Discussion questions Grand River & Joy by Susan Messer

1. Intros and what are your memories/stories of the Detroit riot/rebellion of 1967?

2. All the chapters have one word titles except Riot/Rebellion - why do you think the author did that?

3. The chapter "Boiler" is where Curtis and Harry discuss race relations and racial epithets. Harry is trying to do/say the "right" thing but he is having difficulty with the changes occurring around him. Discuss this chapter and the feelings it brings up. How have things changed, improved (or not) since the 60's? How do racial attitudes develop?

4. Harry and Curtis also discuss their differing approaches to child-rearing...

5. Let's discuss Harry's wife Ruth and her place in society at the time vs. what she aims to accomplish.

6. Let's discuss the "Exodus" and the Jews move to the suburbs as African-Americans move into Detroit.

7. Harry is pulled into an Orthodox Jewish religious ceremony and has various thoughts while it is proceeding. He also has an epiphany which affect his future.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 5, 2009

Riot/Rebellion/?

In my novel, every chapter has a one-word title except for one, and that chapter is called Riot/Rebellion. The reason? One theme of my book is that perspective determines everything. So, some might see the events that occurred in July 1967 in Detroit as random chaos and thuggery, while others might see those events as having more political content and intentionality. And, of course, many variations lie between those two possible views. I didn't want to be the one to decide what it should be called, though in promotional material and even in my own descriptions of the book, I use the word *riot* as a kind of shorthand that I know people understand. I have talked about this in an earlier post.

What I want to add here is that I mentioned this question/dilemma in an interesting and vibrant online forum called Detroit Yes. There, one person responded that when you're lying on the floor, hiding behind a dresser, watching bullets fly through your windows, it certainly feels like a riot, and something that people want to forget and put behind them. This, I certainly respect. Another person on the forum called the July '67 events an uprising. What I hadn't expected was what someone told me at a private event for my book--that his Jewish uncle owned a store that was destroyed in the Detroit riot/rebellion, and that this uncle referred to those events not as a riot nor as a rebellion but as a *pogrom*.

Pogrom (according to Wikipedia, that much-maligned and useful source) comes from a Russian word that means "to destroy, to wreak havoc, to demolish violently." In my understanding, the element that most characterizes a pogrom is that it is directed toward a particular group--ethnic, religious, or otherwise. Jews were often the targets of pogroms in Russia, and pogroms were what drove many Jews to run for their lives to America.

That this uncle saw the Detroit events as so intentionally directed toward Jews (I assume this is what he meant by using this word) was startling to me. I've got no conclusions to offer. Just saying . . . perspective is a powerful thing.

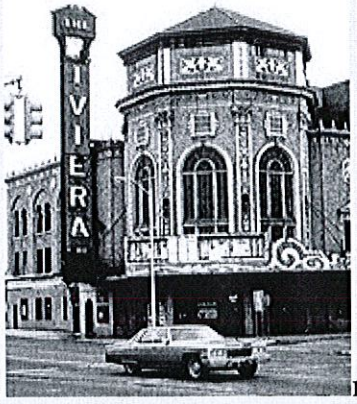
All the way back to Exodus

Susan Messer, *Grand River and Joy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). 230 pp. $24.00.

Once upon a time, Detroit was a great Jewish city. By the Second World War, it was home to eighty-five thousand Jews, who prayed sporadically (if they prayed at all) in twenty-three synagogues, most of them concentrated along the Dexter and Linwood corridor, nearly all of them now converted into black Protestant churches or abandoned to ruin.

The Jews of Detroit migrated steadily north and west, staying just ahead of the advancing African Americans, who poured into the city from the rural South starting in 1914, when Henry Ford announced that he would pay five dollars a day to anyone, including African Americans, who would work on the new assembly line at River Rouge. By 1950 the Jews had settled into Oak Park, but within the decade they were on the move again, opening up the suburbs of Southfield and then Farmington. "These aren't new issues for Jews, about trying to read the signs, and knowing when to leave, what you may lose by staying behind," remarks a character in Susan Messer's novel *Grand River and Joy*. "All the way back to Exodus."

The 61-year-old Messer's intelligent first novel, published not quite a year ago by the University of Michigan Press, is a fictional inquiry into "these issues." Harry Levine owns a wholesale shoe store on Grand River Avenue just south of Joy Road ("Joy Road—now there

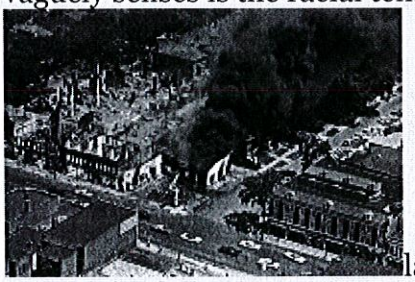


was a misnomer"). The rundown neighborhood is represented by the "magnificent, decaying Riviera Theater" across the street and down a few blocks, whose "festering" sign leads Harry's sister Ilo to call it "the Iviera."

When Harry and Ilo arrive at work on Halloween morning in 1966—one of the best things about her novel is that Messer is exacting and definite about dates and addresses, wanting

to locate her narrative at a fixed and particular time and place—they find a message soaped on the store's front window: *Honky Jew boy*. When Harry goes to the basement for a bucket and brush to clean the window, he discovers that a back room has been "made into something, someone's notion of a clubhouse, or a living room." A circle of chairs, including a "fifties-style armchair with no legs" and a "dingy plaid couch with worn arms that had an old brocade curtain thrown over it," surrounds ashtrays overflowing with marijuana cigarettes, "whole ones and parts," a record player stacked with Motown albums, and a pile of Black Panther literature ("*It was for example the exploitation of Jewish landlords and merchants which first created black resentment toward Jews*").

Harry immediately realizes that the clubhouse or living room was set up by the teenaged son of the black man who is his upstairs tenant and occasional day laborer. What he only vaguely senses is the racial tension that would explode into violent rioting nine months



later. *Grand River and Joy* covers those nine months, subtly graphing the pressures as they rise to the boiling point.

Messer's strategy is to study the relationship between Harry and Curtis, his tenant and sometime employee (Curtis's angry and militant son Alvin, who will play a central role in the riot scenes to come, remains sullenly in the background until then). But Messer also follows Harry's wife Ruth through her interactions with Jewish neighbors who are considering whether to move out of the city, family who have already moved out of the city, and fellow members of the Detroit Council of Jewish Women, who discuss the politics and morality, over coffee cake, of moving out of the city.

Harry's conversations with Curtis are a little stilted, as might be expected from such an ancient genre (fiction in the form of philosophical dialogues). Curtis explains the plight of the black artist, for example:

> Look at those young people writing the Motown songs. They're writing beautiful stories, set to music. . . . Of course, the Motown stars are not the only talent around. I tell that to my son. They wouldn't sound like much without the Funk

> Brothers playing behind them. Do they get any credit for what they do? No. But they keep playing their music anyway. Great music. Great musicians. Playing over on Twelfth—at the Chit Chat, Eagle Show Bar, Collingwood. If you've got the talent and the need, you keep on, no matter who pushes you down.

Harry's reply? "You're what my anthropologist daughter would call an informant." He offers Curtis a drink and a *l'hayim*. "We're informing each other," he says, "seeing what the other has to teach."

More informative, though, are Ruth's scenes. Easily annoyed (slow speech, slow movements, saying the obvious thing), Ruth is a special type of Jewish woman who has rarely appeared, even in the pages of American Jewish fiction—the highly intelligent but undereducated housewife who lives for books and ideas, who relishes *insight*, and who has no ready access to them. The third of seven children born to a kosher chicken-slaughterer, she is the perpetually frustrated outsider, even in her own family. Messer describes her with astonishing penetration.

Nevertheless, Ruth's husband Harry is the center of the novel. And the very fact that he is in the wholesale shoe business—he is neither a writer nor the graduate of a writers' workshop—sets *Grand River and Joy* apart from most other first novels. Messer is very good at capturing the feel of such a business. Like Philip Roth, she obviously believes that most of what a man is is what a man does all day during working hours.

And yet the most powerful scene in this plainly written, briskly paced novel occurs in a little boxy *shul* that Harry stumbles upon while he navigates the back streets of Detroit, trying to avoid rioters and National Guard troops to reach his store. The *shammes* flags him down. "Just in time," he says, handing Harry a yarmulke. "They need one more for the minyan." While the old men in the *shul* chant the traditional morning prayers, Harry plunges into memory, reliving the first time that he and Ruth had ever slept together. He snaps to with a flush of shame, but then:

> Deep within the privacy of his tallis tent, he saw that the horror that had seized the city could release him. It could open his life, push him out, tell him go, be, do.

Grand River and Joy is neither a great novel nor even a compact admirable well-made novel, but it is something worth honoring, because it is unlike so much contemporary American fiction. (That may explain why it was published by a university press rather than a commercial New York house.) Messer's novel tells how real places and real events, recognized with shocking minuteness, are what release men and women into their real lives

I. Q&A with Susan Messer, author of Grand River and Joy

Grand River and Joy, named after a landmark intersection in Detroit, follows Harry Levine through the intersections of his life and the history of his city. It's a work of fiction set in a world that is anything but fictional, a novel about the intersections between races, classes and religions exploding in the long, hot summers of Detroit in the 1960s. *Grand River and Joy* is a powerful and moving exploration of one of the most difficult chapters of Michigan history.

Susan Messer's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in numerous publications. She received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in prose, an Illinois Arts Council literary award for creative nonfiction, and a prize in the Jewish Cultural Writing Competition of the Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture. Her story "Remnants, Like Dust in Pocket Seams," which is the basis for her novel, won *Moment* magazine's 2005 short fiction competition.

Listen to the podcast

University of Michigan Press: Your book is about a Jewish shopkeeper in a downscale Detroit neighborhood near the time of the 1967 riots. What made you decide to set your novel there and then?

Susan Messer: Oh, my. This is perhaps one of the most complicated questions there is about a piece of writing because time and place in a sense determine everything---at least that's how I see it. But it's a good question, so I will launch in. First, I'll say that I am Jewish, and I did grow up in Detroit during this dramatic era, with a father who was a small-business owner, and these experiences left their marks on my family and me. Second, I'll say that the relationship of Jews and blacks in cities over the decades is a complex and fascinating one---as is the role of the Jewish shop owner and landlord in primarily black neighborhoods. So this was something I wanted to write about, and this was a ripe setting in which to feature it. Third, my choice of time and place has to do with where I live now---a place that has an important similarity to the neighborhood where I grew up in Detroit: a wide socioeconomic range---from the very wealthy to the struggling---all mingled together in a fairly small geographic area. When my daughter started going to the high school here, I realized how much her high school was like the one I'd gone to, with that wide range, and I wondered why, as an adult, I had ended up living in a place that replicates those features and tensions of my growing-up years. Perhaps the thing that really finally compelled me was this question: "what keeps the lid on sometimes but not others?" With so much inequity, such vast differences, why aren't people tearing up the streets all the time?

I also want to say something about that word riot. The point is that what one calls the kind of disorder that erupted in Detroit---and in many other places---depends on one's perspective. In my book, the chapter that describes those events of July 1967 is called "Riot/Rebellion." We used the word riot as a shorthand in promotional material, and I also used it in the book, and I use it when I talk to people about the book (it's a convenient, readily understood label), but I want to point out the complications attached to the word.

UMP: Why do you think that particular moment was such a powerful point in time for the city?

