

# 'Beautiful Music'

Like many writers, Zadoorian draws from his life. "The Leisure Seeker" was inspired by his father's struggle with Alzheimer's and road trips his family of four used to take. (He has an older sister, Susan, who's retired.)

As for "Beautiful Music," Zadoorian laughs: The teenage Danny is pretty much an autobiographical character. Danny grows up in northwest Detroit, a sensitive kid, a "bully-magnet," who finds a sanctuary in his music. "I was kind of a lonely, nerdy little guy," says Zadoorian. "I was too sensitive for my own good."

The novel, rich with Detroit details (Korvette's, Bill Bonds, Iggy Pop), follows Danny through racial tensions at high school, his changing body and his imploding family life. He needs a safe place, says Zadoorian. "For him, it's rock 'n' roll."



"Beautiful Music," Michael Zadoorian's third novel, arrived in stores Tuesday. (Photo: Akashic Books)

The story grew from Zadoorian's musing about his own youth. "I just started writing down everything I could remember about those times. The people I knew, what went on, what I was thinking and how I was feeling. ... Music always winds up being a symbol of something and a way for young people to discover themselves," he says. "Danny's dad likes the same kind of records that were played in my household. ... I took that from my dad."

BY MORGAN STANLEY

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## Growing up

Music was one way Zadoorian bonded with his father, Norman, who played albums like "Genuine Electric Latin Love Machine" and synthesizer sounds before Zadoorian discovered the likes of Led Zeppelin, the Who and Fleetwood Mac.

The biggest influence his father had on him, he says, was helping him realize his creative potential. Zadoorian saw that his father loved his job as an industrial photographer for Detroit Edison and, specifically, that he could make a living taking photographs. "He encouraged me to find something I loved and then to do it," the author says. (His father died in 2004. His mother, Rose Mary, died in 2008.)

Zadoorian says his father also instilled in him an attitude. "A very Detroit attitude. (Some artists) feel the world owes them a living. Artists in Detroit (don't) feel that way. They've figured out some side hustle to survive and do what's important to them. ... That's a real Detroit thing, and that's a gift."

That attitude helped Zadoorian get where he is today. Certainly it helped him get "the best gig in advertising for decades," as his former Campbell Ewald boss, Cindy Sikorski, puts it.

Zadoorian had been freelancing for a year when the agency decided to hire him full time. Sikorski recalls with a laugh how the writer, always a bit shy, hesitated with a sheepish look and said he wanted to work part time so he could work on his novel.

He offered them five days a week every afternoon. "He was great. He was there like clockwork," says Sikorski. "He accomplished in four hours more than most other writers did all day."

Zadoorian might have even stayed at the agency—which taught him to be a "ruthless self editor" and how to deal with rejection—but the increasing workload was killing him. "It was getting to the point where I couldn't write fiction anymore," he says. "It made me so depressed. I was like, 'OK, now is the time.'"

Leaving was a good decision but a tough adjustment, in large part because Zadoorian lost his beloved cat Bongo at about the same time. The pet was like his writing companion. Zadoorian took the loss hard and wrote a touching piece for the Huffington Post defending a man's right to publicly mourn the death of his cat.

Soon afterward, things began picking up with the book and the movie. Although Zadoorian had nothing to do with the film, he got attention as the book's author and was invited to visit the film sets and the premiere at the Venice Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival. He schmoozed with

Mirren twice ("She was so nice. She told me I looked elegant in my tuxedo") and briefly met Sutherland ("I found him grumpy").

Last month, after the film's release and with "Beautiful Music" about to come out, friends insisted that Zadoorian let them put on two local film premieres to benefit the Alzheimer's Association. He spoke after the film screenings and signed advance copies of the book.



Michael Zadoorian lives in a vintage-décor Ferndale bungalow with wife Rita Simmons and their three cats — Cheeto, Junebug and Pickles. (Photo: Kathleen Galligan, *Detroit Free Press*)

## In the spotlight

All the excitement has been a bit stressful for Zadoorian, who never dreamed of more than getting his books published. As he likes to say, "It's been surreal."

He laments that he can't talk to his longtime mentor and creative writing advisor at Wayne State University, Christopher Leland, who died in 2012. "He was very good at guiding writers," he says. "He took great joy in the successes of his students. He was just a sweet, kind person."

Zadoorian wishes he could ask him: "What do you make of all this?" There's a longing to know the answer. "This was nothing that I ever expected," he says. "It was never on my radar."

