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In her first novel, veteran Bay Area journalist Meredith Maran turns to the mysteries of love and family in gay and straight relationships

By [WALLACE BAINE](#)
Posted: 02/23/2012 01:30:53 AM PST

For a novel released on Valentine's Day, Meredith Maran's "A Theory of Small Earthquakes" is several magnitudes of order more complicated than your grocery-store Valentine's card.

Is it a love story? Sure, but it's a thorny, messy, ambiguous love story centered on three people with overlapping currents of sexuality, parenthood and commitment creating a vortex designed to reflect how people really live today in a changing family environment.

It also marks a new direction for a writer who has spent a lifetime in journalism and has published 10 nonfiction books. "Earthquakes" is her first novel. She will appear Feb. 29 at the Capitola Book Cafe.

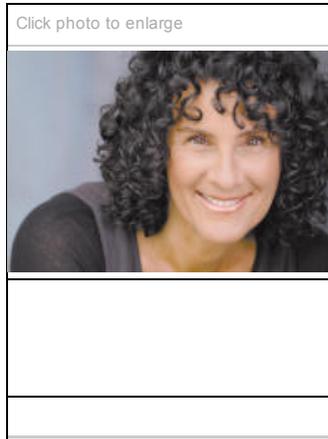
"I had written stories from when I was a child," Maran said. "But then I turned to non-fiction and really never looked back."

"Earthquakes" came to her in her work as a journalist, someone else's life story that had resonance with her own.

"It was a story given to me by someone I knew, and I remember thinking that, wow, this would make a great novel, if I knew how to write fiction."

The East Bay writer tells her story over the course of 20 years, ending it shortly after the 2004 presidential election. It is the tale of Allison, a journalist in a committed relationship with another woman until she decides to leave the relationship in the aftermath of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in order to have a child with a man. Eventually, all three end up as parents to the son Allison bears.

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definition of family' and of lover' is expandable," she said. "It sounds so corny to say that the characters took over, but that's really what happened."

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Loma Prieta becomes the novel's overarching metaphor as it serves as the catalyst for Allison's questioning of her life path, a path that, in her case, became a circle when her female lover re-enters her life.

She said the book is also a reflection of her own experience. Married to a man for 12 years with whom she reared two sons, Maran eventually divorced and entered into a relationship with another woman whom she then married in the days before the passage of Proposition 8.

"The emotion for this with me came from when my husband and I split up and how hard we worked to stay together. My kids had many more friends whose parents were divorced than parents who were together, and [our divorce] changed the course of my kids' lives. Some of this comes from the sadness and grief that I felt having deprived my kids in that way."

In another sense, Maran said, her book serves as a kind of chronicle of how things have changed, and not changed, for same-sex relationships. The book starts in the early '80s, "when it was pretty much unthinkable that two women could raise children together," and ends in 2005 when gay marriage had become a wedge issue in the election. Maran said her novel was meant to be a contemporary novel, but it took her several years to get a publisher interested in it. "It's now a history piece."

Among the nonfiction titles Maran has published are "Dirty: A Search for Answers Inside America's Teenage Drug Epidemic," "Class Dismissed: A Year in the Life of an American High School, A Glimpse Into the Heart of a Nation" and the 2010 memoir "My Lie: A True Story of False Memory."

Her work as a nonfiction writer helped her navigate the very different dictates of writing fiction. "I think my background in research helped a lot," she said. "I wanted to make sure that the logistical details were right, that the cultural milieu was presented correctly. The story takes place over the course of 20 years. That's quite a span. So, when did we first start using cellphones, when did answering machines become common, when did we stop using typewriters. I mean, I lived through all this. But I wanted to really get it right in the timeline."

She said she had heard many times over the years that her nonfiction books often "read like a novel."

"When I was shopping this novel, a lot of the publishers that turned it down said that it read like nonfiction, which was probably their way of saying that it was an issues book." { Wednesday 7:30 p.m. Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola. Free. www.capitolabookcafe.com }

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