SM: Ah. As it says on the trash-container on my book's cover: "Beautiful Detroit." Detroit once was a mighty force. FDR called it the "arsenal of Democracy" during World War II because all the car factories had been converted to weapons plants, and the city was so central to the war effort. After that, most people knew Detroit as the "automobile capital of the world," a label it bore for decades. My story takes place just as the precipitous drop began. Many forces contributed to the erosion and the explosion---the development of the highways that broke up neighborhoods and gave people the means to cut through the city at record speeds; the development of the suburbs; the cabal of realtors, bankers, home developers, mortgage brokers, and so on that drove white fear and white flight; the shift in the 50s from the nonviolent civil rights movement to the more-impatient black power movement; our country's shift from a manufacturing to a service economy. But I'm not a scholar or a historian. I'm more interested in emotional truth than making an argument about causes and effects.

UMP: What research did you do about the period and other details readers will find in the book?

SM: I have plenty of stories to tell about my research, but the one I'll tell you today is about steam boilers---you know, those big metal things in basements that heat buildings. Harry Levine is my main character, and a lot of important things happen in the basement of his business, but one of them happens when his boiler breaks down in the middle of a Detroit February night.

I realized somewhere along my way in writing the novel that a boiler could carry significant metaphorical weight---a device in which pressure builds up and where electricity combines with water, and gas combines with flame. All these explosive possibilities, somehow contained and converted into a gentle warming of the places we inhabit. So I liked the aura of contained danger, but to write about a boiler, I needed to know how a boiler worked and what could go wrong with one. I started by asking my local plumber about old boilers, and he was the one who told me about the pressure-relief valve (also sometimes called pressure-release valve) and that they sometimes get clogged. Wow. Perfect.

But I still needed more information, so I turned to the internet, and there I found a website called heatinghelp.com. The proprietor has a feature called The Wall, where boiler guys go to ask and answer questions. I looked around there, and then I posted a question with the title "novelist needs realistic details about steam boilers." I set out the gist of the story and what I wanted to know---what kinds of things could go wrong, and what it would smell like, sound like, look like, feel like if they did. These guys came through for me big time. For three or four days, I was laughing my head off at their wild, catastrophic fantasies and tearing my hair out as I tried to grasp the technical details. You can see the result in the chapter called "Boiler." I'm telling you. It takes a village.

One more thing about the boiler guys: lest you are tempted toward any stereotypes about them (I know I was initially; please forgive me), many are big readers, and literary ones at that. Dan Holohan, who hosts heatinghelp.com posts a reading list on his website---and there you'll find Tolstoy, Faulkner, Dreiser, Saramago.

UMP: Talk about your protagonist, Harry. What does he want most in life? What is holding him back?

SM: Harry. Interesting that you would ask about what he wants because he's a man who is afraid to want anything. And that's a sad thing about him. The sadness, and cautiousness, I think, kind of hover around him, though he basically has a pretty good life. It's a little hard for me to talk about him, to get perspective on him, and really, I want readers to feel free to have their own reactions to him. But, anyway, here I go.

Like many men of his generation, he came to believe that his life was about duty and about being a provider for his family. Perhaps he is more obedient and risk-averse than others. He does have a few glimmering moments though---points in his life when he feels he might throw off the yoke and be or do something remarkable, points when he thinks he might have the aptitude for something more than being a shoe man. I think these occasional glimmers are what make him both drawn to and afraid of the Black Panther list of wants and needs, which he finds in his basement. Those strong statements, set out so boldly in a numbered list---it stirs something in him.

What holds him back? We could say that it's his father, who somewhat intimidates him into joining the business. Or his role as provider to his wife and children. But I also think he has a sense that a great deal depends on him carrying on as he always has. Maybe he even has some kind of magical-thinking idea that if he keeps doing what he's doing, everything else will keep working as it should as well. He understands that life as he knows it is teetering on some edge, but maybe he can keep it in balance if he just keeps on keeping on, if he sets the model of being the one completely reliable, predictable human on the planet. Seen from this angle, he might have an enormous sense of self-importance.

UMP: Your book begins on Halloween. Why is that?

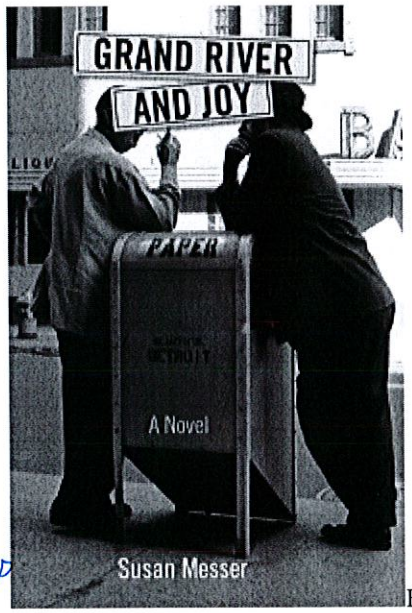
SM: First, I think of Halloween as a time when children can be anything they want, and Harry, as I've said, has a particular problem knowing what he wants. Related to this, Halloween is also about choosing an identity, and mine is a novel about identities--the multiple identities each of us carries, how they shift in importance depending on circumstances and settings, on who is seeing or describing us. Harry is a man, a Jew, a father, a husband, a business owner, a landlord, a Detroiter, a white man, but all these identities are questioned or rattled in the course of the novel. Another aspect of Halloween, from an anthropological perspective, is that it is a night when norms and rules are suspended: Children are free to roam the streets after dark; to go to strangers' doors and make demands---calling trick or treat---a nasty bargain. We also used to say "help the poor," so in a sense we were pretend-begging, and this made me think of the class differences that permeate my novel. Of course, the whole novel is moving toward a point when norms and rules are suspended. The final reason (at least that I can think of) is that Halloween has taken on a special meaning in Detroit, because of the night before Halloween, which we always referred to as devil's night. When I was young, devil's night meant going out to be mischievous---ringing doorbells or soaping windows. However, in the 70s and 80s, devil's night turned ugly. It became a night of arson, practically beyond control. So in a sense, my book

begins during a time of innocence, with all that in the future, yet the people living it have no sense of how innocent it is.

UMP: What effect are you hoping to evoke with your novel? In an ideal world, what would you want people to say after reading it?

SM: Dan Holohan, the proprietor of Heatinghelp.com, told me that when he finished reading my book, he sat with it hugged to his chest. That's about as ideal a world as I can imagine.

I. Messer Comes Home With 'Grand River and Joy'



Having grown up in Detroit, it's no wonder Susan Messer was drawn back to her roots for the setting of *Grand River and Joy*; she clearly knows her old stomping grounds well. From streetlights to schools to museums and waterfront views, Ms. Messer takes us back to a Detroit simmering with indignation and urban unrest. Packed with social and political detail, it is impressive she was able to flesh it all out in just over two hundred pages.

Riding shotgun as shop owner Harry Levine attempts to navigate the racial turmoil of Detroit, we peer out the passenger side and straight into the boiling pot that ultimately spills over into the race riot of 1967. Through the characters of Harry, his wife Ruth, and the tenants residing above his store, we bear witness to the Jewish/Black relationship and their respective points of view as they move around each other at this juncture in history.

Through sharp dialogue, Susan Messer tackles the origins of the impending riot while revealing her characters' varied angles of perspective. By fitting the jagged pieces of economic inequality, housing discrimination, black militancy, police brutality, and white flight into the larger puzzle of Detroit's race relations, Messer brings her readers closer to the frontline of understanding.

Brimming with Detroit's colorful history, *Grand River and Joy* holds plenty of "I did not know that" points of interest. Not only does Messer lift by touching on the finer arts and culture of both Judaism and the city, but also doesn't fear taking us into darker territory with her chapter "Boiler", which educates on the angrier art of the racial epithet.

Despite the heavy nature of the novel, it achieves in its examination of conscience. Providing each character with a distinct point of view facilitates Messer's goal of "getting to emotional truth." Raw and insightful, *Grand River and Joy* is a literary journey of understanding as it covers this seminal time in Detroit's history.

*Freelance writer Megan Shaffer hosts the blog Night Light Revue and reviews for the online publication BookBrowse.

GRAND RIVER AND JOY

BY SUSAN MESSER

1960S DETROIT IS THE SETTING OF THIS INTRIGUING NOVEL ON RACE AND REAL ESTATE

REVIEW BY ANDREW KIM

Grand River and Joy is an interesting look at a slice of Detroit life around the time of the 1967 riots, when a chunk of the city was destroyed in a matter of days, bringing to a head what was already in the process of decay. While it is billed as a story of race and race relations, the book's real focus is the living and moving patterns of people. But as author Susan Messer illustrates, those living and moving patterns usually were based on race.

Messer's tale is told through Harry Levine, a middle-aged father of three who's spent his entire life in the Jewish neighborhoods of Detroit's West Side. Like all of his friends and family, Harry has moved multiple times, always in the direction of the suburbs, and always for the same reason: worries that the current neighborhood will fall into disrepair due to changing demographics, and not wanting to be there when it happens.

Harry owns a building and a business in an urban jungle of Detroit's near west side. Meanwhile he lives a few miles away in an all white neighborhood near the city limits. The big issue for all of Harry's people is moving. Conversation centers on the standard questions, such as, When would the neighborhood change? When would they move in? Where will we move to?

Messer does a great job using the character of Harry to show the middle and confused ground that many white people stand on as they view race relations. Harry constantly finds himself defending whatever group he is not talking to at the time. When Harry's friends and family insult minorities, he puts them in their place. But at the same time, Harry cannot understand, let alone agree with the militancy and anger coming from the black community.

Messer's characters are realistic, and their dialogue is just as real. There is Curtis, Harry's black tenant who lives above the business with his teenage son Alvin. Harry and Curtis genuinely like and respect each other, but Messer shows the unbridgeable gap between them.

Harry and Curtis try to discuss the situation but there simply is no common ground. Discussing the riots in Watts, Curtis compares it to the revolt against England. And Harry simply cannot equate the two. When Curtis explains to Harry that his people do not call the police if there is a problem, because in his world the police are viewed as oppressors, Harry replies, 'Can't celebrate the uprising in Watts and expect the police to love you.'

But as mentioned earlier, the novel says as much about our living patterns as it does about race. In pretty much all the big cities, the decades since 1900 all saw the same basic thing: Waves of European immigrants slowly moving farther from the city's core, assimilating as they did.

We see Harry is happy in his west side Detroit neighborhood, and is tired of moving. He definitely does not want to move to the new subdivisions being built in the suburbs where his family and friends are going. And there is his wife Ruth, who through her involvement with her synagogue and women's group tries to convince her friends not to flee the city.

Unfortunately for the both of them it is a losing battle. The climax of the book is the 1967 riots, and in its aftermath Harry liquidates the business and moves his family out of the city.

The book's strength is the dialogue, no doubt most of which Messer heard with her own ears. We see Harry get into an argument with his brother who is a home builder, and who is making big money constructing houses in the suburbs. The brother abuses Harry for not moving his family to the suburbs, asking him why he'd want to live with the schwartzes. When Harry points out that every family in his neighborhood is white, the brother simply dismisses him and calls him a fool. Harry sees his brother as a leech, profiting from and stoking people's fears so that they will flee the city for one of his newly-built homes.

