

BOOKS

Long way home

Eugene author chronicles bitter custody battle centered on her mother's sexuality

BY JODI HELMER

Melissa Hart has a lot to be grateful for: a beautiful home in rural Eugene that she shares with her husband and a menagerie of pets and a successful writing career. At 35, her life reads like a fairy tale, but Hart is the first to admit that her childhood was a different story.

She was just 9 years old when her mother came out as a lesbian and left her father. In the years that followed, Hart was caught in the middle of a bitter custody battle that resulted in her mother losing custody of her three children because of her sexuality. Hart wrote a book chronicling her experiences.

"The book started out as my thesis for graduate school," she says. "At first, I didn't want to write the story; it wasn't a subject I felt comfortable talking about or writing about."

Hart says it was her academic advisers at Goddard, a liberal arts college in rural Vermont, who encouraged her to pursue publication of her manuscript.

"One of my advisers, Mariana Romo-Carmona, lost her son for the same reason, and she was so taken by the book and so affirming of the manuscript," she says. "Her affirmations were [what made me send the manuscript] to a publisher."

In 1996, Hart sent the manuscript to a mainstream children's publisher and received a rejection letter saying the topic was "too risqué" for its readers. Undeterred, she sent the manuscript out again.

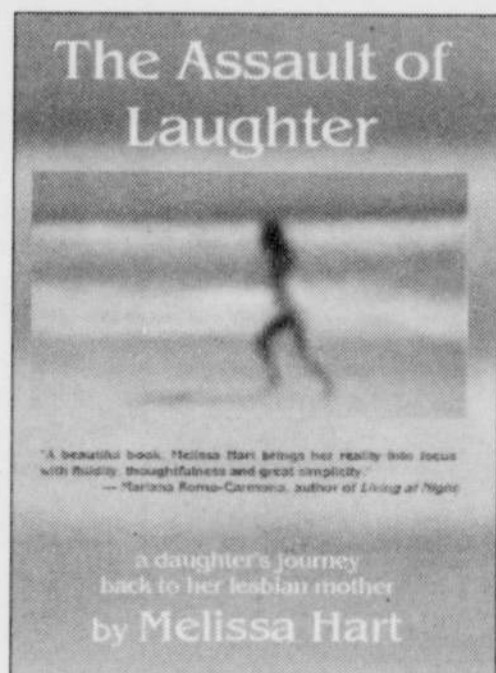
"I sent it to Windstorm Creative, and they instantly loved it," she says of the independent press publisher in Port Orchard, Wash.

Hart was thrilled her book was going to be published, but she admits there were other emotions at play, too.

"I was terrified, mostly about how the book would affect my family," she recalls. "For my mother, the subject—even after all of this time—was still devastating. I was also concerned that [my father] might sue when he heard about the book."

Despite her reservations, Hart was determined to tell her story. She did, however, make a few concessions: At the request of her mother, she published the book as a work of fiction titled *Long Way Home* in 1996. She changed names, locations and other identifying details but ensured that the rest of the manuscript was a true depiction of her experience.

Publishing her story as fiction presented challenges for Hart.



"I had to do readings and lectures and pretend that it wasn't my story," she says. "I was telling people that it happened to a friend."

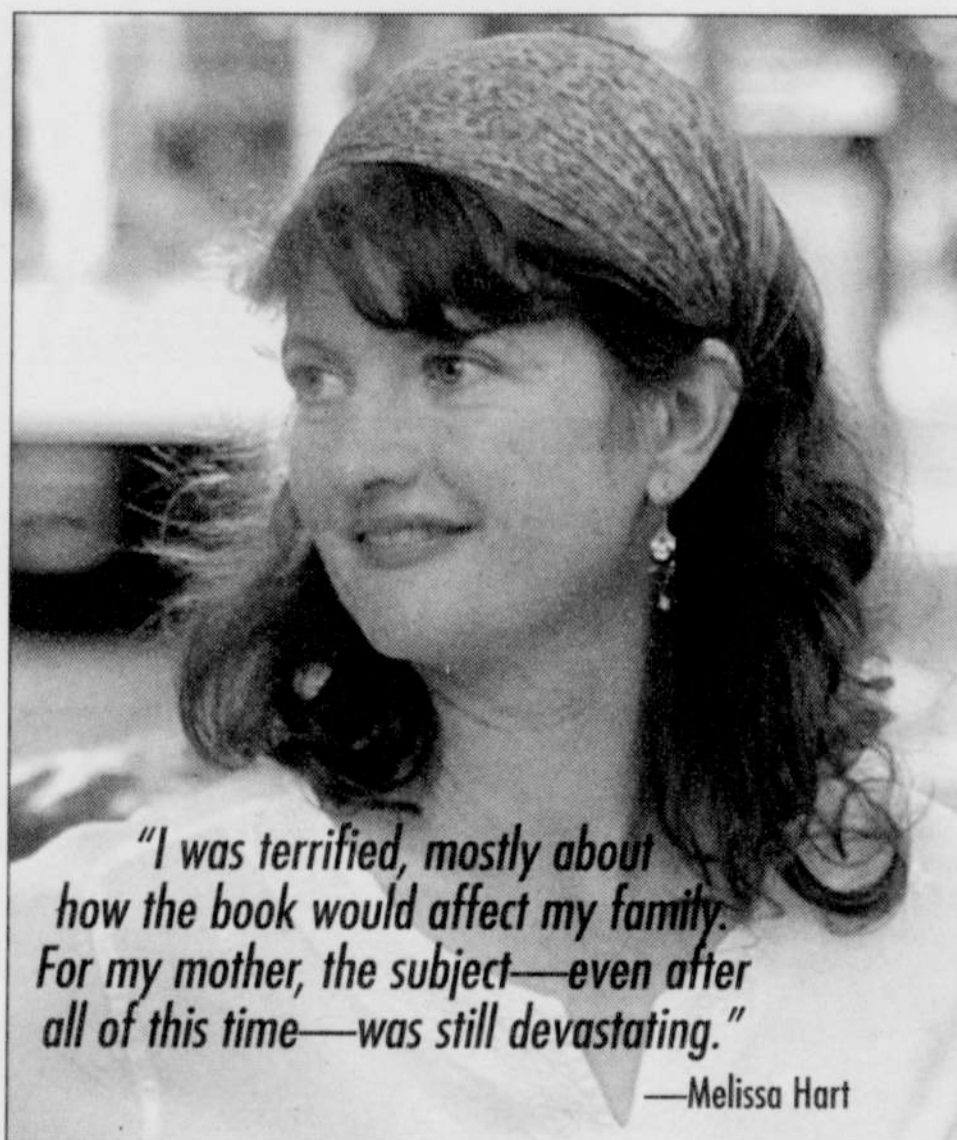
Several months after *Long Way Home* was published, Hart was doing a reading at a bookstore when she confessed—for the first time—that the book was a true account of her experiences.

