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Novel explores generational changes

By Mary Jane Ryals • SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT • Published: December 12, 2010 2:00AM

One thing "The Glass Madonna," an expansive and generous novel by Donna Meredith, does is help us imagine and understand three generations of glass workers in West Virginia, the first of which emigrated from Germany nearly 150 years ago.

The novel compares the lives of West Virginia women and their struggles from one generation to the next. And things do improve for women, Meredith seems to say. Yet our contemporary main character, Sarah Stevens, does not live her life without some hell on earth.

We pull for Sarah, living in the '70s Free Love generation. Sarah cannot work in the glass world. Despite her passion for this part of her family heritage, union rules and tradition keep her out.

When Sarah asks her Uncle Mahlon if she can learn how to blow glass, offering to dedicate her whole 'tween summer to "blowing, twirling, dipping" glass, he answers with a brusque, "Girls can't apprentice."

A regard for "madonna" purity is still held up in Sarah's early adult world. When her future husband Roy Glen finds out she's lost that assumed virtue, he obsesses about it. He's so jealous, he isolates her in a rural trailer and does all he can to keep her from driving, working or even seeing her parents. He wants a dozen children, by his account. She has one, then secretly begins to use birth control.

Yet Sarah is whip-smart and determined. Her immediate family backs her up. More so, her Aunt Livvie loves her beyond the "right now." Livvie holds many secrets, slowly revealed in the novel and she's also the keeper of the Glass Madonna, a family heirloom that works as a metaphor for something far more important than purity and perfection.

The immigrant generation before Livvie's has its own secrets as well, which are told with as much beauty, terror and detail for the women in this family as the more contemporary Sarah.

Sarah could easily have become a laconic, hapless victim of circumstance. Through Meredith's skillful

writing, we stay interested in a character who knows how to love fiercely and how to stay interested in the world. The novel is an action-packed page turner.

Meredith has an intellectual ability to reach readers. She stretches across history, into the perils and pleasures of extended family, and she shows in loving detail the craft of glassmaking. She illustrates through Sarah what it takes to be a teacher and to mother. She talks about war and weather with shoot-from-the-hip wit.

These features create a powerful master story. Sarah slowly becomes determined to work hard for her own destiny, and to protect herself and her daughter from an increasingly dangerous husband.

Donna Meredith for

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if you go

What: Book signing and reading by Donna Meredith for "The Glass Madonna"

When: 1 to 3 p.m. Saturday

Where: Downtown Books, 67 Commerce St., Apalachicola

Admission: free

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