



## Pending Litigation

**Cheryl Robbins Berg**

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In this fine debut legal thriller, Charity McLaughlin has a thriving law practice, doting friendly colleagues, a loving husband and...bipolar disorder. When Deborah Elledge comes to her begging for help after the suspicious death of her husband who also had bipolar disorder, Charity is drawn in. The investigation wends its way back to the hospital where Mr. Elledge died and Charity is confronted with memories of her own hospital stays, and the fact that there is more going on in this case than first appears. The title refers to the lawsuit Charity's firm brings against the hospital where Mr. Elledge dies.

A twenty-five-year veteran of the bar specializing in personal injury and medical malpractice law, Berg tells most of the story from Charity's point of view. The omniscient narration allows readers to see the quirky personalities and compelling back story of all the characters. The camaraderie among Charity's officemates is appealingly believable of a close-knit workplace. In a refreshing change from the all-too-common investigator who sallies forth alone, Charity and her coworkers collaborate to bring down the villains. Even as the finale renders Charity a damsel in distress to be rescued by her male colleagues, the protagonist nonetheless plays an active role in the scheme. Berg ratchets up the tension by ending each of her short chapters with a mini cliffhanger and readers are sure to keep flipping to the next page.

Berg's research into, and sensitivity about, bipolar disorder shows as she creates an intelligent protagonist who happens to have a mental illness. Through Charity, Berg describes the causes, symptoms, and treatments in a matter-of-fact manner for the uninitiated. The build-up to Charity's initial episode is so expertly crafted as to leave readers on tenterhooks, wondering when the poor woman will have her breakdown. Alas, after a lengthy first episode, the second episode feels rushed through in a few sentences. Far more unsettling though, is Berg's repeated references to the "insane" patients in the mental ward of the hospital where Mr. Elledge dies. The use of this antiquated term seems at odds with the empathy with which Charity is portrayed; to be sure, she is not described as insane. The timeline of the book can also be confusing until readers realize that Berg uses flashback scenes in the last several chapters. Additionally, the author overuses the foreshadowing trope of, "Little did she know..." She also repeatedly misspells *waved* as *waived*. In general, however, *Pending Litigation* is a well-crafted thriller.

JILL ALLEN (November 9, 2010)

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