

# Sieruta's teenage stories show heart

By Liz Mulligan  
special writer

Peter D. Sieruta is as enjoyable to talk to as his book, "Heartbeats," is to read. Both mean the audience will gain insight through humor.

Born in Detroit in 1956, Sieruta attended Cady High School (mentioned in one of his stories, "Walking") as well as the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Having worked in a local library for the past 10 years until he was recently laid off, Sieruta is well acquainted with books.

His first writing success, a play, "When the Lights Go Out," was produced in 1983 at the Attic Theater and, again in 1985 in New York City as an off-off Broadway play. While the play is about teenagers, it is geared for an adult audience.

Also in 1983, the Boardhead Theater in Lansing produced "None of the Above," which is set in Dearborn. Another of Sieruta's works, a one-man play about Oscar Wilde called "A Picture of Oscar Wilde," was produced at the Boardhead and may be seen at the Attic Theater in August.

Sieruta enjoys the group experience of writing (and rewriting) a play as well as the thrill of hearing the audience react to his words.

SIERUTA HAS almost total recall of his high school days. An introvert then, he observed others and began mentally collecting stories.

He still collects tales about teenage years and gives them a significant twist. "Heartbeats" is a young adult book, anyone who has ever longed for his own room, remembers his first job, or was upset with a sibling would enjoy this book.

Liz Mulligan is a freelance writer who resides in West Bloomfield.

## review

ly filled with angst, Sieruta's stories are both real and uplifting. This could be because the two authors who most inspired him are M.E. Kerr, known for her sarcastic comedy, and Bruce Brooks, known for his distinctive voice.

Both authors are published by Harper & Row, a fact that influenced Sieruta, who actually had the good fortune of choosing his publisher. After reading a speech by Brooks thanking his editor at Harper & Row, Sieruta submitted his collection of nine stories to that publishing house.

"HEARTBEATS AND OTHER STORIES" uses all titles in a clever way. "Heartbeats" reflects a less-than-explicit theme of having the word "heartbeat" (in some form) in each story.

Probably the best titled and most disturbing story is "The Substitute." Sieruta's current favorite (it changes) is "Attack of the Jolly Green Giant," an amazing look at love and driver's ed.

Also impressive are: "25 Good Reasons for Hating My Brother Todd," "Room for Improvement" and "Walking."

EACH OF the nine stories is rich, well-developed, concise and clever. While "Heartbeats" is a young adult book, anyone who has ever longed for his own room, remembers his first job, or was upset with a sibling would enjoy this book.

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# Author Kakonis is really on a roll

LAST FALL, when Tom Kakonis' thriller, "Michigan Roll," was brought out by St. Martin's Press, its cover was adorned with words of praise from a half-dozen fiction-writing luminaries, including R.V. Cassill, Tony Hillerman and Donald Westlake.

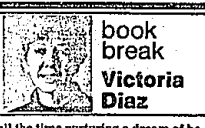
"Michigan Roll" is fast, strong, harsh and beautiful," Westlake wrote. "It is Tom Kakonis' first novel, he sure landed running."

Well, Kakonis may have landed running with this, his first published novel (three others on a shelf at his home in Grand Rapids remain unpublished), but the Ferris State University English professor has spent some time working up to that fast pace, he said.

"I'm 58 — old," he joked recently, taking a break from proofreading the pages of his second crime novel, "Crisis Cross," due out early next year.

Born in California, he grew up "in a remote outpost of South Dakota," and earned a bachelor's degree at the University of Minnesota.

He served a stint in the Army before spending what he calls "a prolonged and wasted youth," knocking about the country, pursuing such varied occupations as railroad laborer, pool hall fitter and beach bum —



book break  
Victoria Diaz

all the time nurturing a dream of becoming a novelist.

EVENTUALLY, HE enrolled at South Dakota State. When he graduated with a master's degree in English, he headed straight for the University of Iowa, where he was accepted into the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, and eventually emerged with a Ph.D.

For his dissertation, he wrote the first of three unpublished novels — a work he describes as "pretty much autobiographical" and "serious."

"At Iowa, they encouraged you to become a 'serious' writer," he said. After Iowa, the ex-Army officer/laborer/pool hall fitter/beach bum/student continued his romantic education, teaching English literature at what he remembers as "dismal little colleges," mostly in the Midwest. At one time, he taught classes in the 19th century novel and Chaucer to

inmates at Illinois State Prison in Joliet.

BY THE time he got to Ferris State, two more of these "serious" novels had been rejected by publishers and he'd more or less given up on his ambition to write fiction, he said.

For some time, he turned his full attention to writing college textbooks and teaching. After awhile, he became involved in college administration, and eventually became head of the English department at Ferris State.

"Then, one day about three years ago — as old men will do — I decided I'd give (novel writing) one more shot," he said. "Only this time I decided I'd try something with some commercial appeal."

"I remember I had been to Traverse City the week before, and I'd gone to this Chippewa reservation near there, where they have the casino. And when I got back home, I just started putting together this book."

WHAT HE came up with was "Michigan Roll," the story of Timothy Waverly, an educated man turned professional gambler, who comes up against two of the most loathsome villains you'll ever meet on the printed page — Shadow, a re-

pellent, sexually obsessed killer, and Gleep, a monstrous Indian, who once torched an elementary school.

Coming to Traverse City on a vacation of sorts, Waverly finds himself involved with a dark-haired beauty called Midnight, whose wayward brother is being hunted down by the two same old killers.

Against a backdrop of gambling, mobsterism and other dark dealings, Waverly matches wits and nerves with Shadow and Gleep, who not only want to see him dead, but want to see him get that way as slowly and painfully as possible.

"I'm really not well-versed in (crime fiction) at all, but I figured I knew gambling — I've had a lifelong fascination with it — and I knew Traverse City," Kakonis said, attempting to explain how the thriller evolved.

"I had no real plot outline when I started, although I did have the main character, Waverly, pretty much in mind. But I didn't have the two villains yet — and they turned out to be the most fun for me to work with, and the best-rendered, I think," he said.

ONCE ALL his characters had made an appearance, it was just a matter, more or less, of following them around, Kakonis said.

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# Ford estate welcomes all to birthday celebration

A commemoration of auto pioneer Henry Ford's birthday is scheduled for Sunday — the 175th anniversary of his birth — as the Henry Ford Estate-Fair Lane hosts its annual "Henry Ford Day" celebration.

The Henry Ford Day festival, which runs from noon to 6 p.m. on the grounds of the Estate (Evansburg Road across from Fairlane Town Center), is a family celebration focusing on Ford's love of music and dance. A special musical feature of this year's festival is the artistry of

Charles W. Hardy, master of the musical saw.

Admission to the Henry Ford Day festival is \$2 per person. Parking is free in the lot adjacent to the estate. In addition, tours of the Fair Lane mansion and powerhouse will be available throughout the day: \$4/adults, \$3/students and senior citizens.

The Henry Ford Estate-Fair Lane is located on the campus of the University of Michigan-Dearborn. For more information, call 593-5590.

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