Zadoorian has had a taste of stardom outside the U.S. "I have this weird popularity in Italy," he says. One day, he got an e-mail inquiring about the Italian rights to his first novel, "Second Hand." It did so well, so the Italians immediately wanted to publish "The Leisure Seeker." That led to the film, which was produced by an Italian company with an Italian director.

Zadoorian was even featured a 2010 issue of the Italian *Vanity Fair* with Mel Gibson on the cover. He has never had it translated. "I'm kind of afraid to," he jokes. He seems almost embarrassed by it.

That reticence is something Zadoorian worries about, mostly because he doesn't want to offend someone. "People are very happy for me," he explains. "I get enthusiastic about things, but I don't make a lot of noise. I think sometimes it can seem that I'm not enjoying myself or not appreciative."

Zadoorian is that genuinely nice, says Sikorski. "That's what makes his success so great. ... He's very humble and unassuming."

Simmons, who met her husband when they were students at WSU and first fell for his sense of humor, calls him "the kindest person I know." She recalls a time they were at the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, and saw an older man struggling a bit with a cane. "Michael didn't even blink an eye. He just offered him his arm, like no big deal, and asked how he enjoyed Greece," she says. "He's very generous."

If success has changed Zadoorian, Simmons, who is similarly reserved, says only: "It's forced him to be a little more outgoing."

It hasn't been easy, but Zadoorian is working on it. "I'm trying to appreciate things," he says with a bit of a sigh. "I'm trying to be in the moment."

**Henry Milek: What's your connection to the Midwest?**

**Michael Zadoorian:** I've lived in Michigan all my life. I am a Midwesterner.

**HM: As a lifelong resident of Detroit, what would you say makes Detroit unique among American cities, and how has this influenced your writing?**

**MZ:** Detroit is an enormous part of who I am as a person and a writer. I grew up in the city, got both my degrees at Wayne State University in Detroit, met my wife here, lived my life here, so it's deeply ingrained in me. It's home. I love it here and don't want to live anywhere else. There's a determination and spirit that Detroiters possess that you won't find anywhere else. There's something about being from a place like this that inspires creativity. Part of that is because of Detroit's many troubles, from being a place that felt abandoned and broken, that the rest of the country mocked and derided. You worry less about "making it" here. You just want to make *something*.

**HM: Detroit has a tumultuous history over the last century or so, from the automobile boom to the Civil Rights movement to the economic collapse. How would you say this history has influenced Detroit's sense of identity – particularly in the arts? Why is it important for Detroit artists to tell stories of the city from their own perspectives?**

**MZ:** Being from a place like Detroit affects you because the city has been on a fairly downward spiral for the past 50+ years or so. And in the last 20 or so, we've pretty much been a joke to the rest of America. Not long ago, if you told someone that you were from Detroit, you'd either get a look of pity or they'd expect you to pull a gun on them. Pathos or badass, that's all we'd get. We were perceived to be a desolate, abandoned place, a broken city. And in many ways, we were. How can that not affect what you create?

That said, I think there's definitely a Detroit aesthetic. I see it in the writing, the music, the art, everywhere. Living around here, you gain an appreciation for the imperfect, the forgotten, the broken, the abandoned, and it imbues your work. Artists from around here often find beauty in things that others may not find beautiful.

Detroit is very much a character in *Beautiful Music* since it is set in the years following all its violence and social unrest of the '67 Rebellion. I have memories of that time. I was a child, so it was scary, though I'm not entirely sure I completely understood what was going on at the time. I don't think my mother and father were letting me watch much of the coverage on TV. But I do remember seeing towers of smoke rising into the sky from all the fires. The air in my neighborhood was hazy and there were the cinders falling from the sky. There were constant sirens from police cars racing down Fenkell Road, not to mention the rumble of tanks or other military vehicles. We were lucky not to be in the middle of it, but still, it was chilling.

At a certain point, it was inevitable that all the racial tensions would be a big part of the book. That's when it started to feel like it was coming together. The '67 Rebellion casts a long shadow over this book. There is lingering evidence of the damage and after-effects on the city and the characters throughout.

**HM: Your new novel *Beautiful Music* takes place in the Detroit in the early '70s. What was your thinking in writing in this setting? What attracted you about writing on the '70s?**

**MZ:** One reason is that it was the 70's when I came of age and I think in some ways, I wanted to do some detective work on my own past. Writing a coming-of-age story is certainly an excuse to look at one's early life as a way to figure out how you arrived at your version of adulthood. When I started making notes for the book, as I was writing out all this high school stuff, I kept thinking: "What am I doing? Am I writing a YA book?" I have nothing against YA, but it was nothing I ever set out to do as a writer. Still, I decided not to worry about any of that and just to see where it would take me. I see now that I was kind of uncoiling my own past.

