

Book Club Kit



DEAR READER,

I've long been drawn to historical events where ordinary people were thrust into extraordinary circumstances and discovered inner courage, ingenuity, and resolve where perhaps none had been before. It's why I've written about the London Blitz, the French Resistance, the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and 9/11, the wartime internment of civilians, and now, the great San Francisco earthquake.

On an otherwise unremarkable morning in April 1906, a powerful tremor only a few seconds in length shook San Franciscans out of their beds at twelve minutes past five. Mere breaths later, a second quake—this one lasting for nearly a terrifying full minute—forever changed San Francisco. Broken water mains and gas lines set in motion an inferno that could not be quenched, and for three days the city burned. Five hundred city blocks were destroyed and more than three thousand people lost their lives.

I knew that here was a backdrop—despite the quake's brevity—for a story about ordinary people thrust into a character-defining, life-changing situation. Here I could offer a metaphorical look into what can happen when everything gets shaken, torn apart and laid bare. Here I could imagine a person either succumbing to these forces greater than herself or finding a way to outsmart, outplay, outlast her adversary.

Into this setting I decided to place an Irish immigrant (my father's ancestors hailed from Ballinacly, in County Wexford) who is so desperate to escape the squalid New York tenement she's living in that she answers an ad for a mail-order bride, agreeing to marry a San Francisco widower and become instant mother to his five-year-old daughter. I knew that this character named Sophie would be living in a time when women had little agency and that she would find out, when her whole world gets shaken, that her hastily manufactured happiness had serious flaws; dangerous ones. More than that though, I knew I had an opportunity with this novel to show how women—even then—could be each other's strong-back and daring protector and confidante. Together they could accomplish far more than what their so-called fragile natures suggested they could accomplish. The nature of things that are fragile is that they are easily broken, but not everything—not everyone—who looks fragile actually is. This theme was my controlling thought as I penned this story for you. I hope you have enjoyed it!

As always, I look forward to hearing from you and your club members. And if you'd like for me to be a small part of your gathering via Skype or FaceTime or Zoom, please visit my website (click the "For Book Clubs" tab) for details on how to arrange that visit.

