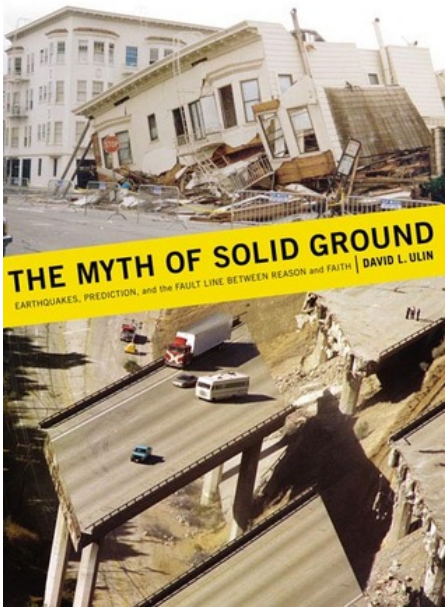

The Myth of Solid Ground: Earthquakes, Prediction, and the Fault Line Between Reason and Faith

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From the first earthquake David L. Ulin experienced in San Francisco at age eighteen, he was fascinated with the daily lives of Californians, who seem to be going about their business with just an occasional rumbling interruption. But these tectonic shifts could easily wreak cataclysmic havoc, just as they did in the great earthquake of 1906.

In *The Myth of Solid Ground*, Ulin explores how an unlikely collection of scientists, psychics, and apocalyptics have made startlingly accurate earthquake predictions based on everything from magnetic fields to the behavior of whales. In the end, Ulin uses the world of earthquake prediction to explore the deep fault lines of belief and the human longing to hold control, no matter how misguided, over a mysterious and deadly phenomenon that is as much a part of California as speed, youth, and celebrity.

The Myth of Solid Ground: Earthquakes, Prediction, and the Fault Line Between Reason and Faith Details

Date	:	Published July 22nd 2004 by Viking Adult (first published 2004)
ISBN	:	9780670033232
Author	:	David L. Ulin
Format	:	Hardcover 304 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Science, Geology

From Reader Review The Myth of Solid Ground: Earthquakes, Prediction, and the Fault Line Between Reason and Faith for online ebook

Sara says

Usually I hate things about natural disasters, because, well, obviously they are just altogether too possible. I don't read the paper or watch the news, and roll my eyes when people start to talk about the fires or earthquakes in California. . .this book was a confrontation. A gentle push. One I really needed. The writing is incredible.

Mark says

shocking

Jim says

in high school we assigned research projects called i-search papers. the idea being we would write about something we researched w/ourselves as the star, not the subject. dewey about the library cat and the bio of rin tin tin are examples and so is this book.

Kevin says

Didn't finish. Difficult to read. Interesting take on an interesting subject, at times beautifully written, but i feel like this should have been an essay about a third to the fourth of the length, not a 300-page book.

Abe Brennan says

Hallowed literary names pepper the sterling reviews of The Myth of Solid Ground, Ulin’s first nonfiction book. He is compared to McPhee, Didion, and even, improbably, Charlie Kaufman. Certainly his seamless mechanics and blend of reportage, research, and cultural analysis make such comparisons apt, but Ulin’s inimitable voice emerges not through the echoes of other writers but via a psychological crucible through which his many influences—literary and critical—fuse into a coherent, original expression. “…what matters, strictly speaking, isn’t the so-called truth of my recollections,” he says in his book. “What matters is the way they add up to some larger narrative.” The larger narrative in this book has to do with the subjective truth of Ulin himself and the seismologists, geologists, predictors, and sensitives he encounters throughout his research. He aims to extrapolate something universal from the particulars of these individual points of view. A post-modern resonance echoes amidst the nooks and crannies of Ulin’s musings in The Myth of Solid Ground, but he’s not involved in idle deconstruction. Anything he unhinges, whether it be truth, language,

myth, or the earth itself, he does so for a reason. He posits the idea of empirical and hypothetical integration, which he views as “a broadly monitored landscape where different strands of research may be woven into the tapestry of a larger point of view.” That larger point of view dissolves into the incomprehensible abyss of geologic time, leaving humans to parse something intelligible from the vortex. This business of interpretation can be applied to all of the characters in his book, from the seemingly psychotic to the rigorously rational—each person deals with a truth all their own, and it is somewhere within this schizophrenic, point of view morass that reality resides. In the end, Ulin’s book is a quest—as is much of his writing—not for literal answers, but for a reconciliation between reason and faith—adopting the best of both, as it were—so as to live easier in the face of the ultimately unfathomable, often catastrophic processes of our universe.

Ammie says

I think the premise behind this book was almost better than the book itself: in seismologically active areas, how do science and myth, fact and faith, come together for the people who live there? David Ulin meets with seismologists, earthquake predictors, attends simulate shake tests, and even visits the fake earthquake at Universal Studios in his search for an understanding of the exceptionally blurry line between reality and fiction, trying to make the disparate pieces fit together. What he finds--and what I most took away from my reading--is that really, we have no idea at all what the earth is doing. I think sometimes we assume that science knows a lot more then it really does, that they have things pinned down and now we're just looking at the details. In a very real sense, though, seismology doesn't know why earthquakes happen when and where they do, doesn't know exactly how they work, and it's pretty unlikely that we'll ever be able to predict them with any degree of confidence or precision. They are, after all, a force of nature.

There were a lot of things I liked about this book. A lot of the language is beautiful, and I really appreciated the wide focus of study; Ulin does not shy away from investigating any number of different aspects of his subject, from talking to self-proclaimed predictors to visiting geologically relevant sections of the San Andreas to examining the various emerging theories of seismology. In some ways, though, I felt like that wide focus made things a little... unfocused. I felt like there was a lot of repetition, and that certain tantalizing leads were left open-ended, and I had a harder time getting through it than I would have thought. That said, Ulin has a sense of wonder for geology and for the collision of faith and realism that I loved, and I learned a lot about the instability of our understanding of seismology, and that's a good thing. I love remembering that the earth is still a mystery.