"The crowd was so supportive," she recalls. "At the same time I was incredibly embarrassed. At first I was embarrassed that this had happened to me, and later I was embarrassed that I pretended that it hadn't."

After that reading, Hart decided to rerelease the book as a memoir. "I realized that the story needed to be told and would have a lot more power if it were told in the first person," she says.

Long Way Home became *The Assault of Laughter: A Daughter's Journey Back to her Lesbian Mother* and hit shelves in January.

"It was extremely empowering," Hart says of letting readers know it was a true story. "I was doing some pre-publicity interviews, and I discovered this entire community of children of GLBT parents. It was so exciting to find all of these people from all over the U.S. who have



"I was terrified, mostly about how the book would affect my family. For my mother, the subject—even after all of this time—was still devastating."

—Melissa Hart

had similar experiences."

Hart says writing *The Assault of Laughter* has changed the direction her career has taken. "The book opened up so many doors in terms of being a speaker and writing about GLBT issues."

It has also opened her eyes to the importance of sharing her story. The response, Hart says, has been overwhelmingly positive.

"Children of GLBT parents have said to me: 'You nailed it. You captured so many of the issues we grew up with.'"

Still, Hart admits to feeling skeptical about the praise. "Sometimes I think that maybe people say nice things because they are sympathetic to the cause, so they were willing to overlook the obvious flaws," she says.

In fact, if she had it to do all over again, Hart says the book would look much different.

"If I had the chance to rewrite the book completely—as if it had never been written

before—I would have written it in a completely different way. I would have given it more of an adult voice," she says. "I was a very different writer then; I was pretty angry about what had happened."

Hart is still angry that her mother lost custody of her children because of her sexuality but says *The Assault of Laughter* has been an unexpected gift that came out of the experience.

"I think that the warm reception the book received may have lessened [my mom's] guilt a little. It made her realize that she is not the only mother who has lost custody of her children for being gay."

Hart says that other members of her family have also benefited from reading the book.

"Surprisingly, my stepmother read the book and e-mailed me—we had been out of touch for a decade—and said that she was grateful for the insight it gave her. It helped her to understand the reason for my sorrow and hostility," Hart says. "My [younger] sister told me that the book has gone a long way toward helping her understand what we went through."

But not everyone has been supportive of Hart's book.

"The book really upset my father," she says. "In his eyes, he sees my mother as a woman who left him and a very comfortable upper-middle-class life to live with a woman. He thinks we were led into a den of iniquity and that he rescued us from going to hell with her."

Hart does believe, in a sense, that the experience rescued her.

"I was in danger—as a child of an upper-middle-class family living in a chic suburb of L.A.—of being myopic, of growing up without compassion and without insight," she says. "I am extremely grateful that I could live with my mom in near poverty. It opened my eyes to the injustice [in the world] and made me want to fight for the underdog."

Hart adds that the experience was instrumental in shaping who she has become.

"It has made me—it has forced me—to be politically engaged in GLBT issues," she says. "I am not sure how people can look at something that is so obviously a problem and not be engaged." ■

MELISSA HART will read from *The Assault of Laughter: A Daughter's Journey Back to Her Lesbian Mother* 7 p.m. April 18 at the Coffee House Café, 135 Liberty St. N.E. in Salem, and will present a workshop on humor writing 1 p.m. April 23 during the first-ever Wordstock Book Fair in Room D134 at the Oregon Convention Center, 777 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. For more information visit www.melissahart.com.

JODI HELMER is a Portland free-lance writer. Visit her online at www.jodihelmer.com.

eatingout eatingout eatingout eatingout eatingout eatingout eatingout eatingout eatingout

Violet's Café
5204 NE SACRAMENTO BLVD. PORTLAND,
OREGON 97213

Baked Fresh Daily!
CINNAMON ROLLS & MORE

SERVING BREAKFAST AND LUNCH
hrs: Thursday - Monday 7am - 2pm
(503) 281-7933

Coffee Cat
Snuggle up to a cup...
Great Coffee, Pastries & Gifts
On the corner of
41st & Woodstock
(503) 774-0577

Casual Dining
Piano Lounge
Game Room
Open 4:00 Daily

Hobo's

120 NW Third Avenue
Portland, Or 97209
(503) 224-3285
www.hobospdx.com
Parking Validated
Smart Park Davis & Front