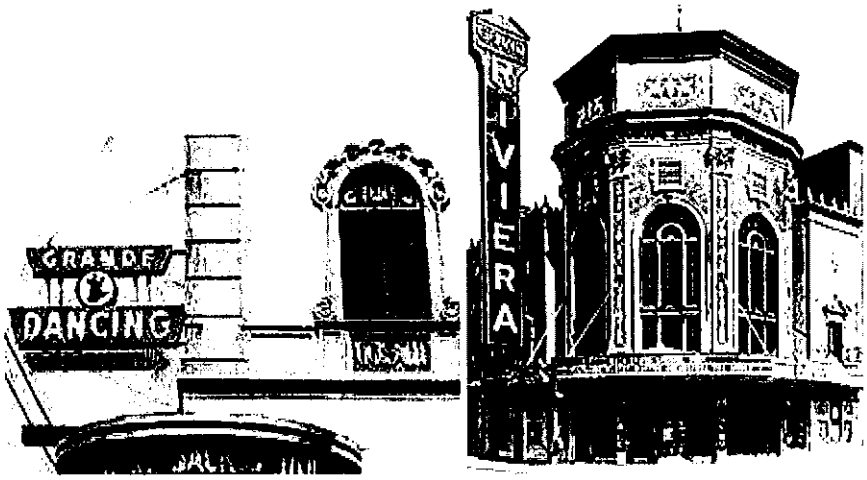
Messer discusses the business practices of the big real estate developers at that time, which fueled the constant migration. Discussed are the different parts of the real estate industory—the mortgage brokers, bankers, insurance salesmen and builders-- and the tactics they've used and continue to use to keep their profits coming. A common practice was to hire black people to drive through all-white neighborhoods, scaring people into putting up their home for sale.

Messer makes the point that the people who complain loudest about the city are the people who don't live there. And how for some reason, those people who are the first to move out always feel the need to belittle their friends for not immediately following in their footsteps.

An interesting, deep look at something many people have lived through possibly without even realizing it.

but they do

published by The University of Michigan Press and is available in book stores now.



http://www.russgibbatrandom.com/archive/2009-07-08/1075/

THE DISCOMFORTS OF DIVERSITY: ETHNIC LABELS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 13, 2010

The Discomforts of Diverse Childrearing Styles

In my novel *Grand River and Joy,* two of the main characters--Harry and Curtis--discuss their differences regarding child rearing. A few readers commented on this (thank you Alesia, Deborah, Caryn), and I was very pleased that they did, as this was a thread that felt important to me. Of course, every novel has so many threads. Even if people notice them, they don't always get around to commenting.

At any rate, in the novel Harry is Jewish, and Curtis is black. (I know the photo above is of a mother and child, so it doesn't quite fit with Harry and Curtis and their parenting styles, but the photo has the feel that I wanted, so I'm going with it.) Harry views Curtis's parenting style as too strict, while Curtis views Harry's as too

I post on this blog every Wednesday morning. Check back each week for new discomforts of diversity

For more about me and my writing, please visit my website: http://www.susanmesser.net/

And to learn more about my novel *Grand River and Joy,* please visit http://www.susanmesser.net/

indulgent. Harry tells Curtis he should encourage his son more, be more loving. Curtis tells Harry that he should teach his daughters a little more civility. In my mind, differences in parenting style flow from socioeconomic and cultural differences, and this is supported by research in the field of child development--something I know because of my other life as an editor of numerous child development books. But it makes sense. Though not a wealthy man, Harry has far more resources than Curtis does, and can afford to be more indulgent. Curtis, the marginally employed father of a teen-aged son, knows there's little room for error, that his son Alvin has the deck stacked significantly against him.

I mention all this because the other night, we had friends over for dinner, and one of them mentioned this aspect of my book. Then she told a story. When her child was in first or second grade, she used to go into his class once a week to help with math stations. She and her son are white, and one day he came over to her to ask if he could do something. She said that they'd talk about it later or that it depended on whether he could finish doing something she had asked him to do. An African-American boy who was sitting nearby overheard, and said, "Why are white parents always negotiating with their kids?" Even at age 6 or 7, he noticed the difference.

When my friend finished telling this story, the rest of us in the room shouted in unison, "Because we're white." We'd each had a couple of drinks, so we were laughing, and "Because we're white" might not be the most precise research-based, clinically accurate answer available, but it seemed to do the job at that point. For those of you who don't know me well, I do want to point out that the laughter was in part laughter of embarrassment.

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 8:03 AM 4 COMMENTS
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: CHILD REARDING, DIFFERENCE, RACE

grandriver&joy.html

My novel came out in paperback; I received my first copy yesterday (1/20/10)

Here's the latest review of my novel (Feb 2010), from Hadassah magazine.

Here's a podcast interview about my novel.

And an interview with WDET-Detroit Public Radio.

Here's a new review of my novel from *Jewish Week*.

Here's a review of my novel from blogger Megan Shaffer at Night Light Revue.

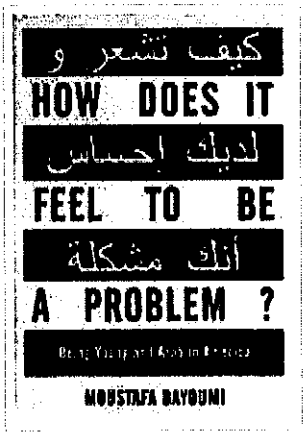
Here's a list of my upcoming and recent book events:

Weds, Sept 30; 8:30.
Book release reading
Sponsored by Guild Complex
Free admission. 21 and over event.
California Clipper, 1002 N. California, Chicago
http://www.guildcomplex.org/?q=taxonomy/term/12

Weds, Oct. 21, 7:00

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 6, 2010

Profiling and filtering and screening



This is the cover of a book by Moustafa Bayoumi. I ran across it this morning when I was thinking that I wanted to write about profiling--a topic much in the news and in our minds these days. The subtitle of the book (in case it's too small for you to read) is "Being Young and Arab in America." Bayoumi has won several awards for this book, and in an interview, he explains that the book's title came from a question posed decades earlier by W.E.B. DuBois. In the book, Bayoumi presents portraits of men living that title question. I admire the whole concept and plan to read the book.

I've been thinking about profiling because of the two recent terrorist events and the government's new thinking about how to try to head off future terrorist attacks. The word *profiling* sounds ominous, with its attempt to boil people down to a few variables--to look at them from the side, so to speak, rather than full in the face. I'd always before thought of profiling as racial or ethnic, which it often is, but now I've learned that it can also involve other aspects of identity: behavioral (acting nervous?), national, religious (of course), and probably lots of other things.

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http://www.schulerbooks.com/

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http://glbtbooks.com/

Sun, Oct 25, 2:00
Book Beat
26010 Greenfield, Oak Park, MI 48237
248-968-1190
http://www.thebookbeat.com/

Fri, Oct. 30, 7:00
Book Stall at Chestnut Court
811 Elm St
Winnetka, IL 60093-2295
(847) 446-8880
http://www.thebookstall.com/

Weds, Nov. 18, 7:30
Reading
Women & Children First Bookstore
5233 N Clark St
Chicago, IL 60640-2122
(773) 769-9299
http://www.womenandchildrenfirst.com/NASApp/store/IndexJsp

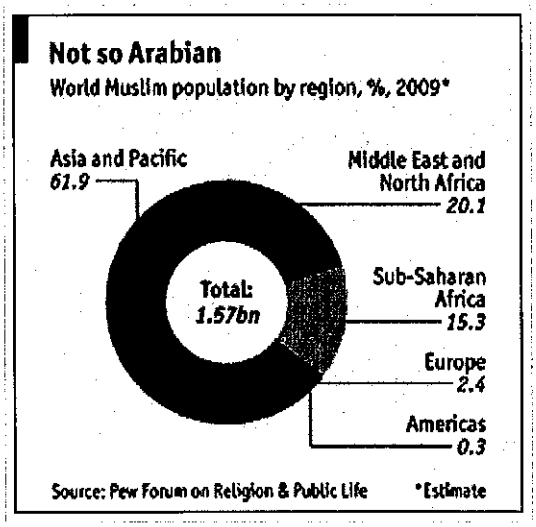
The idea is to narrow the field; this is *filtering,* as we do on certain websites when we're trying to find a restaurant of a particular cuisine in a particular neighborhood in a particular price range. A related concept is *screening,* which they do at the airport, when they x-ray our carry-ons and have us walk through the metal detector and compare our ID with our tickets.

My mother-in-law does not think they're doing a very good job of any of this--profiling, filtering, screening. She thinks the focus should be on the people who go to particular mosques or study with particular religious leaders--as did the man who did the shooting at Fort Hood and the man who tried to blow up the flight to Detroit. I guess this would be behavioral profiling. Once the profile is applied, everyone in the group becomes a problem. Complicated. Did you see the debate in the *New York Times* on the subject of profiling? It's worth reading.

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 8:14 AM 2 COMMENTS
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: ARABS, PROFILING, RACE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2009

A Few Basic Facts about the word Muslim and the population carrying that label



The airline incident in Detroit this week was, of course, scary, but it also was confusing. The accused bomber is black, and from Nigeria, and doesn't look anything like the images we'd previously seen in the media of who we're supposed to suspect. Although I already knew that not all Arabs are Muslims, nor vice versa, I've never been completely certain about terminology or pronunciation, so I looked again to Phil Herbst's Dictionary of Ethnic Bias, and found the following.

Muslim. Arabic *muslim*, from *aslama* (to surrender to God, to seek peace)--an adherent of Islam. *Islam* (surrender, submission) corresponds in meaning to *Muslim*. As *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (1991) explains, the *s* in Muslim is pronounced with a hiss; to pronounce it as the *s* in *nose* alters the meaning in Arabic to "cruel," thus becoming offensive.

As both adjective and noun, *Muslim* is preferred by adherents of Islam to the Westernized *Moslem*. According to research done for Allan M. Siegal, assistant managing editor of the *New York Times*, *Muslim* is seen in print almost two to one to *Moslem* (reported in Safire 1991). In the United States, *Muslim* is used to refer to a diverse population of American Muslims, including African American Muslims and immigrants from Pakistan, Egypt, India, and many other countries (an Arab, however, is not necessarily a Muslim).

So that's what Phil had to say. I also wondered about population distribution, and found this, from the *Economist* (October 8, 2009).

Thurs, March 18, noon
Lunch and Literature Series Book Club
JCC of Metro Detroit
6600 West Maple
West Bloomfield, MI 48322-3022

Thurs, March 18, 7:00
Marygrove College
Reading with Peter Markus and Michael Zadoorian
8425 W. McNichols, Detroit, MI,
313.927.1200
http://www.marygrove.edu/home_fl.html

Fri, March 19, 5:30-7
"Establishing a Sense of Place"
Reading and discussion with novelist Debra Spark (and me)
University of Michigan
Undergraduate Library
2nd floor, screening room
Ann Arbor, Mich

Sat, March 20, 2:00
Detroit Public Library
Douglass Branch
3666 Grand River, Detroit, MI 48208
313.833.5686
Carolyn McCormick, Branch Manager
http://www.detroitpubliclibrary.org/douglass/douglass_index.htm

This should be a surprise to people who still equate the terms *Muslim* and *Arab,* as they will soon see that the largest Muslim populations live in Asia:

A new survey of the world's Muslim population, by the Pew Research Center based in Washington, DC, . . . estimates the total number of Muslims in the world at 1.57 billion, or about 23% of a global population of 6.8 billion. Almost two-thirds of Muslims live in Asia, with Indonesia providing the biggest contingent (203m), followed by Pakistan (174m) and India (160m).

Perhaps more surprising will be the finding that the European country with the highest Muslim population is not France or Germany, but Russia, where 16.5m adherents of Islam make up nearly 12% of the total national population. Compared with other surveys, the report gives a lowish estimate for the number of Muslims in France (3.6m), as it does for the United States (2.5m); in both those countries, secular principles make it impossible to ask religious questions on a census.

So that's the *Economist*. At least we have some basic information now. And, wow, about 23% of the world population. That's a lot of people to have so many fears and misconceptions about.

