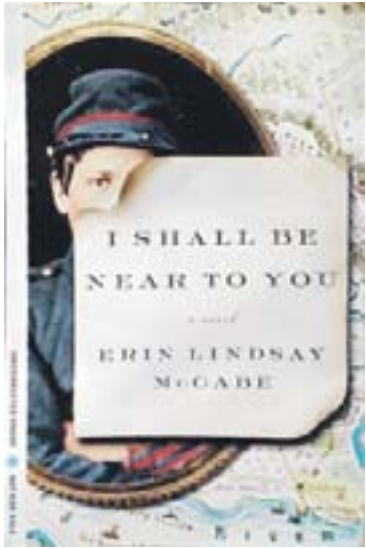


Novel Sheds Light on Female Civil War Soldiers

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.”

‘Crosses’ Photographs on Display at the Library

By Cathy Tyson



Photo Cathy Tyson

When the first of many crosses started to sprout on a Lafayette hillside opposite the Lafayette BART station in 2006, there was an outcry from both supporters and opponents – some calling the growing art/memorial installation undignified and others seeing it as a poignant reminder of U.S. service members who made the ultimate sacrifice. Perhaps the passage of time has slightly dimmed the novelty of the “Crosses,” even as the actual number of them, along with Stars of David and other markers symbolizing soldiers who have died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, has grown. The memorial has attracted national attention and contains a running count of the number of deaths on the prominently displayed sign that’s visible from Hwy 24.

Now roughly eight years since their debut, the “Crosses” are the subject of famous artist Binh Danh’s Daguerreotype photographs that are currently on display in the Lafayette

Library and Learning Center gallery through March 21.

It seems only fitting that the very images that represent a painful part of our history have been captured by an artist whose work focuses on heritage, memories, and conflict. Dahn came to the United States from Vietnam when he was only 2 years old. His early work documented his investigation of the Vietnam War using a creative technique to transfer the faces of soldiers who had died in that conflict onto leaves. This collection of 18 Daguerreotype photographs captures similar themes of death, memory, and war. Despite the subject matter, they offer a unique perspective of a very visible Lafayette landmark, taken in a way that emphasizes their historical nature.

The exhibit, “The Crosses: a Protest Against Forgetting,” is located in the gallery space in the Lafayette Library and Learning Center’s Community Hall. The gallery is open most Monday evenings; call the library for more details at (925) 385-2280.

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