Also I wanted to write something about music. It's not a very literary thing to say, but I kind of wanted to write my own version of the Cameron Crowe film *Almost Famous*. I really love that film. I certainly didn't want to copy it, but I knew there was a story of my own in that era that I wanted to find. I just kept thinking about rock

music: all the joy it gave me in my teenage years and how it helped create my identity. I wanted to think about the music that my later adult self was sort of embarrassed for liking – Foghat, Blue Oyster Cult, Black Sabbath.

**HM:** How did you approach writing a story that takes place in this period? What kind of research was involved in crafting an authentic recreation of the era?

**MZ:** I started by just writing things down, anything I could remember. There's usually a reason why you remember something from decades ago. It made an impression on you in some way.

I'm also a bit of a pack rat, so I was able to look through a lot of the actual magazines and books I was reading at the time. I also did research, but it was kind of arcane research: I listened to the music I liked at the time, looked through yearbooks from that era, listened to voice checks of the disc jockeys of the time, scanned through 1970s Detroit newspapers on microfiche to find small, but exact things that were going on during the time frame of the book. I went to the main branch of Detroit Public Library and checked the 1970's city directories of the area where I grew up in northwest Detroit. (It's also Danny's neighborhood). That sort of thing. During research, I certainly write many things down, but I also just try to absorb details. Not too difficult because all of this was very interesting to me. As I said before, it was like doing detective work on my own past.

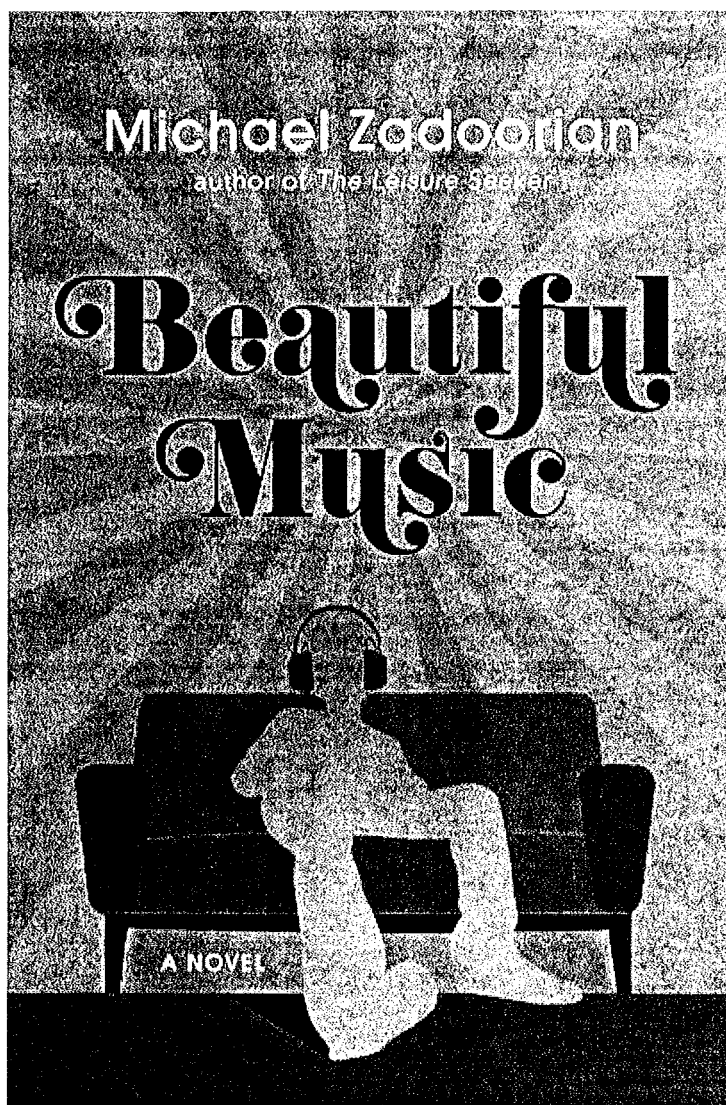
In any case, details are important to me. I like to put in a lot of them, but I want them to feel natural and not obvious or crammed in. Still, details are one of my very favorite parts of writing a novel. I get to choose a world, and then I get to furnish it.

