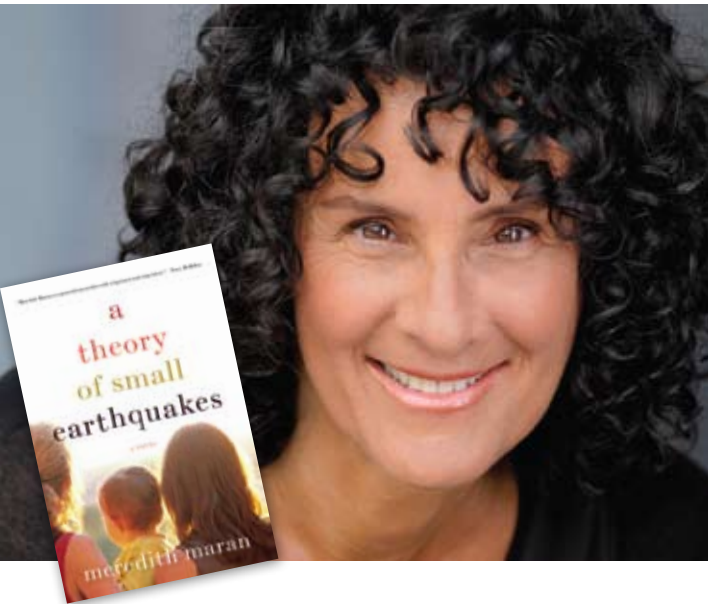


# Writing Her Way Home

Author and journalist Meredith Maran mines her life for material. **By Stephanie Schroeder**



Meredith Maran's first memoir, *What It's Like to Live Now* (1995), covers a lot of personal ground: from her childhood in New York City, to her 1960s social and political activism, to marrying a man, having children and getting a divorce, to becoming intimately involved with women.

Today, Maran, 60, lives in Oakland, Calif. with her wife, Katrine Thomas, whom she has been with for 15 years. The two were married the day before Prop. 8 passed in 2008. Maran has two sons and a grandson.

*What It's Like to Live Now* is described in *Library Journal* as an attempt "to reconcile her activist ideals of the 1960s and 1970s with her life today and shows us clearly how her life has been and is still shaped by them."

Lesbian and bisexual readers of *What It's Like to Live Now* would, Maran says, come with a copy of that book to her other readings and book tour events. "This happened consistently, the most memorable occasion being when I was touring for my 2003 nonfiction book *Dirty*. I was speaking at a theater in Seattle, and after my talk a woman about my age came up to me with a copy of every one of my books in a canvas bag—including the book I published in 1970, and didn't own a copy of, and hadn't seen since! She actually gave me her copy. It was moving to me to know that writing a memoir about raising kids in Oakland as a lesbian mom evoked such loyalty that readers would follow my career through several books that had nothing to do with that topic."

This year, Maran published her 11th book, *A Theory of Small Earthquakes*. It's her first novel, and she hopes those same readers will reacquaint themselves with her through this work. "Writing *A Theory of Small Earthquakes* felt to me like coming home to

the readers of the memoirs I published in 1995 and 1997," Maran says, "and I hope they'll come home to me!"

Well-received in everything from *Reader's Digest* and *Ladies' Home Journal* to *People* magazine, *A Theory of Small Earthquakes* is, according to Maran, a family story spanning two decades, and is set against the social, political and geological upheavals of the Bay Area. Eager to escape her damaging past and chart her own future, Alison Rose is drawn to Zoe, a free-spirited artist who offers emotional stability and a love outside the norm. After they've had many happy years together, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake deepens fissures in the two women's relationship, and Alison leaves Zoe for a new, "normal" life with a man. Alison's son is the outcome of both of these complicated relationships, and the three parents strive to create a life together that will test the boundaries of love and family in changing times.

"A decade ago, a friend told me a true story about such a nontraditional family, whose existence required so much daily forgiveness on the part of all involved. I thought, 'If only I were a novelist, that would make a great plot,'" Maran recalls. "As I watched the story unfold in real time, in my friend's real life, the itch to write it finally overcame my fear of attempting a novel. After a lifetime of writing only nonfiction, that fear was epic—and, as it turned out, well-founded."

*A Theory of Small Earthquakes* "took two years to write, five years to rewrite, and many gnawed fingernails to sell to a publisher. And it's been the most thrilling writing experience of my life," says Maran.

The book was not an easy sell. "My agent shopped the first version of the novel in 2006, and about 15 editors, all of them female, said they loved the book but didn't love the lead character, Alison, because she wasn't 'likable,' 'sympathetic,' 'relatable'—all euphemisms for 'nice.' I suspect that Alison's active bisexuality was a factor they didn't want to mention as well," says Maran. "It was crushing to hear this, especially since I'd written a story for *More*, years before, about male protagonists who were assholes, when female protagonists were not, and are not allowed to be much more interesting than 'nice.'"

The book finally landed with the indie house Soft Skull Press, a publisher Maran says, "was determined to position it...as a love story—not a gay love story, or a bi love story, or a 'normal' love story, just a love story.

