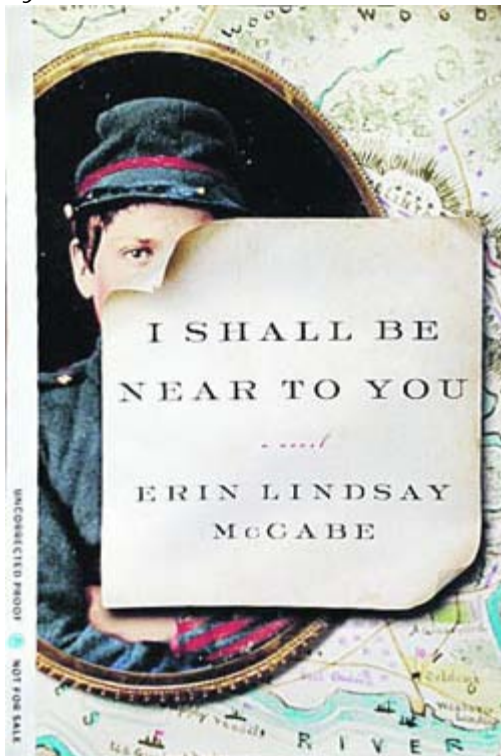


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Novel Sheds Light on Female Civil War Soldiers Local author Erin McCabe will discuss her book Feb. 8

By Amanda Kuehn



"Anyone looking will think we're good friends, all of us joined up together ... Papa will see the only son he'll ever have ... [Mama] will see I still ain't ever the daughter she wanted. But all I see is me and Jeremiah, his head leaning toward mine, his fingers tight on my shoulder." So begins the prologue to Erin McCabe's novel, "I Shall Be Near to You."

A longtime resident in the Lamorinda area and graduate of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program at Saint Mary's College in Moraga, McCabe has been writing her whole life. "As a kid, I kept a diary. I had tons of pen pals that I wrote to all through middle school," she recalled.

With the intention of becoming an English teacher, McCabe studied literature and history at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She never took a creative writing course. She taught at Ygnacio Valley High in Concord for seven years, during which time she began working on the first draft of a novel she never intends to publish. "It was kind of a dare between my husband and I," said McCabe. "A romance novel that sat in a drawer for a while."

McCabe was working on revising this first novel when she crawled into bed one night and heard the voice of a character. "It was not one of the characters I'd been working with and I knew I had to get up and write it down," she said, "and that became the first chapter of 'I Shall Be Near to You.'"

Once McCabe began the new novel, she returned to the idea of pursuing an MFA. She worked for nine months before submitting an application, along with the

first 30 pages of the manuscript. "I chose SMC because I really liked the smaller size ... and it was basically in my back yard." McCabe began the two-year program in 2008, and by the time she graduated she'd finished a first draft of the book.

The story of a woman who impersonates a man in the American Civil War, "I Shall Be Near to You" is a historical romance based on the lives of real people. As an undergrad, McCabe found a collection of letters from Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, a woman who left her family to serve as a soldier. "I pulled it off the shelf, saw the picture of her, and that was it right there," McCabe recalled. "I really fell in love with her and I was shocked that women fought in the Civil War and I didn't even know."

The first chapter is McCabe's favorite. "That's where I met Rosetta and found out who she is and how she sees the world," she said. "And there's a scene at Antietam that made me cry when I wrote it. So, I like that scene, too."

McCabe describes the book as a love story and a war story, with timeless desires and real characters. It is also a tribute to the bravery of unknown and forgotten female soldiers. "I feel like it's a book that I wrote for women," said McCabe. "But mostly it's a love story."

"I Shall Be Near to You" will be released Jan. 30. McCabe will talk about the book and how it came to be, read a short selection, take questions and sign books afterwards at 1 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 8 at Orinda Books.

"I really wanted to do some events in the Bay Area," she commented. "So many of the people who supported my writing are here. It's a really supportive place for the arts."

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