**HM:** Music plays a large role in the story, as it becomes a means by which protagonist Danny copes with the difficult world around him. What does this say about the importance of music – or art overall – in giving one a sense of fulfillment?

**MZ:** The book is absolutely a paean to music and its transformative power. Music pretty much changes everything about Danny in the course of the book. After Danny discovers rock, it becomes so important to him that he filters his entire world through it.

In the book, he talks about something he calls "The Fade," which he experiences while listening to a song he loves, over and over again. After each listen, as the song fades out, he notices his joy slowly start to wane. He knows that he will never hear the song again with the same pleasure that he had listening to it for the first time. Eventually, "The Fade" becomes a kind of metaphor for his sadness. When something goes wrong, when he's scared, when the world beats him up or bullies him, he feels "The Fade" crashing down on him. So music becomes a way for him to interpret his own pain.

While music is certainly his safe place, it also becomes a source of power for him. Music makes him believe in himself. It helps him take his first shaky steps toward being his own man, regardless of the obstacles in his path, be they absent father, unstable mother, bully or bigot.



That's what I wanted to write about in this book: music as refuge in a hostile world. That special, secret hiding place inside the LP or 8 track or mixtape or CD or iPod or wherever, that place where you can seek refuge when nothing else seems to make sense. For Danny, it's rock and roll. But it's the same way for every generation of young person, whether they're listening to doo-wop, acid rock, gangsta rap, death-metal or EDM. The melody changes, but the song remains the same.

**MG: As a music lover, to what extent does music influence your writing process? Do you listen to music while you write, or is it more of an indirect influence on your process? Which musical artists would you say have been the most influential on your work and why?**

**MZ:** I am a music lover. It's always been a big part of my life. Like with the character of Danny, music for me was transformative. It changed me enormously and helped me to figure out who I was and how I felt about things. It changed me intellectually. (Which is kind of the opposite of what rock and roll is supposed to do.) Through music magazines, I discovered writers that I still love to this day – Hunter S. Thompson, Charles Bukowski, Jack Kerouac, Kurt Vonnegut, Lester Bangs, and a lot of others.

I can't really listen to music while I write, but as I was writing *Beautiful Music*, I found myself often going over to my turntable to put on an old record just to remember what that felt like. I thought a lot about vinyl when I was writing the book. The whole ritual of it – of going to a store (Korvettes, in Danny's case), looking at albums, choosing one, then buying it and taking it home. All the while, your anticipation is building. Everything you do is working toward that moment when you sit down with a turntable in front of you. That moment when you slit the cellophane on the LP, carefully pull the disc out to place it on the player, then lower the tone arm on to the vinyl.

There's a moment where Danny, as he listens to an album over his earphones, is just staring at the center label of the record as it is spinning around and around, almost putting him in a trance. That's another part of the ritual, completely immersing oneself in the music. It's hard to do nowadays. We tend to multi-task as we listen to our music now.

Rock and Roll certainly influenced me, perhaps not so much in the way I write, but in the spirit of what and how I write. It probably taught me about letting go, and letting what you're working on take you away, and perhaps to not think so much. If something feels right, it's probably right. I think rock music is more about instinct than intellect.

I think the musical artists that influenced me most as a writer are probably jazz musicians. Not that there's some sort of jazziness to my style of writing. I write in a fairly clear, straightforward way, but I had to arrive there through years of work. I do strive for a kind of intentionally canted quality to my work, like you might feel when you listen to Thelonious Monk. If I could write the way Monk plays, I would be happy. For me, it's that detail or moment in a story that makes everything unsettled, slightly crooked. The note that feels wrong, but is actually right.

**HM: Why is it important for writers to take influence from other mediums, such as music or film? Are there particular insights to writing that you feel you've gained by taking in alternative mediums?**

**MZ:** I think it's important to look to other mediums. I learn about writing from music and films, but other places as well. The way a good comedian crafts a joke is extremely interesting to me. I'll listen to comedy podcasts and hear the way comedians talk about writing comedy and how just altering a word or two can change everything about how a joke goes over. The power of silence, the well-placed glance, the tag at the end. Sometimes it's about knowing when to stop and when to let the audience fill in what happens next.

**HM: Your last novel, *The Leisure Seeker*, was recently made into a film. What was that like, both the process of how the book became a film and the experience of seeing your work play out on the big screen?**

**MZ:** The best word I can come up with for the experience is surreal. It was something I never expected to have happen. I was amazed when it became a book, so for it to end up as a film, was simply beyond the ken. It's

always been so difficult to just get a book published, so to even expect anything like that to happen was just plain surreal.