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 2:35 PM 0 COMMENTS
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: ARABS, BLACKS, MISCONCEPTIONS, MUSLIMS, POPULATIONS

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2009

Integration

Weds, April 21, 7:30, Women's Guild of Oak Park. Meets at First United Church, Lake St., Oak Park

Tues, May 11, 7:00
Southfield Public Library annual meeting
26300 Evergreen Road
Southfield, Michigan 48076
(248) 796-4200
contact: Kelly Ireland
http://www.sfldlib.org/

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This is a photo from a just-integrated Virginia school in 1954, published in the New York Times. Oh, what I'd give to hear the thoughts of the two girls during what I assume is their first encounter. I will say that to me, the white girl looks friendly, and the black girl looks scared. And being a writer, I think I could begin to imagine a dialogue and spin out a scene. And I think I will. Just not right now.

I looked for a photo by using the search term "integration" and was surprised that the first four or five pages of images were almost all schematic diagrams from industry having to do with systems integration. And the reason I was even looking for an integration image was that I was thinking about a conversation that was going on at an online forum called DetroitYes. This is an extremely active forum, and the people who post there have been very friendly and very supportive about my novel.

In a recent thread, someone from Wisconsin posted about a visit to Detroit and how surprised and impressed and even enchanted he'd been by the city. This is the kind of thing that devoted Detroiters like to hear. But one person chimed in by saying that this is the typical thing one hears from suburbanites who duck in for one afternoon, hit the highlights, and then go back to the suburbs, never really seeing the pain and misery and poverty that reside in most of the city. This person assumed that the Wisconsin guy was white, and then others

BLOG ARCHIVE

▼ 2010 (37)

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The Discomforts of Listening

Martin Luther King, a brilliant speaker

The Discomforts of Diverse Childrearing Styles

Profiling and filtering and screening

► 2009 (35)

MY BLOG LIST

the books for walls project
Book of the Week: It's A Book
1 hour ago

A Commonplace Blog
Freedom's just Franzen's word for—
2 hours ago

joined in, noting the assumption, telling the second guy not to be so negative, and soon the conversation was about race.

One person sounded a note of great optimism about the gradual and future blurring of the racial divide, and I noted that I have had people at my readings who have said the same--especially noting that with more biracial children, the divide will continue to diminish as these children negotiate the borders of race and how they categorize themselves. Several people agreed with the optimistic view, and then someone said something along the lines of "it gives me no pleasure to say that I think the racial divide is widening," and after that no one said anything. Of course, perspective is everything. It all depends who you are and where you live. A lot of the divide is more economic than racial, I think, though the two are so deeply integrated or intertwined. Perhaps I might create a diagram to show what I mean--similar to those I ran across when I first started looking for an integration image.

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 8:08 AM 0 COMMENTS
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: INTEGRATION, RACE, RACIAL DIVIDE, SEGREGATION

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2009

Segregation and Literature

The Sartorialist
On the Street...The Young Square Dancer, Atlanta
4 hours ago

Mark Athitakis' American Fiction Notes
Q&A: Benjamin Percy
1 day ago

Maud Newton
Hitler's First War: not the triumph he claimed
3 days ago

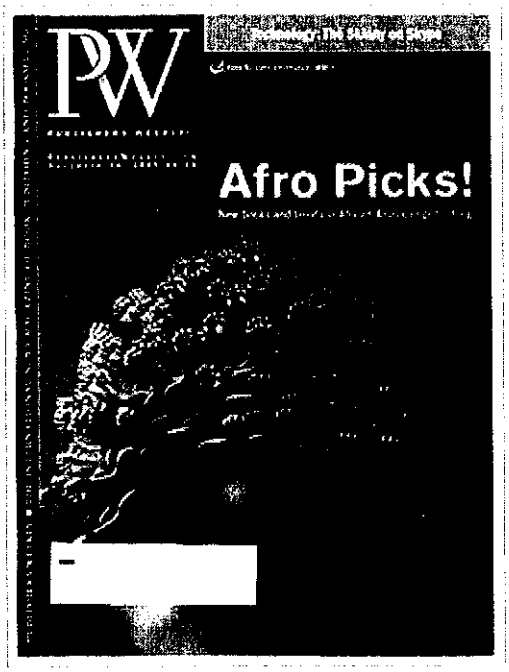
ThinkingAboutStory
Pins and Needles
2 weeks ago

Ritual and Rhubarb Pie
Festa di Tutti i Santi—Chicago's Italian-American All Saints Day
2 weeks ago

The Elegant Variation
WHAT'S HE BUILDING IN THERE?
2 weeks ago

Night Light Revue
So Long for Now...
3 weeks ago

ChicagoPoetry.com :: The Center of Chicago's Cyberspace Poetry



This is the cover of the latest *Publishers Weekly*--a magazine about books and publishing. In case the print is too small for you to read it, the words under Afro Picks say "new books and trends in African-American publishing." Calvin Reid at *Publishers Weekly* (who edited the feature and, with the creative director, chose the cover image and tagline [and he's also black]) explained that the "image is from the book 'Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present' by Deborah Willis (Norton). The image is called Pickin' by photographer Lauren Kelly. Ms. Willis is chair of the photo dept. at NYU, a MacArthur Fellow & a scholar of black photography and representation." A lot of people did not like this cover.

Some comments: the image is "aesthetically offensive," portrays black literature as "tribalistic," portrays the "black Medusa," is outdated and anachronistic, is simply ugly, is cheap and tasteless. Some thought it was a bad pun. Some didn't like boiling down all African-American lit to this one image. Still, some people did like it, thought it was funny or clever, and told others to "lighten up." Calvin Reid apologized to those who didn't like it.

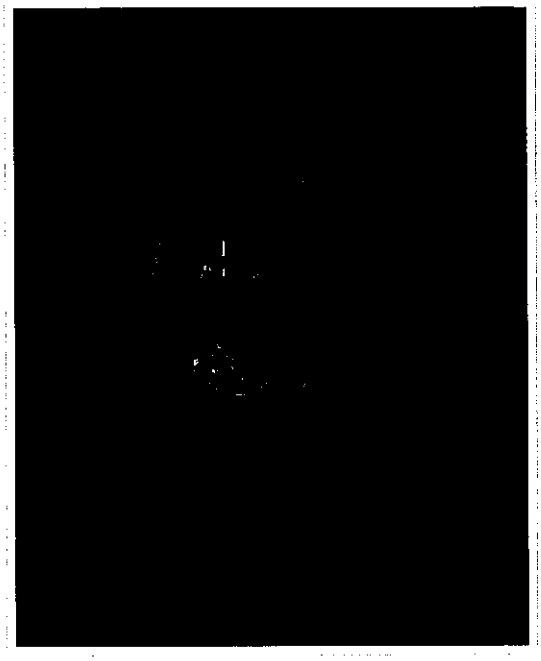
Part of the issue, I think, is the way publishers categorize literature (some would say "segregate") by author or subject--in some sense making African-American literature a genre. Thus, when you go into

a bookstore, you might see an area or shelf labeled *African American* where books by African-American authors reside. Some black authors have been able to "cross over" from the labeled shelves to the general shelves--Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Colson Whitehead, and others--but many haven't. And then, the question is, how many non-African Americans cross over and go to those labeled shelves? I don't think I ever have.

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 8:16 AM 0 COMMENTS
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: AFRICAN AMERICANS, GENRES, HAIR, LITERATURE, PUBLISHING, SEGRETATION

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2009

Not your Jewish Christmas



There are so many things in the world that I do not know--especially about the customs and traditions of groups I do not belong to. When I have attended church services--for example, a wedding, funeral, christening, or so on of someone I know--I have felt some discomfort at my ignorance: not knowing the words to the songs, not knowing how to participate in various traditions, not wanting to do something wrong and/or offend. Let's face it. With religion, and with

differences, there are so many ways to go wrong. So my general approach has been to keep a very low profile and fade into the woodwork.

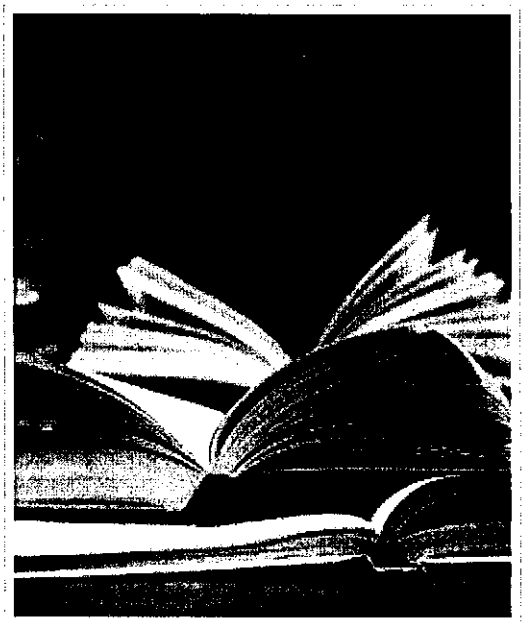
Because being Jewish is so familiar to me, I am often surprised to discover what other people don't know about it. Once, years ago, at a gathering at my daughter's preschool, approaching the winter holidays, the children were singing the Christmas songs and then the few requisite Chanukah songs. When they got to the dreidel song and the chorus ("Oh dreidel, dreidel, dreidel, I made it out of clay"), a woman leaned over to me and asked, "Are they saying, 'bagel, bagel, bagel'?" I guess bagel was the Jewish word she was most familiar with. Of course, her ignorance was not her fault, and I don't mean to make fun of her. She took a risk to ask, and I am sure that I have shown comparable ignorance in comparable situations (e.g., those church visits). By taking the risk, however, she at least had the chance to learn something.

When I was thinking of this post, I had it in mind to tell a different story about Chanukah, but I think I will save that for next week. And here I will raise my glass to that woman who had the courage to ask the question.

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 8:15 AM 0 COMMENTS
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: BAGEL, CHANUKAH, COURAGE, DREIDEL, RISK TAKING

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2009

Book groups, wonderful book groups



I have so many things I could say about book groups--having been a member of one (actually, of a series of them) for 20+ years. First, there was the Ann Arbor Society of the Written Word (A2sW2), which I launched with Paul Reingold so many years ago. Then, when I moved to Chicago, my husband and I were invited to join a Proust reading group. With that group, we spent three years--about 100 pages a month, a volume a year--reading and discussing *Remembrance of Things Past.* The group started with a huge living room full of people (maybe 30-40) but over the years dwindled to a core group of about 10 who were there at the finish line. Now my husband and I are in a group that began almost 30 years ago (close to the time Paul and I were starting ours in A2). We have belonged to this "latest" group for maybe 15 years??? The membership has changed dramatically and is really great right now. Before me, my parents belonged to reading groups, as did my sister.

My latest experience with book groups has involved attending meetings where my novel--*Grand River and Joy*--is being discussed. And I did this last night--via speaker phone--with a group of women in Michigan, which is what has prompted me to write this post. It was a

wonderful, gratifying experience. I learn something every time I talk with a reader. But the real point of this post is to talk about hope because lately I have not been feeling a lot of it, and I have to do some serious work to keep myself from despair. But I found hope last night in that discussion--in a group of humans who cares enough about books and literature and community to take the time (on a week night!) to come together to converse and explore ideas. I salute you and thank you for inviting me in and giving me hope.