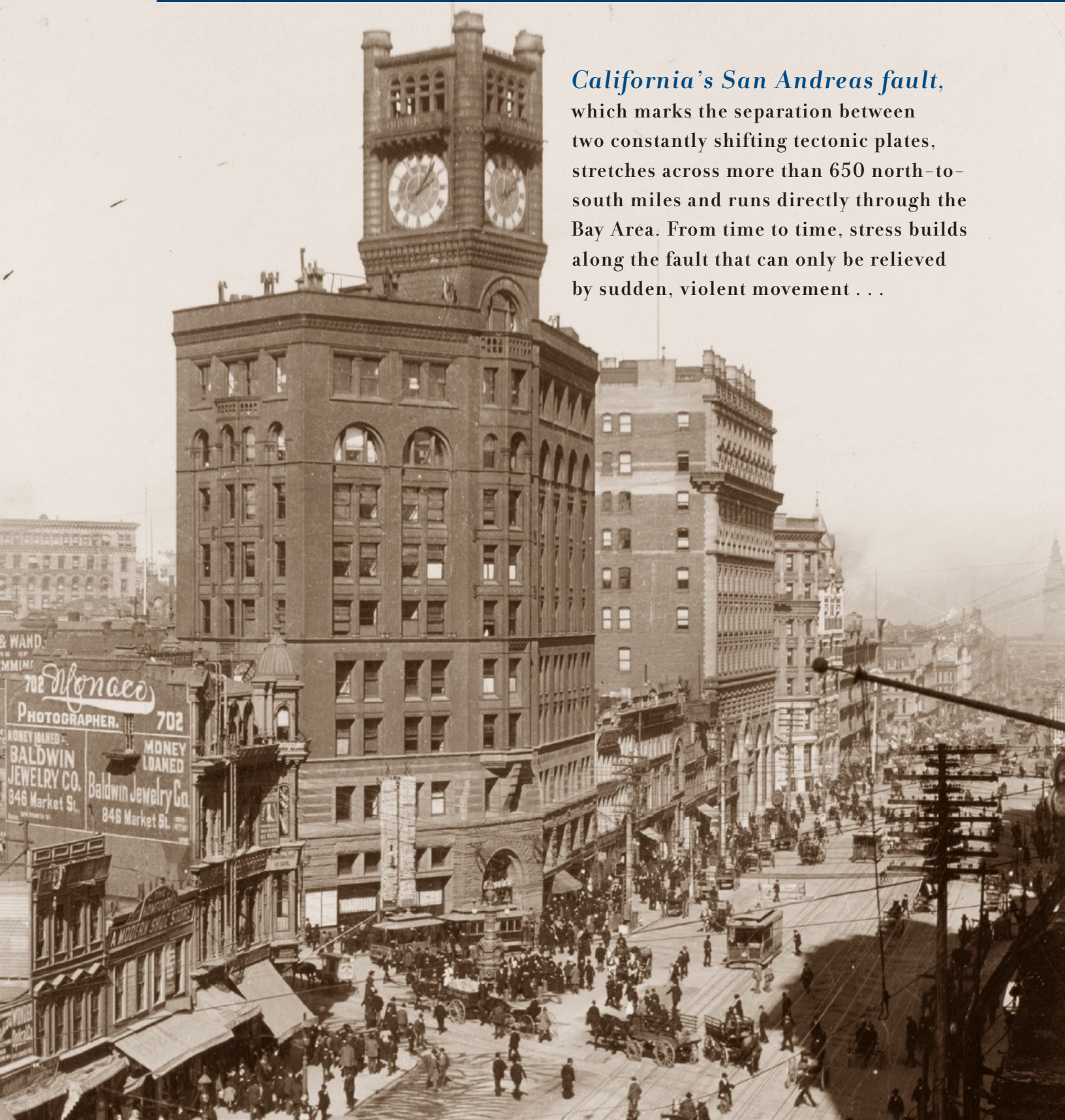
You are the reason I write,

Susan Meissner

SAN FRANCISCO

Before the Earthquake

California's San Andreas fault, which marks the separation between two constantly shifting tectonic plates, stretches across more than 650 north-to-south miles and runs directly through the Bay Area. From time to time, stress builds along the fault that can only be relieved by sudden, violent movement . . .





“On the splendid Bay of San Francisco, one of the noblest harbors on the whole vast range of the Pacific Ocean, long has stood, like a Queen of the West on its seven Hills, the beautiful city of San Francisco . . .”

—CHARLES MORRIS, 1906

When the twentieth century began, San Francisco was frequently being hailed as the Paris of the West. Its many luxurious hotels and restaurants were known around the world. Tourists wandered the colorful streets of Chinatown and relaxed at the salt and freshwater pools at the Sutro Baths and lunched at the Cliff House perched on the very edge of the North American continent. The downtown skyline boasted dozens upon dozens of multiple-story structures. The towering Claus-Spreckels building where the *San Francisco Call* had its offices included a restaurant on its topmost floor with a stunning view of the vibrant city.

San Francisco was experiencing a time of great economic success in 1906 and nearly half a million people called it home.



SAN FRANCISCO

After the Earthquake

The 1906 earthquake and fire devastated more than 80 percent of the city. An estimated 28,000 buildings were destroyed, leaving more than 250,000 people homeless.

No one knows for sure when the first fire started, but within minutes of the larger of the two quakes on April 18, fifty-two fires were in progress. Many would merge to create a tidal wave of fire that would burn for three days and nights. The dynamiting of the beautiful homes and buildings on Van Ness Avenue finally halted the devouring inferno.

Reconstruction began as soon as the ashes could be safely swept away. By 1909 nearly 20,000 buildings had been built in the recovering city. To celebrate this accomplishment, San Francisco hosted the Portola Festival in 1909 and the much larger Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915. Nineteen million people attended the exposition proving that San Francisco had risen like a phoenix from the ashes.



Scenes from after the earthquake



INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT SAN FRANCISCO

During the Great Depression, not a single San Francisco bank failed. The economy was so good in the 1930s that the city built both the Golden Gate Bridge and the Oakland Bay Bridge during these years.

The U.S. Navy had originally planned to paint the Golden Gate Bridge black with yellow stripes. **The now infamous red-orange coat was intended to be a sealant only.**

The Gold Rush brought so many people interested in mining and panning that San Francisco's port was soon packed with abandoned ships. The vessels were deconstructed and the lumber used for building homes and businesses.

San Francisco's cable cars are the only National Historical Monument that can move. The cables that pull the cars run at a continuous speed of nine-and-a-half miles per hour.

The Hagiwara family—immigrants from Japan—made the first “Chinese” fortune cookies at Golden Gate Park's Japanese Tea Garden.

San Franciscan Levi Strauss invented denim jeans for Gold Rush miners who needed durable yet comfortable clothing.

The United Nations Charter was drafted and ratified in San Francisco in 1945.



When Al Capone was held at Alcatraz, he gave regular Sunday concerts with an inmate band known as the Rock Islanders. **He played banjo.**

Curvy Lombard Street gets all the attention, but **Filbert St. between Hyde and Leavenworth streets is the steepest at nearly thirty-two degrees.**

San Francisco outlawed burials in 1901. Most of the city's cemeteries are in nearby Colma, California, where the dead outnumber the living by more than 1,000 to 1.

The Beatles gave their last full concert at Candlestick Park on August 29, 1966.

San Francisco is the thirteenth largest city in the United States.

