

The Great Peach Experiment: When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Peach Pie

Erin Soderberg Downing

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In Erin Soderberg Downing's winsome novel *The Great Peach Experiment*, a bucket list road trip upends the Peach family's typical summer plans.

Lucy is the sensible older sister of Freddy, who's ten, artistic, and loves to spout facts, and Herb, who's an eight-year-old math whiz. Ever since their mother died, she's taken care of them while her father has entrenched himself in his university job.

When their late mother's invention makes the family millionaires, Lucy's father buys a food truck to fulfill a dream. Lucy is skeptical, but Freddy hopes that it will knit the family back together. Herb, meanwhile, is game for anything. With the goal of winning an Ohio Food Truck Festival competition, the inexperienced Peaches try to sell as many pies as they can, camping their way through the Midwest.

Lucy's warm, offbeat, STEM-driven family embraces the pie theme with relish. Freddy provides sketches, his enterprising optimism an appealing surprise that helps Lucy to find what's good despite her doubts. Herb runs the gamut from trying his best to feeling useless and restless. Their father—whose narrow focus once made him overlook his children's emotional needs—learns the importance of paying attention.

There are implied lessons about turning the family's "mess into something truly delicious and beautiful." As circumstances force the quirky Peaches toward greater spontaneity, they rise to meet challenges, from figuring out how to streamline (and bake!) to learning how to band together. Memories and loss juxtapose with curious slices of American roadside kitsch, adding up to a life-affirming, nostalgic adventure with an uplifting finale.

The Great Peach Experiment is a cheering middle grade novel about a family's madcap project that includes subtle lessons about overcoming grief.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2021)

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