

A MERMAID'S LIFE

by Betsy Carter

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Unlike most of us, the young heroine in Betsy Carter's Swim to Me has a chance to act on a dream. Delores Walker leaves behind her troubled adolescence in the Bronx, hoping to achieve the seemingly impos-*



Betsy Carter,
author of
Swim to Me



You know that moment when a song or a forgotten scrap of paper turns up out of nowhere and suddenly transports you to another time and place so vivid you can feel the air on your skin and remember exactly what shoes you were wearing?

That's what happened to me on the morning of August 12, 2003. I'd picked up the *New York Times*, and on the front page, bottom left, was the headline: SAD DAYS FOR MERMAIDS OF THE SEQUINED SORT and a slightly out of focus photograph of three mermaids underwater at Weeki Wachee Springs. In an instant I went back more than thirty years to my own version of Weeki Wachee. My family had taken its first and only vacation: a car trip from Miami up to Winter Haven, the site of the famous water ski show at Cypress Gardens. I remembered the winding brick paths lined with giant cypress trees and how the electric-pink azaleas lit up the

sible—to become a mermaid at Weeki Wachee Springs, Florida's "City of Live Mermaids." Carter knows too well that not all of us can live out our childhood dreams, but they're hard to shake, no matter your age.

pathways. But mostly I remembered the show: the water-skiers in dazzling tiaras and long gloves who stood on one another's shoulders to form a human pyramid and did crazy ramp jumps and backward slaloms. As someone who was always more comfortable in the water than on land, I felt I had found my calling. "That's what I'm going to do," I announced to my family after the show.

This was the beginning of my adolescence. I hated my school, my hair, my house, and mostly my father. He was sarcastic and had a blistering temper. I had a big mouth and knew exactly how to provoke him. The air was uneasy between us. Becoming a water-skier suited all my fantasies of escaping who I was, where I lived, and the people to whom I was related. I spent the next four years learning how to cut the wake, drop a ski, and even spin around on a disk.

I never did make it to Cypress Gardens, but as long as the park

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was there, there was always the possibility that I could. When I read that piece in the *Times*, I went back to that adolescent fantasy. What if things had worked out differently, I wondered. What if, by some miracle, I'd been able to leave home and actually become a water-skier? What if? What if?

That's when I started to write *Swim to Me*.

Instead of Cypress Gardens, I decided to place my story in Weeki Wachee Springs. The book begins when Delores Walker is thirteen and she and her family take the only vacation they've ever had. They drive from their home in the Bronx to see the famous live mermaid show in Florida. Delores is so moved by the spectacle that she swears someday, somehow, she will become a mermaid. Three years later, after her parents' marriage ends convulsively and her father disappears, Delores is forced to help her mother earn money to support her and her baby brother. She auditions to be a mermaid at Weeki Wachee. Miracle of miracles, she gets the job, and that is where the journey begins.

The book takes place in the early seventies, while the country is still reverberating from the social and cultural upheavals of the sixties. Suddenly everything seems possible, and each of the characters seeks out the "what ifs" of their own lives. Delores Walker, unhappy schoolgirl from the Bronx, meet Delores Taurus, Florida's favorite mermaid.

Before I started to write *Swim to Me*, I spent some time in Weeki Wachee. There are live mermaids there, just as there were sixty years ago when the park first opened, though

the amphitheater in which they perform smells a little musty now. The day I went to the show, parents with little kids filled the wooden benches in front of the theater. I looked for a family that might have been mine, but just then the lights were dimmed.

The music came up, and as the curtain rose, two mermaids swam by, honest-to-God mermaids, with their hair floating like clouds around their heads and with their tails flapping in time to the current. The sun shone down on the water in such a way as to make the bubbles they breathed look like diamonds. The mermaids came right up to the acrylic window that separates the springs from the amphitheater and were so close you could almost touch them. The little girl behind me gasped and jumped onto her father's lap to get a closer look. My heart was pounding the way it did the first time I saw the water-skiers in Cypress Gardens. Time peeled away, and for the next twenty minutes, I was eleven again. There was mystery and magic and the dizzying possibility that all of it was real.

Had things gone in another direction, maybe I would have become Florida's most beloved mermaid. But as they went, I spent my own 1970s working as a reporter for *Newsweek*. My parents are gone now, and most of the grudges that I held so dear as an adolescent have faded. But I still swim nearly every day, and on good days, when the sun hits the water at a particular angle and there's no one around except for me and my daydreams, I get an inkling of what it might have been like had I turned out to be Delores Taurus. ■

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—BETSY CARTER