Haight-Ashbury is recognized as the birthplace of the counterculture movement. This San Francisco enclave was the place tens of thousands of young people, called "hippies" by some and "flower children" by others, flocked to during what is now known as 1967's "Summer of Love." Most came to protest the war in Vietnam and the materialism of conventional American society. Upper Haight Street is now a hodgepodge of vintage clothing boutiques, record shops, bookstores, bars, and one-of-a-kind restaurants. Bordering Golden Gate Park, the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood also features many preserved Victorian homes, including the infamous Grateful Dead House.

Sources: [Mentalfloss.com](https://www.mentalfloss.com), [Worldstrides.com](https://www.worldstrides.com)



San Francisco-inspired refreshments for your book club event



TEQUILA SUNRISE

The legendary Tequila Sunrise cocktail was created in Sausalito, a mile north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Apparently, Mick Jagger had one in the 1970s and became an ardent fan, and the Tequila Sunrise has been famous ever since.

INGREDIENTS per cocktail

1½ ounces tequila

¾ cup orange juice

¾ ounce grenadine syrup

Orange slice, for garnish

Upscale maraschino cherry,
such as Tillen Farms

In a tulip glass filled with ice, pour in the tequila and orange juice. To get the signature sunrise look, slowly pour in the grenadine over the back of a spoon or by drizzling down the side of the glass so that it can settle at the bottom. Garnish with an orange slice and maraschino cherry.

PISCO PUNCH

During the Gold Rush, Duncan Nichols, the owner of San Francisco's Bank Exchange Saloon, created a cocktail with Pisco—a white grape brandy popular in Peru. It is said that Nichols kept the recipe a secret by refusing to make the drink in front of anyone, but rumor also had that the drink was addictively popular because of a stealthy lacing of cocaine, still legal during the mid-1800s. On a side note, this saloon was where Mark Twain met a San Francisco firefighter named Tom Sawyer, the inspiration for the book he would write with the same name in its title.

INGREDIENTS to serve 12

1 pineapple, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces

3 cups Pisco (substitute white tequila if you can't locate this hard-to-find brandy)

2 cups simple syrup

1½ teaspoons grated lime peel

1½ teaspoons grated grapefruit peel

⅔ cup fresh lemon juice

Place pineapple pieces in a large jar and pour in Pisco. Cover and refrigerate 3 days, shaking or stirring from time to time. Divide simple syrup between two bowls. Mix grated lime peel into one bowl and grated grapefruit peel into the other. Cover and refrigerate both overnight. To serve, strain infused Pisco into pitcher and discard pineapple. Strain both syrups into the pitcher. Add lemon juice and stir to blend. Fill 12 small glasses with ice, then add punch. Garnish with a lemon twist if desired.

MARTINI

If you have wondered where the iconic martini first hailed from, wonder no longer. The cocktail owes its beginning to the classic Martinez: a blend of gin, vermouth, and maraschino liqueur. At some point in the 1860s, San Francisco's Occidental Hotel dropped the liqueur from the recipe, and the martini was born.

INGREDIENTS per cocktail

1½ ounces London dry gin

1½ ounces sweet vermouth

1 dash orange bitters

1 teaspoon simple syrup

Small piece lemon peel

Green olive for garnish

In a cocktail shaker filled with ice, combine gin, vermouth, bitters, and simple syrup. Stir well, at least 15 seconds, then strain into cocktail coupe or martini glass. Twist lemon peel directly over drink and garnish with a green olive or two.

SOURDOUGH BREAD

and Accompaniments

Boudin Bakery, renowned for its sourdough bread, is widely recognized as the oldest continually operating business in San Francisco. Founded in 1849 by Isidore Boudin, the bakery and bistro located at Fisherman's Wharf is a usual must-stop for today's tourists.

The bread made at this flagship location is still baked fresh every day using the same mother dough cultivated from an 1800s gold miner's sourdough starter. Legend has it that the miners, who brought sourdough starters with them to San Francisco from places far afield, cuddled the starter crocks on cold nights so the yeasts and bacteria that kept the starters alive wouldn't die.

If you want the original for your book club gathering, it is available for purchase online at boudinbakery.com, but this famed sourdough bread and others like it are sold in regular retail grocery outlets.

Some accompaniment ideas for your sourdough bread refreshment:

- Slice, lightly broil, and serve with crab dip (San Francisco is famous for its crab dishes)
- Slice and serve with fresh fruit and cheese
- Serve as avocado toast
- Serve grilled with steamed mussels in a savory broth
- Serve with clam chowder
- Serve toasted with herb jam
- Serve toasted, spread with Neufchâtel cheese and topped with thinly sliced figs



GHIRARDELLI CHOCOLATE

In 1852, Italian immigrant Domingo Ghirardelli opened a confectionary shop in San Francisco. Nearly forty successful years later and in need of more manufacturing space, Ghirardelli's sons bought the Pioneer Woolen Building on San Francisco's northern waterfront, the present site of Ghirardelli Square. Remarkably, the earthquake and fire of 1906 did not damage the plant. Operations resumed within ten days of the disaster. Ghirardelli Chocolate Company celebrated its 160th anniversary in 2012.

