

A different disaster, another time

On March 27, 1964, the largest earthquake in North America's recorded history heaved, roared and lurched through Alaska's southern central landscape — jumbling forests, churning seas and obliterating entire villages. It went on for about four minutes but felt like an eternity.

Then, and now, the largest population center in Alaska was Anchorage, which lay east of the epicenter by about 75 miles.

In a gripping new narrative of the historic event, Bainbridge Island-based writer Jon Mooallem focuses on the earthquake's impact on the aspirational frontier town. Alaska had become the 49th star in the firmament of Old Glory only five years earlier.

"This Is Chance!" is the kaleidoscopic story of different Alaskans who lived through the earthquake and assumed various roles in rebuilding their town.

The novel centers on the steady voice of Chance, whose part-time reporting gig for radio station KENI turned into a three-day broadcasting marathon immediately following the earthquake.

Over the airwaves, Chance helped to hold the fractured community together by knitting together an ongoing series of public safety bulletins and damage reports.

Chance also directed calls for volunteer rescue teams around town. She relayed messages over the air for everyday folks trying to locate missing family members or seeking to let others know that they were alright.

In those first few days following the calamity, with the telephone lines down and roads turned to rubble, the radio station was the only way people had to communicate with one another. Broadcasting non-stop, Chance's reassuring voice helped to avert panic.

She was heard around the world as well, as her reports were transmitted to those on the "outside" — in Seattle, Portland, Omaha, Texas — and as far away as Tokyo, London and Norway.

The fact that she initially had taken the job at KENI because her alcoholic and increasingly abusive husband was unable to support the family as a used car salesman didn't matter. With the world as witness, she became one of the fundamental players in helping a shattered community pick up the pieces and put itself back together

This Week's Book

'This Is Chance!' By Jon Mooallem
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again.

In Mooallem's words, "Our force for counteracting chaos is connection."

The author spent six years researching the material for this book. He conducted interviews with now elderly survivors of the earthquake, and combed through several archives in search of eye-witness accounts, government records, audio recordings and other documents.

Most significantly, he was allowed access to Chance's exhaustive collection of diaries, letters, photos, KENI scripts and audio recordings, which had been stored in her daughter's basement since Chance died in 1998.

"This Is Chance" is a remarkable and deeply moving account of how a community responded in the hours and days following a literally earthshaking disaster. As we find ourselves immersed in our own period of uncertainty and fear, Mooallem's book — and Chance's story — provide encouraging perspectives.

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