As for the film itself, I don't think it's surprising when an author wishes that some things hadn't been changed or added. For instance, in the film, the characters of John and Ella are from the Boston area. I really wish they had remained from Detroit because the Midwest is terribly underrepresented in films. In American films, it seems like most characters are either from New York/Boston or Los Angeles, instead of the so-called "flyover" states.

And when I first read the script, I seriously wondered why there was political content in the film. I think they took a story that could have felt timeless and universal and made it strangely specific by placing it in the middle of the most contentious election in American history. It seemed completely unnecessary. The critics agreed.

That said, the film looked beautiful and I enjoyed the tone of it. Many critics felt that the film couldn't make up its mind whether it wanted to be a comedy or a drama, but what was interesting was that no one ever said that about the book. People liked that the book had humor in it. Of course, the performances from Helen Mirren and Donald Sutherland were wonderful. Best of all, since it was an Italian production, I don't think that it ever occurred to the director or the writers or producers to change the ending, which some people found controversial or at least quietly shocking. If an American studio had made a film of *The Leisure Seeker*, that probably would have been the first thing they discussed: *what to do about the ending?*

All in all, it was thrilling to see it on screen and best of all, there were twenty new translations of the book, so my work was exposed to many new readers all over the world. Hard to beat that.

**HM: What's next for you?**

**MZ:** I just sent my new novel to my agent for him to read. So it's that nervous period of waiting to see what he thinks. There were nine years between my first and second novel, then another nine years between my second and third, so I'm trying very hard not to let that happen again. We'll see.

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**Michael Zadoorian** is the author of three novels, *Beautiful Music* (Akashic Books), *The Leisure Seeker* (William Morrow) and *Second Hand* (W.W. Norton), and a story collection, *The Lost Tiki Palaces of Detroit* (Wayne State University Press). A motion picture of *The Leisure Seeker* starring Helen Mirren and Donald Sutherland was released in 2018.

Zadoorian is a recipient of a Kresge Artist Fellowship in the Literary Arts, the Columbia University Anahid Literary Award, the Michigan Notable Book award, and the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award. His work has appeared in *The Literary Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *American Short Fiction*, *Witness*, *Great Lakes Review*, *North American Review* and the anthologies *Bob Seger's House*, *On The Clock*, and *Detroit Noir*. He has worked as a copywriter, journalist, voice over talent, shipping room clerk, and a plant guard for Chrysler. A lifetime resident of the Detroit area, he lives with his wife in a 1937 bungalow filled with cats and objects that used to be in the houses of other people.

A bildungsroman about a young man's love for music is no special thing, but a bildungsroman about a young man's love of music developed as a coping mechanism after a devastating family tragedy set against the backdrop of a racially charged tinderbox like Detroit just after the 1967 riots, all while navigating a certain existential crisis, is quite another thing altogether.

Michael Zadoorian's latest effort, *Beautiful Music* (Akashic Books, 2018), also makes another truth plain: the Motor City was alive — *is* alive — and so much of our country's history, both virtuous and evil, can be traced into the heart of Motown. Oh, and that song you may be listening to right now while you read this review? There's a good chance you can thank Detroit for that, too.

*Beautiful Music* is not only a testament to the rockin' jams that propelled Motown to become reknown as Detroit Rock City, it swells with the beautiful music of a lively soul. Danny Yzemeski, the protagonist, is a lowly teenager the reader follows from his early teens through driving age (a truly monumental time for any Detroiter — motor oil is the city's lifeblood). After a family tragedy forever alters Danny and his home life, Zadoorian offers an intimate look at the trials of a youngster evolving into a man in the shadow of Detroit's skyscrapers — and the even larger shadow cast by his parents. Through it all, there's plenty of heart and humor, as well turmoil, as the Motor City reels in the years following the 1967 rebellion.

The struggle for equality has long been front and center in the





story of the Motor City. Zadoorian flips this narrative thread to the B-side, allowing it to play in the background until he's ready to turn up the volume at just the right moment. Through the eyes of young Danny, the reader gets a firsthand account of what it's like to live in a rapidly changing metropolis during a time of great civil unrest. Zadoorian crafts a narrative in which the city's racial tensions play an increasingly prominent role within the novel, all while not sidelining the engrossing personal story of loss, determination, and familial bonds.