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 7:43 AM 2 COMMENTS
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: BOOK GROUPS, BOOKS, DESPAIR, HOPE

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TUESDAY, APRIL 13, 2010

How a racial attitude can develop

This is a hard post to write, but it's a good one to write because it's about actually learning something, even if the thing I learned is kind of embarrassing in the sense of revealing what I would call a racialist flaw in my thinking. Here's the deal. I live on a block with (I think) 17 houses, arrayed across the street from each other in parallel lines. They're not all the same style, which I like. Some are bigger than others, some are stucco, some brick; one is frame, one has vinyl siding. My block doesn't look anything like the one in the photo, but I like the atmosphere and the era of the photo, so that's why I put it there.

I have lived on this block for over twenty years; a few have lived here longer than I have. It's a moderately friendly block. People live on my block who I consider to be good friends and excellent neighbors. We have a block party once a year in the summer, and most (but not all) people attend. Years ago, someone started the tradition of having a block map--that is, a list of names and phone numbers arrayed in a schematic way to represent the configuration of our block. My husband and I keep our block map on the refrigerator, and we consult it often.

Most of the people on my block are white; two families are African American. Neither of the African-American families comes to block parties. For one of these families, we don't even have a phone number on the block map, as the last time the map was updated (I updated it about a month ago), I tried the phone number on the outgoing map, found it disconnected, and slipped a note (actually my husband slipped the note) through the mail slot letting them know we were updating the map and would like to add their phone number if they'd like to share it. Apparently, they didn't want to.

Here's where my racialist thinking came in. I started to feel that the non-participation of these two families had something to do with their being black. I acknowledged that it could have something to do with discomfort about being in a minority; I was willing to be understanding in my racialist thinking. Still, I was linking what I determined to be a pattern with race.

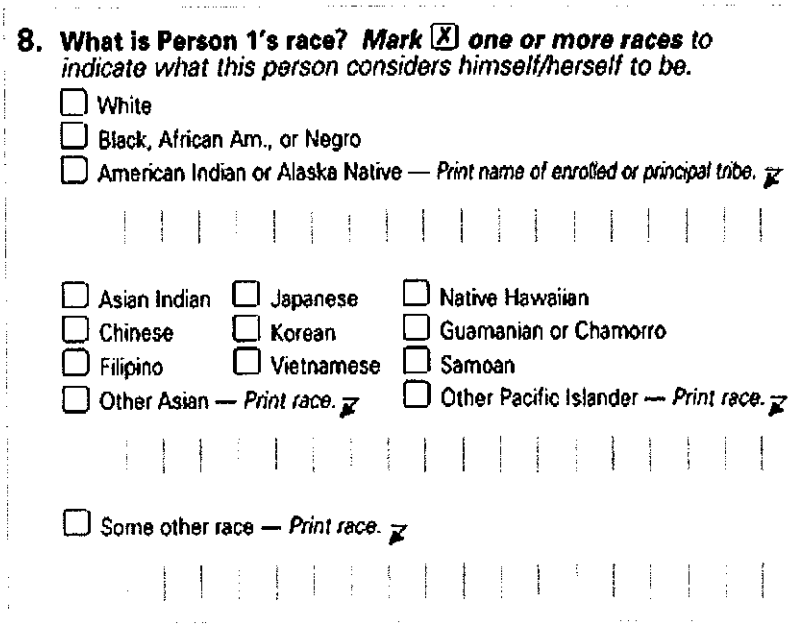
I am glad that I shared this thought with others, even though I ended up feeling a little foolish in retrospect. I was at my book group meeting, where we were discussing, of all things, my novel. Which is how the subject of race came up. In response to my comment about the African-American neighbors and their non-participation, my husband pointed out that there was another house on the block that had always been occupied by white people, and still, in 20+ years, we hadn't known who owned the house or lived in it (well, there was a short time when a renter lived there with her son, and she came to the block parties, and we knew her name and phone number). And then, two book group members (a couple; white) from another blocks said, "We never go to block parties." And another said, "We don't either."

So I could see how an attitude might develop, how possibly unrelated facts (they're both black; neither comes to the block party) could come to feel linked, and from there . . . who knows?

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 8:24 PM 8 COMMENTS

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31, 2010

Census and Race



8. What is Person 1's race? ***Mark*** ☒ ***one or more races*** *to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be.*

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black, African Am., or Negro
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.*

- ☐ Asian Indian
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Native Hawaiian
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Guamanian or Chamorro
- ☐ Filipino
- ☐ Vietnamese
- ☐ Samoan
- ☐ Other Asian — *Print race.*
- ☐ Other Pacific Islander — *Print race.*

- ☐ Some other race — *Print race.*

Okay. The census is here, and one of the more complex items on this deceptively simple form appears above: Question #8 on race. As I've discussed before on this blog, the concept of race is a slippery one. Here's the basic definition.

> **race.** In its biological sense, the term refers to a category of people distinguished by such inherited physical characteristics as skin color, certain facial features, and quality or form of hair. *Race* may also signify the prejudices, beliefs, and policies called racial or racist. Behind the term is an extremely vague, misleading, and intractable folk concept about how people are to be categorized.

I heard an NPR story the other night in which people whose ancestors came from the Middle East, who might be described as Arab-American, wondered where they fit in the categories listed on the census form. The general idea I got from the story was, "If we have to take the abuse, shouldn't our category at least be listed on the form?"

Of course, anyone has the option of writing in "some other race." But I have a lot of questions about this item.

First, is race really even the right term for the categories listed there? Aren't they more like nationalities or ethnicities than races (even if people in each of those categories do or may share some physical characteristics)? If your category is not listed, does it mean you're automatically white? I know some people who don't think of Jews as white.

Of course, anthropologists and other observers will point out that the categories listed for the race question have changed over the years the census has been taken. And if races are strictly defined by biology, how can the categories change? Oh, I know, it's all very complicated, and I probably haven't even asked the right questions in the right ways. I do like how post-modern the census people sound though, the way they frame the question by asking what person number 1 "*considers* [italics mine] himself/herself to be." What do you consider yourself to be?

Click to Print

DETROIT HOW I LOVE THEE

JULY 8, 2009

As a native Detroiter, I remember Detroit when it was referred to as the Paris of the Midwest. And over the years our beloved city has changed.

Recently I read a book called "Grand River and Joy" by Susan Messer. And of course my eyes lit up as I saw Grand River and Joy. Some of you will recall that a block south of Joy, on Beverly and Grand River, was the Grande Ballroom and I had a wee bit to do with that rock 'n' roll establishment.

Grand River and Joy is a story about the Jewish community that was prevalent in the area in the 1960's and the movement into the community of our African American neighbors. There was some conflict but there are also moments of understanding and joy and human relationships that went on there.

Susan captures the trauma and the joys of the changing Grand River and Joy neighborhood. Think kosher corned beef sandwiches, think ribs and greens, think Dexter and Davison.

The defining scene comes when a Jewish merchant named Harry Levine and his employee Curtis confront Curtis' son Alvin, who is a member of the Black Panthers, and was railing against the white honkies and wondered why his father worked for a man named Harry Levine. "Why are you friends with that white man?" asks Alvin. Curtis defines Mr. Levine by saying, "That's no white man, that's Mr. Levine."

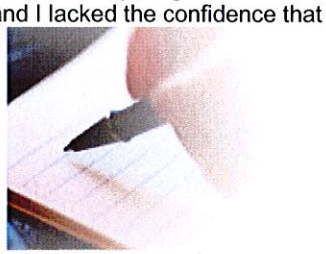
It's a beautiful story, a moving story, and a story that will bring tears and quiet joy as you relive those turbulent days of the 1960's at Grand River and Joy in Detroit. "Grand River and Joy" is

About Susan Messer

My career as a worrier began at an early age. Even on the dock, on a summer day, with my sailboat swimsuit and my beautiful mother so close (in the sunglasses), I had my worries. Perhaps the key lies in the mysterious object in my hand: the line to a boat for which I have sole responsibility? I can't identify the other woman or the boy in the picture, but neither seems to see the trouble. On second thought, perhaps whatever it is that lies before us is troubling only to children, and the boy had to turn away.

I could argue that worrying and writing are deeply intertwined. For example, worrying is an exercise in imagining all the bad things that could happen. And writing requires extensive imagining of possibilities, especially possibilities that will pose problems to one's characters. I believe it was **Grace Paley** who put forth the idea that whenever you're stumped with your writing, the trick is to "send in another son of a bitch." And the step after that is to imagine what-all trouble he or she will cause.

Although I began worrying early, I waited until relatively late to think of myself as a writer. When I was younger, I didn't understand the connection between worrying and imagination, and I lacked the confidence that I could do anything with the worries. But at age 45, I got lucky because **Etta Worthington,** a friend of mine, began a writers' organization in the town where I live, and sensing something in me, I suppose, she gently nudged me to question the limitations I placed on myself, to take writing workshops, to read my work in public, and eventually, to submit my work for publication.



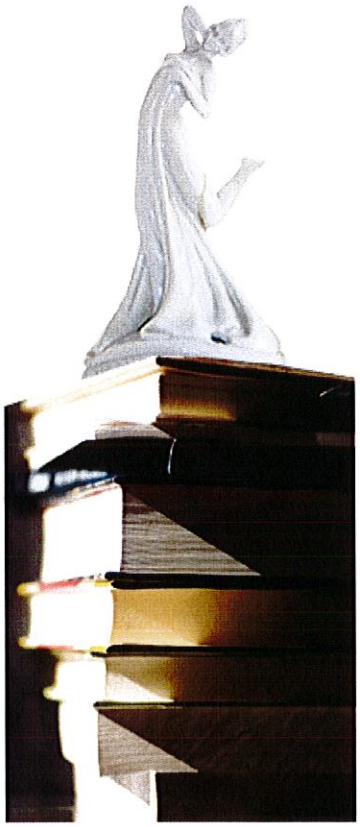
I proceeded diligently with each of these activities, but the core of the enterprise was the Sunday morning writing session. Every Sunday at 8 am, I went (and still go) to my desk ready to work. I do not answer the phone, nor let anything else interfere, and I work until noon.I have a friend who says that if you have a regular time for creative work, the muse hears about it and shows up. Whether or not this is true, the regularity of the exercise has worked well for me. Around Wednesday night, I start to think about what I'll be working on next Sunday, and by the time Sunday comes, I have a focus.

Page top

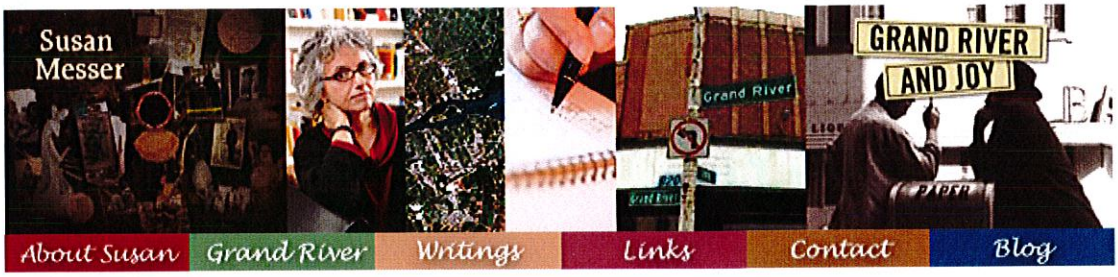
It has been fifteen years since I began this practice, and in this way, I have progressed—growing as a writer, **placing numerous short stories and essays for publication**, and winning **several awards and prizes**. Although I have not had much formal training as a writer, I have taken workshops with some of Chicago's best writers and teachers, including **Sandi Wisenberg** and **Janet Desaulniers**, and I belonged to a writing group for eight years.

About four years ago, I began to think that one of my unpublished stories had novelistic potential, so I upped my time commitment to writing. I had two residencies at **Ragdale**, an artists' colony, and at home, I began working on the novel every evening. That novel, called ***Grand River and Joy***, is about a Jewish man whose small business ends up in the path of the Detroit riots of 1967. It has been published by **University of Michigan Press** as part of their **Sweetwater Fiction Series**. Meanwhile, I have written over 300 pages of a second novel.

