment ritual by the militia. Is this a "performative intervention" of its own kind? Between Jo-Jo?s physical castigation and D?aron?s banishment from the town, which do you think is more severe and why?

12. In the "Sexicon," the author defines Braggsville as "U.S. of A," and vice versa. Do you think Braggsville is a microcosm of the United States? In which ways do you perceive it to be similar to or different from the country as a whole? Is Berkeley depicted as an ideal environment, or is it criticized for its own shortcomings?

Author Bio

Born and raised in New Orleans, T. Geronimo Johnson is the bestselling author of WELCOME TO BRAGGSVILLE, longlisted for the National Book Award and Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence; and HOLD IT 'TIL IT HURTS, a finalist for the 2013 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. He won the inaugural Joyce Carol Oates Award, the Rome Prize, Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence, and the William Saroyan International Prize; received his M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers? Workshop, where he later taught writing; and has held Stegner and Iowa Arts fellowships. His latest novel is THE OCCIDENTAL BOOK OF THE DEAD.

Critical Praise

?A partial list of great American writers whose names came to mind as I was reading T. Geronimo Johnson?s new novel, WELCOME TO BRAGGSVILLE: Tom Wolfe, Mark Twain, Toni Morrison, H.L. Mencken, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Norman Mailer and Ralph Ellison, Ralph Ellison, Ralph Ellison. Johnson?s timely novel is a tipsy social satire about race and the oh-so-fragile ties that bind disparate parts of this country into an imperfect and restless union. It?s an ambitious book that not only wants to say something big about America, but aims to do so in a big American voice that contains multitudes?. [It?s] CONFEDERATES IN THE ATTIC meets A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES?. The novel ends with a tour-de-force riff on black history, which, Johnson writes, ?in its myriad inversions, loops, whorls, coils, corkscrews, spirals; from slavery to Jim Crow to the Carceral State [is] the helix that stitches the U.S. of A.?s social DNA.? WELCOME TO BRAGGSVILLE isn?t quite INVISIBLE MAN or WHITE NOISE, but it gets within hailing distance of their heights. It?s as American as chattel slavery and Lenny Bruce Lee.?

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