You can get a variety of Ghirardelli chocolate for your club meeting at many typical supermarket and food retailers, or order online at ghirardelli.com/chocolate/.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*To be read after you've finished the novel, book-loving friend,
as there are spoilers ahead!*

1. What do you think of Sophie's decision to answer Martin's newspaper advertisement? Do you think that her decision to move to San Francisco was foolishly risky, or was it in fact her best opportunity to get out of a tight spot in the tenements?
 5. Beyond their ties to Martin, what else do Sophie, Belinda, and Candace have in common?
2. Talk for a moment about the relationship between Kat and Sophie. How would you describe the health of their relationship before the earthquake? How about afterward? How might Martin's parenting styles affect the way Kat approaches new relationships?
 6. Sophie explains to Candace that Martin was moving to attack Belinda before Kat pushed him down the stairs. What do you think Martin's plan was? What do you think was running through Kat's mind in that moment?
3. A major theme in this story is the power of female solidarity. Sophie develops great affection for Belinda and Candace despite the unfortunate circumstances that bring them together. How does Libby's shallow acquaintance with Sophie further outline the importance of genuine female friendships, especially considering the women's circumstances at this point in history?
 7. In chapter 25, as Sophie surveys the rubble that was once their San Francisco home, she notes that "It is the nature of the earth to shift. It is the nature of fragile things to break. It is the nature of fire to burn." What is she referring to when she says "fragile things"?
4. Do you think Kat is fully aware of the peculiar connection between Sophie, Belinda, and Candace? Why do you think she is instantly enamored of her infant half sister?
 8. Sophie speaks twice about not saving either of her husbands when it had been in her power to do so. She believes Martin died inside the house where she left him unable to escape, and Colm drowned right in front of her after she hit him with an iron skillet. But she says killing

a person and letting someone die aren't the same thing. Is she right? What would you have done in her shoes?

9. Though Sophie and Candace both love Kat, they have very different relationships with her. How has this book changed your understanding of motherhood?
10. Near the end of the book, Sophie remarks, "What a beautiful family Martin has made of us, despite himself." What is she saying here? How did it make you feel when she said that? What made the family she is talking about beautiful?
11. In chapter 32, Deputy Logan releases Sophie, and even allows her to keep the records from her sister's death to protect her false identity. He says, "I believe in justice, too, but I know that sometimes it is not delivered in the way it should be. Sometimes it is not delivered at all, and the evil man walks free . . . I believe in justice, but I believe it is best administered by those commissioned by the rest of humanity to give it." Discuss what this means to you.
12. Do you think that in the end, Sophie, Belinda, and Kat had happy lives? Why? How do you think each one was changed by what they collectively experienced?

About Susan Meissner



Susan Meissner is a former managing editor of a weekly newspaper and an award-winning columnist. She is the award-winning author of *A Fall of Marigolds*, *Secrets of a Charmed Life*, *Stars over Sunset Boulevard*, *A Bridge Across the Ocean*, *As Bright as Heaven*, and *The Last Year of the War*, among other novels.

SusanLMeissner.com •  Susan.Meissner
 SusanMeissner •  SoozMeissner

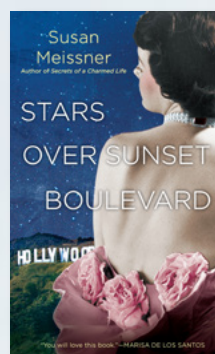
More novels from
SUSAN MEISSNER

If you and your book club enjoyed *The Nature of Fragile Things*, here are more engaging historical fiction titles by Susan for you to read and discuss:



The Last Year of the War

An American teenage girl's life changes forever when her German immigrant parents are interned in a WWII Texas internment camp.



Stars Over Sunset Boulevard

Studio secretaries working in Hollywood during its Golden Age discover the joy and heartbreak of true friendship.



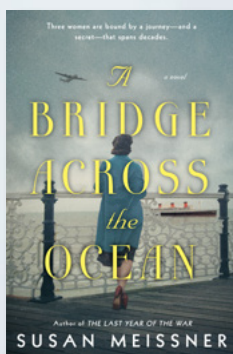
As Bright as Heaven

A family is reborn through loss and love during the time of the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic.



Secrets of a Charmed Life

Two young sisters are separated by the chaos of war during the London Blitz.



A Bridge Across the Ocean

Secrets entangle the lives of war brides coming to America aboard the RMS *Queen Mary*.



A Fall of Marigolds

A century-old scarf connects a widow and a 1911 Ellis Island nurse ten years after 9/11.