To read some of my work, see **Work available online** and excerpts of ***Grand River and Joy*** and my **Additional Writings.**



Page top ◘ **About Susan Messer** ◘ *Grand River and Joy* ◘ Additional Writings ◘ Links ◘ Contact Us ◘ Blog ◘ Home



Grand River and Joy

- Praise for the novel
- About the book
- Excerpt
- Readings and book signings
- Buy *Grand River and Joy*
- Events and reviews

When I was a young girl, growing up in Detroit, someone told me that Jews and blacks were minority groups. I remember turning this idea over in my mind and thinking that the person who concocted it must be terribly misinformed, because when I looked around my world, the only people I saw were blacks and Jews. *Grand River and Joy* comes in part from that world, where together we two minority groups lived, went to school, and worked in uneasy proximity, never fully understanding each other, never fully welcomed by the surrounding community.

Praise for the novel

What Makes Life Worth Living? The University of Michigan Fall 2010 LS&A Theme Semester explores some of the many ways we find meaning and value in our lives. And as part of this exploration, they have chosen *Grand River and Joy* as the summer reading book for incoming freshmen.

Read about it at University of Michigan Fall 2010 LS&A Theme Semester

Messer's novel tells how real places and real events, recognized with shocking minuteness, are what release men and women into their real lives.

D. G. Myers,
Read the full review at A Commonplace Blog

With unsparing candor, Susan Messer thrusts us into a time when racial tensions sundered friends and neighbors and turned families upside down. The confrontations in Grand River and Joy are complex, challenging, bitterly funny, and—painful though it is to acknowledge it—spot-on accurate.

Rosellen Brown
Author of *Before and After* and *Half a Heart*

Grand River and Joy is a rare novel of insight and inspiration. It's impossible not to like a book this well-written and meaningful—not to mention as historically significant, humorous, and meditative."

Laura Kasischke
Author of *The Life Before Her Eyes* and *Be Mine*

Riding shotgun as shop owner Harry Levine attempts to navigate the racial turmoil of Detroit, we peer out the passenger side and straight into the boiling pot that ultimately spills over...

Megan Shaffer
Read the full review at *Night Light Revue*

It's a beautiful story, a moving story, and a story that will bring tears and quiet joy as you relive those turbulent days of the 1960's at Grand River and Joy in Detroit.

Russ Gibb
Read the full review at *At Random*

Messer captures the small moments, in relationships and in daily life, that build to create a distinctive atmosphere. Here, the mood is one of anxiety and anticipation, underscored by the need to persist. Her characters are compelling and familiar.

Jewish Week

The sense of loss in Messer's book is palpable. Messer describes the Dutch colonials, the red-stone Georgians and towering elm trees lining the streets of her Detroit in loving detail.

Detroit News

Messer dramatizes the nuances of racism from Jewish and African-American perspectives. Particularly poignant, and hilarious, is the chapter in which Levine and his black tenant, Curtis, spend a night in the basement next to a broken boiler that could explode at any minute.

Detroit Free Press

Messer's strength as a writer is to tackle the complications without reducing them to sound bites. Instead, she uses believable characters to approach impossible subjects such as power, prejudice, and—yes—migration.

ForeWord

Susan Messer empathetically describes the struggle against the coming catastrophe... This fine book is a reminder of confusing, painful times and their consequences.

Hadassah

Messer does a great job using the character of Harry to show the middle and confused ground that many white people stand on as they view race relations... an interesting, deep look at something many people have lived through, possibly without even realizing it.

Andrew Klm in *It's On*
Download the full review

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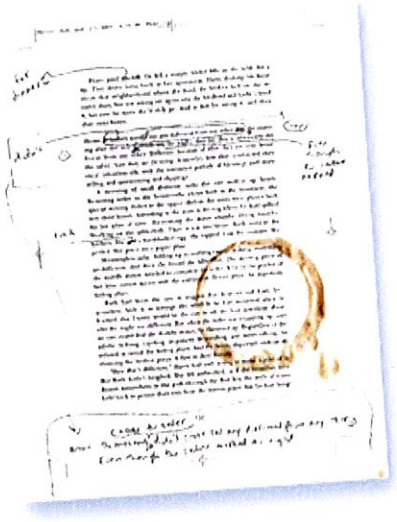
About the book

Halloween morning 1966, Harry Levine arrives at his wholesale shoe warehouse to find an ethnic slur soaped on the front window. As he scavenges around the sprawling warehouse basement, looking for the supplies he needs to clean the window, he makes more unsettling discoveries: a stash of Black

Power literature; marijuana; a new phone line running off his own;and a makeshift living room, arranged by Alvin,the teenaged tenant who lives with his father, Curtis,above the warehouse .Accustomed to sloughing off fears about Detroit's troubled inner-city neighborhood,Harry dismisses the soaped window as a Halloween prank and gradually dismantles "Alvin's lounge" in a silent conversation with the teenaged tenant. Still, these events and discoveries draw him more deeply into the frustrations and fissures permeating his city in the months leading up to the Detroit riots.



Grand River and Joy, named after a landmark intersection in Detroit, follows Harry through the intersections of his life and the history of his city. It's a work of fiction set in a world that is anything but fictional, a novel about the intersections between races, classes and religions during the long, hot summers of Detroit in the 1960s. *Grand River and Joy* is a powerful and moving exploration of one of the most difficult chapters of Michigan history.

Excerpt

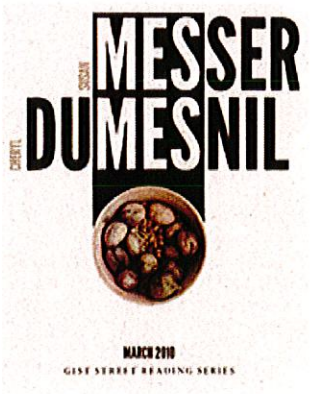
Because of the chores, the routine, on the way up the hall to the two front rooms, Harry didn't see, or notice, the front window until the Halloween-morning sun glinted off it full on. And because he'd never seen anything like this before on his own front window, but because he had seen pictures, and because a deep ancestral memory of facing something like this was stored in a brain region that science had not yet identified, he now had a conjunction of shock and recognition, a sense that he'd always expected it, but that it didn't hurt any less for the expecting.

And because Ilo always came up behind him, as if to say, let him be the first to face whatever happened during the night, let him be the scout, and because she had stopped in the ancient bathroom, where the door didn't close all the way because of the warping and the layer upon ageless layer of paint, to check her lipstick—lipstick of all things, in a place like this. And because she was about to see the same front window he'd seen, he moved quickly in front of it and fooled with the old-fashioned shoes, thinking he might cover what he'd seen or simply distract her so she wouldn't see, or simply to distract himself so that he himself wouldn't see, wouldn't fully see. Of course, the letters were backwards, when viewed from the inside, but it was surprising how many of them worked either way.

Readings and book signings

For information about private events or book group visits, please contact me at Susan@SusanMesser.net.

Play video of Susan Messer reading from *Grand River & Joy*



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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2009

Blacks and Jews

At one of my readings, a woman in the audience said, in a very respectful and open way, I thought, that she had not lived around very many Jews nor very many blacks in her life. Could I explain the relationship between the two groups? This relationship, especially as it has occurred in U.S. cities, lies at or near the center of my book, so it was a fair question. The answer, however, is difficult and huge. Fortunately, as I present my work to more audiences and listen to their comments and questions, I am starting to formulate a way to talk about this. I am formulating an understanding.

First, I can say that here we have two oppressed populations. Second, I can say that in cities, blacks had an easier time finding housing near and around established Jewish neighborhoods. I would not necessarily say that blacks were welcomed, however, because once blacks moved into a neighborhood, Jews began an exodus to a new neighborhood. In Detroit, it was a northern and western exodus, eventually moving over the city limit (Eight Mile Rd) into the suburbs.

In this scenario, Jews sold their homes, but many of them owned businesses in the neighborhoods they were leaving behind--often retail operations: furniture stores, drug stores, shoe stores, hardware stores, and so on. These, they held onto. So the business owner (usually the man of the house) would leave the neighborhood where he lived and drive to work in the old neighborhood, where most of his customers (and some employees, perhaps) were black. Sometimes he had apartments in that old neighborhood that he rented out to black tenants. Thus the two populations were economically interdependent, but you can see the potential for tension. One tension-provoking idea (and, I suppose, reality) was that the Jewish business owner was making his money from the black population and taking that money out of the neighborhood.

Yes, yes, the Jews were very supportive of the Civil Rights Movement. And, yes, Jews have been very charitable toward organizations in the black community, and many Jews have well-tuned social consciences. Yet, many misunderstandings and tensions characterize the relationship. Perhaps I will try to say more about it in a future post--even quoting from my own novel.

Title:Remembering the riots. (Detroit race riots of 1967)(Editorial)
Pub:*First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*
Detail:James Nuechterlein. n76 (Oct 1997 n76): p.p12(2). (1229 words) From *General OneFile.*

Abstract:

The African American riots in Detroit, MI during Jul 1967 dealt race relations in the city and the nation a blow from which they have yet to recover. The Detroit riots, and others during the 1960s, destroyed the fragile consensus on racial issues that Martin Luther King, Jr. had built between whites and African Americans. The riots alienated many members of the white middle class and further polarized US society. Most whites rejected both liberal appeals to spend more money on racial problems and the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders' report that blamed the riots upon white racism.

Of the various disasters that littered the 1960s, none was more deleterious in its effects than the series of black riots that began in Birmingham in 1963 and became an annual rite of summer for most of the rest of the decade. The best-remembered of them occurred in Watts in 1965, but the two most destructive in their toll on lives and property took place thirty years ago this summer -- the first in Newark and then, the worst of all, in Detroit. I was in Detroit during the disturbance there, and my memories of the event are still vivid.

The riot began early in the morning of Sunday, July 23, 1967, when the police raided an illegal bar in the inner city. A crowd gathered in protest, and within a short time mobs of young men were engaged in burning, looting, and acts f random violence. Earlier riots had been blamed on police "overreaction" to minor incidents, so authorities did not a first dispatch large numbers of officers to the area. They further tried to keep things in check -- based again on presumed lessons from disturbances elsewhere -- by persuading the media to impose a news blackout. Neither tactic worked, however, and things were soon utterly out of control. The rioting spread to take in fourteen square miles of black neighborhoods, and unlike some earlier outbreaks, it was quite indiscriminate: mobs torched and plundered black businesses as freely as white ones and burned down a number of black homes as well. In the latter stages of the riot, blacks from outside the inner city entered the riot zone to participate in the looting.

My wife and I was visiting my brother's family in Livonia, a western suburb of the city. We learned nothing of the riot until early Sunday afternoon when other members of the family arrived to report that in their drive from the city they had seen vast clouds of smoke rising from black neighborhoods. Soon afterward the media lifted the news blackout and we began to get the details.

By Monday morning, news reports indicated that the police and National Guard had matters under control, and so, as previously planned, we drove into the city to stay with my sister at her apartment. Kay lived, by choice, in a racially mixed neighborhood near downtown, only a few blocks from the riot area. That night the rioting resumed and intensified.

