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'Wave' makes a splash among LBI readers

Out over the Atlantic, a terrorist plot has gone awry. A 747 bound for Washington, D.C., nosedives into the ocean and a nuclear bomb detonates, causing a vast undersea landslide. Within minutes a tsunami is moving toward the Jersey shore and Long Beach Island is directly in its path, with one causeway and less than three hours to evacuate.

Kaitlyn Romano, 12, of Conneticut, sat in a chair tucked into the reading room of Things A Drift shop in Ship Bottom on Monday, book in hand. Her eyes scanned those sentences, printed on a hardcover book flap, with rapt interest.

Romano looked up from her reading and giggled.

"It looks interesting," she said. "What would happen if a tsunami ever hit here?" she wondered out loud.

Her brother Thomas, 14, also an avid read, agreed.

The pair were searching for their latest beach book, a breezy read while staying in their home in Surf City for the week. What better than a novel about catastrophic disasters striking the very spot you're sitting.

Wil Mara's novel, aptly titled "Wave," is already in its second printing. It is listed in Amazon.com's Top 100,000 titles list, out of millions of books.

Ten shops on the island carry the book, often propped up in a special display set aside because of all the attention the book has gotten. People browsing through Things A Drift commented that it's hard to pass by a book that has a picture of Barnegat Lighthouse being engulfed by a wave on its cover.

Mara said the idea for the book evolved out of a core image that struck him one day. In his head he saw two women walking down Long Beach Boulevard, suddenly washed away by a monstrous wave.

He could not shake that image he said, and began writing. The author of more than 70 books, Mara said that "Wave" is the first of a few New



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Jersey-centric novels he has planned. He chose LBI because it's full of naturally colorful characters.

He called his research of the inner workings of the 18-mile beach community meticulous. He interviewed shop and restaurant owners up and down the boulevard, lifetime residents in every town, and even a mayor.

"My yardstick of success was going to be, I didn't want anybody to read it and say he didn't do his homework." he said of his attention to LBI detail.

The book is littered with references that describe real life spots on the island.

Novels about specific locales are fairly common, but Mara says his novel is a bit different because he has his characters dealing with their worst nightmare. A working mom trying to find her children scattered on the island, two young lovers from opposite sides of the tracks and a disgraced mayor are all there, waiting to be washed away.

If the plot sounds a bit implausible, Dr. Harold Mofjeld, senior scientist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, tsunami research group, says think again.

"You can't rule it out as impossible." he said of Mara's tale of a 18- to 20-foot waves moving 600 miles an hour with the island as a bullseye.

"There has been concern about how stable the sediment is at the continental slope, or area where there is a sharp drop off in depth," he said. "If there was a shakeup of some sort, from an earthquake, or a bomb detonation right there in that specific shelf break, a landslide generated tsunami is possible."

Mara said that for his book to be effective as a suspense novel, it would have to be realistic and actually strike fear in the reader. He consulted with NOAA over the course of several long phone calls, to make sure that his science was credible.

"I went out of my way to make it unnerving." Mara said.

One book store was actually hesitant to carry it, thinking it would frighten too many people following the tragedy of the tsunami in Asia this year.

One woman he met at a recent book signing at Things a Drift told Mara that after reading the novel, she was thinking about it all the time.

"She was an older woman who lived on LBI her whole life and she told me she had always been afraid of waves. She finally got over that fear and then she read the book (and) was scared all over again," he said.

Mara likes to make it clear that his idea for the novel came to him in 2001 and his manuscript was already finished and submitted to the publisher by the time the tsunami occurred.

Rational or irrational fears aside, the book is selling. The owner of Things a Drift said Monday that since Memorial Day she has already had to unpack her third case of the books.

"I was raised here on the island, I remember the great March storm of the 60s." said shop owner Cheryl, who didn't want her last name printed. "That subject has been done. If it was just weather-related I don't think it would be as good, but it combines two topics that gets people on edge."



Mara said that the response from some people has been so strong that he sent a copy to somebody he knew at the FBI to look into, "just in case." The FBI agent's response? "He told me, 'Thank you for the information. Somebody will look into that!'"

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