"My hope is for the largest possible number of people, including people who don't agree with me, to read my book. I want my book to be an enjoyable as well as a thought-provoking read. It's not a Great Work of Literature, but it's the kind of book I like to read, with compelling characters and a twisty plot and a deep examination of what it means to love. So when one reviewer called it a 'beach read,' I took that as high praise!"

Another reviewer said the novel “hits every possible stereotype on the subjects of feminism, liberalism and lesbianism.”

Maran, being “an incurable and impractical optimist,” took that to mean that the book “hits stereotypes by rendering them as the ridiculous, and also sometimes true, generalizations they are. I assume my readers are smart enough to know the difference between poking fun at stereotypes and perpetuating them,” she says. Elated to have published her first (but not last) work of fiction, Maran says, “I stopped writing memoirs at the request of my family.”

Having had “several long-term relationships with dudes before

marrying my husband in 1974,” Maran also had “several long-term crushes on chicks, none of which was consummated until I finally got up the nerve to cross Sexuality Street. I’m sort of amazed when I compare my coming-out process in the early 1980s to the process of bi and lesbian girls coming out these days. I’m aware of the importance of keeping our oral herstory alive, reminding our young ‘uns of how we collectively got where we are now. That’s one reason I wrote the novel—to bring life to the past, and help younger people, LGBT and het, to understand what a huge factor sexual orientation was as recently as 20 years ago.” (*meredithmaran.com*) ■

## AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Radical takes on feminism and eroticism. By Rachel Pepper

***When We Were Outlaws: A Memoir of Love and Revolution*, Jeanne Cordova (Spinsters Ink):**

What was it like to live through the 1970s as a radical lesbian feminist? You’ll get no better answer than from Jeanne Cordova’s recent memoir, *When We Were Outlaws*. Cordova portrays the ‘70s as an exciting time, when lesbians were just beginning to organize, to find their voice—in music, in politics, in the media—and to find one another. It was a time of big ideas and even bigger ideals, and *When We Were Outlaws* characterizes those years as passionately political, anti-establishment, and sexually liberating. Whether she was running *The Lesbian Tide*, a pioneering lesbian newspaper, interviewing political prisoners such as Emily Harris (of the Symbionese Liberation Army), or grappling with sexism within the early LGBT movement (culminating in a notorious strike at L.A.’s Gay Community Center), Cordova was always a leader on the scene. She was the L.A. chapter president of the Daughters of Bilitis, 1970–71, and an organizer of the groundbreaking National Lesbian Conference at UCLA in 1973. That she was also an attractive butch and a heartbreaker only

adds to her mystique. While the bulk of the book seems like a carefully constructed recollection of her activism, many readers will enjoy hearing about who she was dating even more than how she was changing the political landscape. After all, it is hard work being a player and a lesbian revolutionary. For example, Cordova remembers a moment when a lover asked for more time with her, and she suggested the woman join her newspaper collective instead. Affronted, the woman quipped, “That’s an outrageously bad idea, Jeanne... Why would I want to join a group of your present and ex-lovers!” Perplexed, Cordova ponders why this is an issue, and writes, “Since feminism I’d always lived non-monogamously, having two, sometime three, lovers simultaneously. That’s how feminists were supposed to live outside of patriarchal colonization. We weren’t supposed to be living behind white picket fences. We were radicals. We were engaged in political revolution.” Although times have changed, Cordova has stayed active, contributing to many anthologies; publishing several books, as well as the Community Yellow Pages; co-founding LEX, the Lesbian

Exploratorium Project; and organizing and chairing the 2010 Butch Voices conference. Cordova continues to set the standard for what our leaders of any age can be: energetic, visionary and passionate about the LGBT community.

***Curvy Girls: Erotica for Women*, edited by Rachel Kramer Bussel (Seal Press):**

Women with curves get their due in this anthology, which amply celebrates full-figured female sexuality. Kramer Bussel is the editor of 30 anthologies, and here she gathers stories from well-seasoned erotica writers such as Sommer Marsden, Evan Mora and Isabelle Gray. While most of the pieces in this collection are heterosexual in nature, there are several lesbian offerings, including “Recognition” by Salome Wilde and Talon Rihai, about an airport tryst between two full-figured gals, and “At Last” by Jessica Lennox, which celebrates a friendship that’s caught fire. Lesbian and bisexual readers will enjoy the rest of the pieces too, which range from kinky to one-night stands in places as unlikely as record shops and restaurant kitchens to relationships of a more ongoing nature. Still, no matter what

the setting, this is a book that revels in the empowerment of sexy women, regardless of their size or shape, and no matter what conflicting messages the mainstream media tries to direct their way. No tale does it better than the last one, “Happy Ending,” by Donna George Storey, which explores a woman’s coming to terms with her “blockbuster butt.” As she begins to tell her male fiancé “The Story of My Ass,” she writes, “I know it’s almost impossible to believe a sweet-faced, flat-chested girl would have such a big, bouncy ass,” an ass, she says, that she used to hate, but eventually decided not to: “Because once I stopped hating my ass, I discovered something very interesting. In spite of all those models with flat little bums in the magazines, real men out in the real world couldn’t keep their eyes away from my asset... And I’m not going to give up that hard-won pleasure ever—for you, or anyone else. I will never be ashamed of my ass again.” A joyful message to all the curvy, big-bottomed women out there and, of course, their admirers. ■