Kyle Aisteach says

After the Northridge quake, a friend of mine joked that he was going to print up T-shirts: "I won't tell you my boring earthquake story if you won't tell me yours." Alas, this book is one man's journey to decipher the meaning of life through earthquake pseudo-science, personal earthquake stories (none of which are remotely interesting to anyone who has been through the real thing), cherry picking of real seismology, and way too much travelogue. The end result is a navel-gazing mess that this California boy found most effective as a treatment for insomnia. Alas, it was required reading for a seminar, and I therefore had to continually interrupt even that benefit.

Possibly interesting to people who've never been through an earthquake and don't care about learning the real science behind them, who would rather have a glossed-over memoiristic view of them, but certainly not my

cup of tea.

The worst part is that I now have to go figure out something to write about in order to analyze Ulin's craft for class. Perhaps it'll be a paper about unintentional irony as he casts aspersions at earthquake predictors while equally ignoring the science the good folks at Caltech, the USGS, and Cal State Fullerton tried desperately to teach him...

Megan says

Far more poetic than any other book about earthquakes I've ever read. Fascinating overall.

Dee Eisel says

I've heard that Californians are prone to navel-gazing, and to be honest I didn't find that to be all that true when I lived there, or in the times I've interacted with them over my years doing tech support across the country. Ulin seems to be determined to make up for any number of practical and earthy Californians, though, with a dive deep into his belly button in an attempt to figure out why on earth people would live in California, with all of its earthquakes.

This doesn't make the book bad, by any means. Any examination of the reasons people choose to live in risky locations is going to be subjective, and Ulin is open about this being a very personal quest from the beginning. But the circles he goes in trying to figure himself out left me feeling disconnected and dissociated from his real emotions. I didn't feel like I ever had a sense of sympathy with him, which is very odd because I went through a similar decision process and decided very quickly to leave the state.

Ulin introduces us to various figures in the earthquake prediction realm, one which I haven't looked into much because I've been reading the USGS more than anything. We meet a few of the USGS researchers, but Ulin spends a lot more time talking to and about the prediction folks. I found these to be interesting because of the unfamiliarity, and also because they feed a lot more into the purpose of the book.

It wouldn't be a long enough book if Ulin distilled it all down into the truth: We desire to understand the natural world, and we desire to figure out how to influence it to our benefit. I'm pagan, I get this! I feel the urge to propitiate Poseidon so that the New Madrid fault doesn't go off before retrofits are done, for instance. (Which is really odd for someone in Minnesota to say, because really, Poseidon, here? But my Queen was born of the sea foam too, and I feel Her here, and this WAS once the shore of an inland ocean, and the Great Lakes are freaking amazing inland seas, so...) It's not considered the Done Thing to propitiate the Gods anymore, because Science, but I understand completely the urge to do so. And the fact that he doesn't get any feeling of urgency out of a lot of the preparatory and exploration work he does is unsurprising to me, and it startles me that he doesn't grasp it.

When he talks about feeling the sterility of the Universal earthquake exhibit or the shake table, I understand in a way. But the thing is, he's ignoring the fact that of course he didn't get the adrenaline, because he did know he was perfectly safe. And the fact is that in my case, every time I went over a bridge in Cali I felt a hit of adrenaline - because I wasn't. He's managed to shut out all of that to live, so he's numb to the little fears and looking for a hit of the big one. But I didn't feel that fear at Universal either, and to think he'd find it

there was, well, a little naiive.

I give this one three of five stars. It's not bad, but it doesn't really go where I think he wanted it to go, and I know it didn't go where I hoped.

Paul says

Of course, scardey cat that I am, I waited until I was back on my home turf in the East coast to read about earthquakes and how the denizens of California deal with it. Going into the book, I was a person who knew next to nothing about earthquakes and how effectively (or ineffectively) we’re able to predict when/where they will strike. So imagine my alarm, control-freak that I am, when I found that we still suck at predicting earthquakes and that so many people are still drawn to pseudo-science and predicting earthquakes by headache or cloud shape. Ulin and scientists argue that part of the reason why predicting earthquakes is so difficult is that geological time/age is so vast and dwarfs our own time, it’s seemingly impossible to set our clocks to run together. Get it? Well, David explains it much better than I do. And, even better, he doesn’t explain everything. I was drawn to David’s sense of wonder in the face of disaster, in the face of the infinite. Ultimately, we don’t know if we’re ever safe, but that’s okay too.

Sarah says

Ostensibly about earthquake prediction, this book is really about living in a place which forces you to confront your mortality each time you feel a temblor, is about the quiescent and uneasy peace we all make between what we perceive and what we believe. The writing is lush and lyrical. A great read.

Liz says

Interesting, informative, fun, excessively wordy & self-conscious. I did enjoy it greatly, as an emigrant Californian. For real solid information on the (continuing) geologic formation of California, however, go to John McPhee. Better writing, less touchy-feely.

DeAnna says

This gets three stars for its creative exploration of earthquakes. It explores the relationship between science and culture and probes how California can be such a popular place to live given its unstable foundations.

There are some priceless interviews with some of the scientists and wingnut predictors working on better understanding earthquakes. There are also some insightful self-reflections that Ulin offers that I really related to. That being said, I think Ulin goes a little to far into self-reflection too often and lost me. I wish that energy had been instead used to talk to more non-experts about what it is like to live in an earthquake prone area.

This book manages to be funny, interesting and reflective most of the time.