

Title Pages

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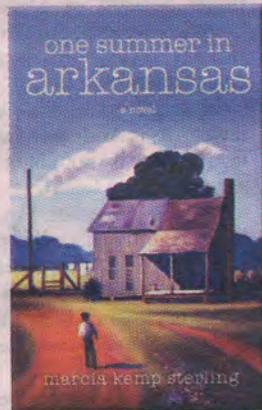
a tale of two cities

**Silicon Valley and the
deep South meet in this
novel about justice,
race, love and family**

by Elena Kadvany

“One Summer in Arkansas” by Marcia Kemp Sterling; Archelaus Press; 349 pages; \$14.95

In “One Summer in Arkansas,” the world of Silicon Valley — tech firms, the Stanford Dish, Stanford Law School, Woodside Bakery, College Terrace in Palo Alto — collides and contrasts with that of Riverton, a small town in Arkansas where humidity, Southern values and lingering remnants of segregation reign.



In Marcia Kemp Sterling’s first novel, the link between these two worlds is Stanford Law School graduate Lee Addison, a small-town Arkansas boy turned Dish-running, type-A personality who returns to his hometown for a summer to spend time with his mother and sister before he moves to San Francisco.

Addison, never one to stand still, works at a Riverton law firm for the summer. His main case is a “racially-charged” one: A young black boy, Dewaine Washington, drowns at a local swimming reservoir amidst many unanswered questions. Was Dewaine drinking with

(continued on next page)



Title Pages

(continued from previous page)

friends (beer bottles were found at the reservoir)? Had he gotten in a fight with Hispanic kids (who are known to hang out at the river bend “despite of the distaste felt by some about the Bend’s new multiracial and multicultural mix”)? Was the city at fault for not replacing warning signs about diving into the reservoir?

Though Addison thinks he’s dedicated to IPOs and Silicon Valley-style law, he becomes determined to find out what really happened to Dewaine, uncovering layers of racism and corruption along the way.

“The segregated South was so much a part of my childhood,” said Sterling, who grew up in Texarkana, Ark., a small town on the border of Texas and Arkansas, and now lives in Palo Alto. Sterling’s father, a doctor, had a white waiting room in the front of his office and a black one in the back. There were four high schools in Texarkana — two white, two black. Sterling said she never saw the black schools.

A central character in the novel — a black woman named Etta who befriends Addison — was also drawn from Sterling’s childhood. Etta’s character is based on a black woman named Odessa who worked for Sterling’s father. Odessa, who Sterling described as a “resourceful, smart ... community organizer before they existed” once challenged Sterling’s father, informing him that his new wife was calling black patients “boy” and “girl.”

Odessa told him on a Friday and on Monday, Sterling’s father called an all-staff meeting.

“He said, ‘From now on in this office, we will not call our colored patients boy or girl because they consider that disrespectful.’ Odessa was really proud of that and proud of

my father, who for most purposes was quite conservative.”

Despite the heavy themes of race and justice, “One Summer in Arkansas” is also a tale of summer love. Addison struggles to choose between a relationship with Zoe, a fellow law student back in Palo Alto who often appears via cell phone conversations, and a rekindled love with his high school sweetheart, Annie.

A related and very present theme is that of place, belonging and the feeling of being torn between two worlds.

Addison is stuck between the fast-paced, educated, prosperous, health-conscious world of Silicon Valley and “the thick Arkansas humidity, heavy with legions of ancestors and the guilt-filled history of the South.”

Riverton seems to be a fictional version of Sterling’s hometown and Addison a literary reflection, in some ways, of her own life.

Sterling’s grandfather was a lawyer, as is Addison’s (whose legal legacy is brought in for a surprising end twist).

Addison’s mother, Frances, is a functioning alcoholic whose life philosophy is deeply rooted in Southern social values and acute class consciousness. In Addison’s words: “It didn’t matter how little money you had as long as everyone else thought you were loaded.”

Sterling said her mother’s side of the family (who were Methodist circuit riders, clergy who rode on horseback around Arkansas to

preach and organize congregations) had some relatives who, like Frances, “overly cared about social status.”

Addison’s father left Frances when he and his younger sister, M.J., were too young to remember. They grew up in a house their maternal grandparents built during the Great Depression: a three-story brick Southern mansion, complete with white columns and a circular driveway — a symbol of their wealth, race and social status.

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— Marcia Kemp Sterling

Sterling left her home in Texarkana for Palo Alto in the ‘60s, marrying the “wrong man” and, like Frances, eventually ending up with two young children to support on her own.

Three days after her ex-husband left, one of Sterling’s Palo Alto neighbors, a University of San Francisco law student, brought her consolation in the form of an LSAT study book.

“I would wake up in the middle of the night, depressed, thinking, ‘What’s going to become of my kids? What’s going to become of me?’” she recalled. “And I would get out that book and I would say to myself, ‘I may not know how to keep a husband, but I can take a test.’”

She said she saw law school and eventual legal career as a way to guarantee financial support for her children.

Sterling aced the LSAT and was accepted to Stanford Law in the late 1960s as a 38-year-old woman. She went on to work at Wil-

son Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, a law firm in Palo Alto that represented many software companies such as Microsoft, Adobe and Autodesk in their early years.

Sterling served as senior vice president and general counsel for Autodesk until a neurological voice disorder forced her to retire early. She suddenly developed a rare, localized form of spasmodic dysphonia, which causes tremor and loss of pitch, leaving her voice shaky and sometimes hard to understand. This made running high-profile executive meetings impossible.

“It’s the damndest thing. For a female executive, the one thing you cannot afford is to appear scared or upset.”

Addison, too, is forced to confront serious personal issues in his coming-of-age story: his mother’s alcoholism, an absent father and a troubled teen sister who also drinks recklessly.

Sterling’s personal struggles — a husband who left her, raising two children on her own, her speech disorder — run parallel to that.

“Part of the theme of the book is that even when bad things happen, something new comes out of it,” she said. “Not that you ask for tragedy or health problems or divorce, but any kind of loss is going to give you something new.”

Sterling believes in silver linings. Because of her divorce, she became a lawyer. Because of her voice disorder, she had to find a new way to express herself and wrote this novel. The cast of characters in “One Summer in Arkansas,” despite any differences in race, class or background, all manage to find their own silver linings, too, right in time for the end of the summer. ■

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