It was hot and the apartment had no air-conditioning, so we kept the windows open. Playing cards at the kitchen table, we could hear the sound of rifle fire. A major expressway separated us from the riot zone and we felt no great sense of danger, but the continuing -- and increasing -- background noise of gunfire, much like a war movie soundtrack, made for an unsettling, even surreal, experience. After midnight, we heard the rumbling of what we later learned were troop vehicles moving a long the expressway. For the

first time in the decade, a riot had gotten so out of hand that the authorities had to call in federal troops. It took five days to restore order, and afterwards there were 43 dead, 7,000 arrested, 1,300 building destroyed, and 2,700 businesses looted.

The riots in Detroit and elsewhere had a devastating effect not just on the communities themselves but on the entire nation. The assorted tragedies and lunacies of the sixties came near to wrecking the national morale, and nothing contributed more to the sense of things out of control, of a nation falling apart, than the ghastly parade of "long, hot summers." In 1967 alone, according to a recent report in the New York Times, there were almost four dozen riots and over one hundred lesser incidents of civil unrest. The antiwar protests of the time revealed a society bitterly divided over politics. The riots, along with the widespread and often violent campus disturbances, seemed to indicate a country descending into anarchy,

The riots also shattered the fragile national consensus that had begun to emerge following Martin Luther King, Jr's March on Washington in 1963. A majority of white Americans had been increasingly persuaded by the moral appeals of Dr. King and had come to accept the argument that American society had for too long relegated black people to second-class citizenship. There was a readiness to make amends. But the riots eroded much of that good will. They served the cause not of reformers but of racists, and antagonized millions of Middle Americans who were open to change but closed to the idea that the nation's racial were so great that it deserved to be torn apart. The riots polarized a society that had been potentially ready for significant reform.

The response by American liberals to the riots made things worse. Many of them found ways to excuse the inexcusable by rationalizing the mob nihilism manifested in Detriots as radical political protest. They even managed to persuade themselves, against all evidence, that the riots would have a positive net effect: white America would finally be brought to see how desperate was the black plight and thus would be moved to take remedial action.

The official government response compounded the confusion. President Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the Kerner Commission) concluded in 1968 that the single most important cause of the riots was white racism. It would not have been implausible to argue that white racial attitudes were most responsible, over the long run, for the disabilities of black Americans, but to attribute the riots to white racism stretched the causal link to the breaking point.

The Kerner Report also, however inadvertently, demeaned black people by denying them moral agency. It was one thing to recognize the genuine frustration about real grievances that led some blacks to lash out blindly, something else to suggest that the black situation was so hopeless -- and so utterly dependent on white behavior for any kind of amelioration -- that such lashings-out by blacks constituted the only line of action open to them. The report perpetuated the idea that black people had identities only as historical victims, people to whom things simply happened. In post-segregationist America, that was no longer believable.

Most white Americans rejected the claim that they were incorrigible racists and so simply shrugged off the Kerner Commission's indulgent exercise in guilt-mongering. They also, in the light of mounting evidence of the failure of Johnson's Great Society programs, viewed with skepticism the Commission's claim that only massive government programs offered any hope for making things better for black Americans. Indeed, the perceived failure of welfare-state liberalism to solve the nation's racial problems contributed mightily to the mounting suspicion that there might be better responses to social ills than simply spending vast amounts of money on them. The first glimmerings of what Bill Clinton would much later call the end of the era of big government can be found in the baffling incapacity of the received liberal wisdom to offer workable prescriptions for the urban racial crisis of the 1960s.

The best that can be said thirty years later is that our racial situation, however bad, is better than it was in 1967. That is pitiably small consolation. The City of Detroit has never fully recovered from the events of three decades ago. Neither, sad to say, has the rest of the nation.

Source Citation
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WEDNESDAY, MAY 12, 2010

Community and Communities

Just a short post today because I'm just back from a book event in Michigan--the Southfield Public Library, which is one of the most wonderful modern libraries I've ever seen. The children's department is magical. You can take a virtual tour.

I want to tell you many things about my experience there, but I am too tired after all the driving and all the talking and all the thinking. The point I want to make is this: The day before I left, a book group discussed my book and wrote to me with some questions. Among them, they asked what kind of reaction my book has gotten from the black community, and ditto for the Jewish community. Then, I went to the Southfield library, and got the same questions. In one case, it was a black woman who asked me what reaction I've had from the black community.

I think what this question represents is the fact that the book contains potential controversy, that it is in some way bold, and I am glad about this. But the thing I realized last night is that there is no ONE REACTION from any community, that there really isn't even

ONE COMMUNITY. As portrayed in my book, there were multiple points of view in both the Jewish and black communities (and of course still are). And I have in fact had many reactions from both communities. So far, no one has gotten really mad at me for anything I wrote (at least not on the Jewish or racial front). No one has told me that they were offended. Someone out there may have been offended, and I have wondered about this, but no one has told me about it.

One black woman last night (she hadn't read my book) asked whether I'd used black dialect in my book, and noted that doing so is controversial. I am aware of the controversy, and said I thought I took a conservative approach with black dialect, that I'd even scaled it back a bit, based on my editor's feedback. Then a black man spoke up and said he was glad that I had taken a conservative approach on the dialect front (he had read my book and told me he loved it). So there you have some of my feedback from at least two voices in the black community.

POSTED BY SUSAN MESSER AT 4:46 PM 3 COMMENTS

Title:A dream gone awry.(1967 Detroit Race Riots)
Pub:***Michigan History Magazine***
Detail:Kevin Boyle. 88.5 (Sept-Oct 2004): p.34(10). (3914 words) From *General OneFile*.

In the spring and summer of 1963, American public life experienced a seismic shift. The quake's epicenter lay in Birmingham, Alabama, where in April the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and his army of schoolchildren mounted a final assault on the southern system of segregation. The shock waves spread across the nation: into dozens of towns and cities across the South, from Danville, Virginia, to St. Augustine, Florida, where the oppressed mounted their own marches to demand freedom; into the Mississippi Delta, where African American activists and desperately poor sharecroppers risked everything to secure the right to vote; into the churches, schools and union halls of the North, where thousands of blacks and liberal whites rallied to support the southern movement and to demand racial justice in their own communities.

As the racial ground shifted beneath their feet, many public officials tried to cling to the old structures upon which their power had long rested. Southern officials unleashed the full fury of their police power: Bull Connor's Birmingham police assaulted and arrested hundreds; Alabama's governor George Wallace ordered his brutal state troopers to suppress dissent; Mississippi's governor prepared barbed-wire holding pens large enough to imprison ten thousand detainees. Northern politicians were also shaken. U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy insisted that African Americans were "getting mad for no reason at all." Chicago's mayor Richard Daley complained to the president that African Americans in his city no longer feared Chicago's finest. In Detroit, matters took a different turn, as the events of June 23, 1963, made clear. That day, a glorious summer Sunday, Detroit staged its great March to Freedom.

The Reverend C. L. Franklin of New Bethel Baptist Church had planned the march as an act of solidarity with the southern freedom struggle and as a sign of the surging movement within Detroit. Martin Luther King Jr. had agreed to lead the protest, which was to move down Woodward Avenue to a rally at Cobo Hall. Many other mayors undoubtedly would have opposed the event or, at least, kept a safe distance from

it. Not in Detroit. Thirty-five-year-old Jerome Cavanagh, a mere eighteen months into his first term as mayor, not only endorsed the march; he promised to join King and Franklin in leading it.

The march was scheduled to begin at 4:00 P.M. But by 3:00 P.M. the crowd was so great--125,000 strong--that organizers could not conceivably control it. The marchers surged forward, a mass of peaceful protesters, most of them black, propelled by the promise of freedom so long denied. By the time King arrived from the airport, the lead marchers were already at Cadillac Square. The crowd roared at the sight of him, swarming around King as he tried to join the line of dignitaries. The march was now a tide of humanity, its leaders simply pushed forward by it. King reached out to link his arm with Cavanagh's. Afterward, the mayor recalled saying only one thing to King: "Hang on."

In that moment lay the great promise of the Cavanagh years. After centuries of struggle, African Americans in the early 1960s shattered the power of white supremacy. In the process, they created a movement driven by a moral force so great that for a while it seemed to sweep away all the rules of politics and governance. Jerome Cavanagh dared to link himself and his administration to that movement. He had the courage to ride the wave it had created, the vision to imagine the new city that could be built once the old structures had been obliterated. But what Cavanagh did not know--could not have known--as he marched down Woodward that day was that many of the old structures would withstand the earthquake begun in Birmingham. In the coming years, there would be no new city to build; instead, there would be the terrible aftershocks and the fires they triggered.

When Jerome Cavanagh won his improbable victory over incumbent mayor Louis Miriani in 1961, he earned the right to govern a city that, as Look magazine put it, "was noted for three things: automobiles, bad race relations and civic sloth." In fact, Detroit's grip on the auto industry had already begun to weaken. In the 1950s the city had lost over 100,000 manufacturing jobs as Packard, Studebaker, Hudson, Murray Auto Body and hundreds of smaller firms shut their doors. Workers followed the jobs out of Detroit. The city's population fell by 140,000 between 1950 and 1960. The unemployment rate hovered at 10 percent--double the national average.

Look was right about the state of race relations; they were poor indeed. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans had come to Detroit from the South in the 1910s and 1920s and again in the 1940s in search of then-plentiful factory jobs. White Detroiters, many of them also newcomers to the city, mounted a vigorous defense of racial privilege in their neighborhoods and on the job. The result was a reign of anti-black violence, from the Ossian Sweet case of 1925 through the hate strikes and bloody race riot of 1943. Such overt violence had become less common in the 1950s. But hate strikes continued to occur in the city's factories into the mid-1950s, and black homeowners who moved into all-white areas still risked being attacked by their new neighbors. More commonly, they watched as whites fled to the suburbs. In the 1950s, Detroit's white population fell by 23 percent, while African Americans' share of the city's people rose from 16 percent to 30 percent. These changes then intersected with Detroit's economic decline, which burdened African American Detroiter's to a much greater extent than it did whites. When Cavanagh took office, unemployment stood at an appalling 18 percent in the black community.

Civic sloth made the problems worse. The previous mayor, Louis Miriani, had done nothing to adjust city policy to address Detroit's economic problems. As the tax base decayed, city coffers emptied: Miriani left Cavanagh a projected deficit of $28 million for 1962. He also left Cavanagh an explosive racial problem. Detroit's African Americans had long seen the virtually all-white Detroit police department as the brutal arm of white power. When a crime scare spread through white Detroit in December 1960, Miriani and his police commissioner ordered a "crackdown" on street crime. White officers read the order as giving them the right to stop, frisk and harass black Detroiters at random. African Americans rightly bristled at such police state procedures, so reminiscent of the Jim Crow South.

Cavanagh confronted these problems with amazing speed. In his first act as mayor, he ordered the city to

institute nondiscriminatory hiring practices. He named African Americans to several important positions in his new administration, including its chief financial officer. By the end of his first year in office, he had pushed Detroit's first income tax through the state legislature, thus assuring the city of the revenue it needed to balance its books. In perhaps his most inspired move, he appointed George Edwards as police commissioner. The Texas-born Edwards was a veteran of the city's socialist left. He had begun his career as a union organizer for Walter Reuther's UAW local in the late 1930s. As Detroit housing commissioner during World War II, he had taken a courageous stand in support of integration. When he ran for mayor in 1949, he had been defeated in a vicious race-baiting campaign. Now Cavanagh put him in charge of the 4,000-person force with a mandate to reform the department.