Within the narrative thread of Danny's existential crisis, Zadoorian truly excels. Danny is the epitome of a thoughtful young man struggling to understand his place in the universe after tragedy. In one well-crafted scene, the reader experiences a true sense of Danny's visceral dread while he lies in bed ruminating over a recent nightmare, contemplating the future:

I wonder if they wouldn't be better off telling you that your bad dream wasn't really *just a dream*, but your own creeping awareness that you, six-year-old kid, are going to die. Maybe sooner, hopefully later, but still, you're going to die. And by the way, you're not going to wake up from that particular bad dream. Which makes me wonder, *What if parents did tell the truth?* I imagine my father saying: *Hey, buddy, it's okay. You just had a dream about death. I know it's scary, but you're just starting to understand it. It's coming in little waves of recognition, the whisper of an idea that you can't quite hear yet, but try not worry too much about it. It's the most natural thing in the world. In fact, someday I'm going to die on you. Not that long from now, as a matter of fact. How about that?*

In many passages I found myself connecting with Danny, and in that sense, I heard the music of my own soul blaring over my brain's loudspeakers. Danny's concerns are mature in nature, and though they must be due to the sudden loss of his father and his mother's alcoholism, it's rewarding to journey along with this once-nerdy boy who



Michael Zadoorian

fiddles with model cars and toy airplane kits, to watch him thrown forcefully into the land of adults — and into his own hard-pressed future.

The importance of music — specifically, rock and roll — cannot be overstated when considering this novel. From Iggy & the Stooges to the MC5, *Beautiful Music* is a veritable crash course in Detroit's lasting legacy on the music scene; the clanging guitars and screaming singers changed the wiring of an entire generation.

Some books deserve to have a soundtrack album packaged right inside the cover, and that would have been ideal here, because Zadoorian knows rock and roll like few other writers I've read. Have YouTube or Spotify on standby for whenever you come across a song within the text, because trust me: you're going to want to hear it.

In another brilliant passage, Zadoorian expertly weaves two of his novel's most critical themes: the role music plays in a person's sense of well-being and happiness, and the anguish that can develop in its absence — a sensation aptly labeled throughout the narrative as "The Fade":

The song fades out, then suddenly there's static. Gone. This disturbs me in some deep, awful way, a kind of fear that I want to explain to my dad, but just can't. How can I tell him that hearing a radio station go off the air, hearing the music fade away like that, terrifies me somehow, drains me of all the good sounds and vibration from the drags? It's crazy. Maybe it's because music always makes me feel better. So the station going off the air, the static, the quiet — that's the opposite of sounds and vibration and feeling better. It's fear and emptiness.

*Beautiful Music* is touching, hilarious, and heartbreaking, much like the gamut of emotions you may have felt the first time you heard your favorite song. And much like that first, mind-opening musical experience, you'll return to certain passages within this novel because like the perfect song, it hits all the right notes — something you can feel deep in your gut. If there's ever a time in your life when you feel "The Fade" coming on, rest assured that returning to Zadoorian's novel will drive those blues away.

- p. 21 - "Beautiful Music" - Canadian station, instrumental version of pop songs
- p. 32 - Music has power. Danny learns watching his mom succumb to Carpenters vinyl
- p. 38 - Mom always has Music on. Needs things noisy to drown out the other voices
- p. 42 - Danny has Anxiety about starting high school (1973)
- p. 55 - Danny's father lets him reason with him (regarding getting a driver's licence)
- p. 61 - Dad says that Danny will need to help out with Mom (D. Licence), hints at some mental illness
- p. 64 - "Your mother's always been a little, uh, melancholy, Daniel"
- p. 71 - Mom is a racist. Does not want a black mayor. Has issues with the way the neighborhood is changing with more black families moving in. Assumes the 10 year old boy, Darell, on the bike (later in the book) is casing the house to steal things from the garage.
- p. 80 - Danny asks dad what he likes about Music. "I guess it makes me feel something that I'm not used to...It takes me somewhere, changes something...It just makes me happy". They have deeper more meaningful conversations.
- p. 93-94 - After his father's passing, "Grief turns you into someone entirely new."
- p. 180 - reflecting on racism of his parents and when he was in Boy Scout camp. "Can you fear the idea of certain people, but not the people themselves, up close?"

Danny Yzemeski

Eleanor

Harold

John Tedesco

Ms. Floyd - radio station and speech class

Coach Tillman - swim

Mr. B radio

Mrs. Corbin - counselor (write to your father)

Tim Riggle - bully

Stan, Mitch & Dale - Haus Shoppe boss and co-workers

Korvettes