It is difficult to say precisely why Cavanagh moved so aggressively and in such a liberal direction. In large part, it was a matter of background. Cavanagh and many of his advisors were products of the New Deal revolution. They were the sons and daughters of ethnic working-class parents, who even a few decades before probably would have followed their fathers into the trades. But the benefits of the New Deal era--government promotion of unionization, minimum wage laws, the GI Bill--gave Cavanagh's generation extraordinary new opportunities. Unlike their fathers, they would have high school diplomas, college degrees from city schools like the University of Detroit and Wayne State University, graduate training, professional careers as lawyers and academics. People such as these had no fear of government power; they knew government could create opportunity. They were determined that it would do so now that they held the reins of governance.

Cavanagh was also responding to the pressure brought to bear on the political system by the surging civil rights movement. Since at least the late 1940s, African American activists had been building an ever more powerful movement to secure racial justice. By the time Cavanagh took office, the southern wing of the movement had reached full force: the sit-ins had begun just a year and a half before his inauguration; the Freedom Rides a few months earlier.

Civil rights was not just a southern concern. Black Detroiters, like African Americans across the urban North, were also organizing to break down the walls of discrimination that prevented them from enjoying the full benefits of American society. The northern wing of the movement naturally sought different goals than the southern wing. There was no Jim Crow to defeat. Instead, black Detroiters demanded equal access to jobs, better schools, improved housing and an end to police brutality. They did so through traditional civil rights organizations, such as the Detroit chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the largest branch in the nation. They also created new organizations and found new leaders: union activists like Horace Sheffield and Willoughby Abner; clerics like the Reverend Franklin and the Reverend Albert Cleague; aspiring politicians like the young John Conyers; and hundreds of men and women who never made the headlines but who worked quietly in their block clubs, their classrooms and their factories to demand justice.

From the start, then, the Cavanagh administration and the city's civil rights movement were tied together. Cavanagh was willing, even anxious, to use government powers and African American activists demanded that he do so. The alliance was sealed in 1963. At the March to Freedom, Cavanagh symbolically embraced the now-triumphant southern movement. More fundamentally, he vigorously supported the burgeoning civil rights movement in Detroit. He endorsed black demands for an open housing ordinance banning neighborhood discrimination, one of the most explosive issues in the city. He joined black unionists in demanding that the Detroit building trades abandon their discriminatory hiring practices. He pushed the police department to hire more African American officers and dared to integrate the police cruisers so hated in black areas. Cavanagh certainly did not meet every demand. Despite the obvious need, for instance, he refused to establish a civilian police review board. But in the heady days of 1963, 1964 and 1965, he moved farther on racial issues than any other big city mayor. "While Negroes have not deluded themselves that the Messiah has come," the head of the Detroit NAACP said in 1965, "they know that we now have a mayor who ... recognizes that they are part of the city."

By then, Cavanagh dreamed of more. He dreamed of an entirely rebuilt city, where physical changes would dovetail with social changes to create a new model of urban life. A few years earlier, when the Cavanagh administration was trying just to get the garbage collected, such a vision would have seemed utterly fanciful. But when the southern civil rights movement broke the Jim Crow system in 1963, it opened vast opportunities not only in race relations but in other parts of public life as well.

The most profound changes came in Washington, DC. For a generation, southern conservatives within the Democratic Party had blocked any reform they feared might undermine white supremacy in the South. Now their power was broken, their conservatism seemingly delegitimized. Racing to adjust to this new political configuration, Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), himself a son of the South, launched the greatest reform initiative since the New Deal. In January 1964, LBJ committed his new administration to an unconditional War on Poverty. By May of that year, he had expanded that promise, dedicating himself to building a Great Society. Needs long unmet would now be addressed, Johnson pledged. Children would get better educations, from preschool to college; the aged and the indigent would get health care; the poor would get better housing; the unemployed would get job training. Suddenly reform, begun in the streets of the South, promised to stretch into every corner of the nation.

Cavanagh leapt at the opportunity to bring the Great Society to Detroit. Even before LBJ announced the War on Poverty, Cavanagh had launched several small, experimental social service programs for young people in the most impoverished areas of Detroit. The Detroit mayor had proved himself adept at getting the federal government to foot the bill. In 1964 he expanded those programs dramatically. Detroit, he hoped, could become a "pilot area" for the War on Poverty, the focus of a vast, coordinated effort to give the city's poorest citizens--overwhelmingly African American--the skills and services they needed in order to take advantage of economic opportunities.

By June 1964, Cavanagh's administration had created a sweeping program, grandly named Total Action Against Poverty, to provide job training and counseling, medical and dental exams, legal aid, preschool education, summer day camps and adult education to a large swath of the inner city. Impressed by Detroit's initiative, Washington gave the city a disproportionate share of poverty funds. By 1967 only Chicago and New York had received more federal dollars for poverty programs.

Cavanagh wanted still more. Serving on a presidential panel in 1964, he had suggested to Johnson that the federal government target one city for an intensive program of urban rehabilitation, creating a "demonstration city" that combine the War on Poverty with the physical reconstruction of poor neighborhoods. UAW president Walter Reuther picked up the idea in 1965 and convinced Johnson to make it the centerpiece of his administration's urban policy. Renamed Model Cities, the idea became law in 1966. Even as the measure wound its way through Capitol Hill, Cavanagh submitted his bid for Detroit to become the model city. If chosen, the mayor said, Detroit would use federal funds to rehabilitate all the buildings that could be saved in a nine-square-mile section of the inner city; it would eliminate those that could not be saved; it would create new parks and build community centers that would coordinate social services; it would improve police protection; and it would build new neighborhood schools. Out of these efforts would come not simply a renewed area, but a new Detroit. "There isn't a city in America that doesn't have a physical master plan," Cavanagh said. "What we don't know so well is how to live in a large American city, how to get on with each other, how to renew our human and social values."

It was so extraordinary to imagine. In four short years, Cavanagh had moved Detroit from civic sloth to model city. Praise poured in from across the country. "A new consensus is abroad in the city," Fortune magazine proclaimed in June 1965. "All the diverse elements that make up Detroit's power structure ... are being welded together in a remarkable synthesis.... And the achievement of the city is discernible as much in the almost palpable determination of its citizenry to confront its problems and attempt their solution as it is in the marked changes ... already wrought." City officials and local activists basked in the accolades, of course, but they were not naive. They understood that the city had a long way to go to achieve its

grandiose goals. But in the new America that the civil rights movement had created, it was possible to dream.

For all the startling changes it had caused, the movement had not completely transformed the United States. The old structures of power and privilege were weakened, but they had not been toppled. Try as they might, Cavanagh and his supporters could not build their model city as long as those structures remained in place.

Traditional politics was one of the most important of the structures. As early as 1965, powerful southern and northern conservatives, such as Mississippi's senator John Stennis, Ohio's representative Wilbur Mills and Chicago's mayor Richard Daley, were demanding cutbacks in the vaunted War on Poverty. Its programs, they insisted, funded dangerous radicals and cost too much money, particularly as the price of the Vietnam War spiraled upward. LBJ bravely talked of fighting any cuts in his beloved programs. Privately, he backpedaled before the conservative resurgence. By the end of 1966, poverty funding was already in decline. Detroit immediately felt the effects. Federal dollars continued to flow into the city, but they fell far short of the mayor's grand plans. The initial federal grant for Detroit's model city program--a planning grant awarded in 1967--was one-fourth of the amount Cavanagh had requested.

In any case, poverty funds did nothing to address the most basic economic problem the city faced. Throughout the 1960s, Detroit continued to lose factory jobs. Between 1963 and 1967, four hundred manufacturing firms left the city. An economic upswing during those years had masked the effect of that loss; Detroit's unemployment rate had fallen to 3 percent by 1965. But unemployment rates were much higher in poor areas, particularly among young adults, who had once relied on entry-level factory jobs that were now disappearing. Job training and similar poverty programs were pointless under such circumstances. To combat poverty, the federal government needed to create well-paying jobs, something the War on Poverty never tried to do.

White privilege also withstood the civil rights tide. White Detroiters were particularly vigorous in their defense of neighborhood segregation. In 1963 the Common Council voted down the open housing ordinance that Cavanagh had endorsed. The next year, the racial demagogue Thomas Poindexter, a longtime conservative activist, mounted a petition campaign in support of a Homeowners Rights Ordinance that essentially endorsed discrimination in the housing market. Whites rushed to Poindexter's standard; he gathered twice as many signatures as he needed to place his proposal on the ballot. When the issue was put before the electorate, the ordinance passed with 55 percent of the vote. White flight, meanwhile, continued unabated. Between 1960 and 1970, Detroit's white population fell by over 300,000, a number comparable to that of the 1950s.

The most enduring pillar of white privilege in Detroit was not the neighborhood, though; it was the police force. Despite the best efforts of George Edwards and his successor, Ray Girardin, the force seemed impervious to change. Edwards and Girardin had pledged to hire more black officers, but as late as 1967 African Americans still made up only 5 percent of the force. Reports of police brutality against African Americans continued to pour into the department, but police officials refused to cooperate with efforts to establish an effective civilian complaint board. In fact, they responded to any reform initiative with outright hostility.

Together, political constraints and white resistance severely limited Cavanagh's ability to remake the poorest sections of the city. In fact, those sections lost ground. Between 1961 and 1967, poverty actually intensified within the area Cavanagh had designated for rehabilitation. Deindustrialization was taking a heavy toll. By the summer of 1967, the unemployment rate for African Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four hovered at an astounding 30 percent. Police and community relations continued to worsen. Determined to regain status after a tense stand-off between the force and the Cavanagh administration in the spring of 1967, officers increased arrests for petty crimes in the inner city. Little

wonder that frustration mounted in poor neighborhoods. Detroiters there had heard the promises of a new Detroit. But they saw few tangible results.

In retrospect, it is not surprising that the frustration exploded into anger. The riot that began on the oppressive summer night of July 23, 1967, was not inevitable. As historian Sidney Fine has said, it was a chance event, triggered by a needless police raid in a neighborhood already simmering with discontent. It quickly became much more than that. It was a massive expression of rage, the rage of those to whom much had been promised, to whom little had been given.

By early Sunday afternoon, portions of Twelfth Street were already in flames; by nightfall, the fires had spread to other parts of the city. Throughout that night, and the next and the next, Detroiters could hear and see the sounds of war: the reports of rifles; the tramp of soldiers' boots; the rumble of tanks. Above them lay a pall of black smoke, hanging over a city ablaze. When the riot was over, almost a week after it began, the devastation was stunning. Forty-three were dead, 650 injured and $11 million in property destroyed. "Today," a haggard Jerome Cavanagh said in the immediate aftermath, "we stand amidst the ashes of our hopes. We hoped against hope that what we had been doing was enough to prevent a riot. It was not enough."

Already terribly weak, white support for Cavanagh-style reform collapsed after the riots. One post-riot survey showed that 67 percent of white Detroiters believed that poor African Americans had themselves to blame for having "worse jobs, education and housing than white people." Even more disturbing was the palpable sense of anger and fear that swept through white neighborhoods. Gun sales skyrocketed in the months after the riots, up 90 percent from the previous year, as whites armed themselves. Rumors of black attacks on white neighborhoods ran rampant, particularly once the Detroit newspapers went on strike in November 1967. Cavanagh tried to calm the situation by establishing a rumor control center. Whites flooded it with calls: over 1,000 a day were logged in the days after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968. The most common rumor--rife with biblical symbolism--was that African Americans would exact retribution on Good Friday.

By then, the March to Freedom seemed a thing of the distant past. But it was not. Less than five years earlier, Jerome Cavanagh had linked arms with the now martyred King, the two of them propelled forward by a tidal wave of hope. Then it had seemed that so much was possible: a new age of race relations, a new city built on justice and opportunity. The great American writer James Baldwin had captured the moment, rich with possibilities and fraught with dangers. In January 1963, five months before the March to Freedom, he published a slim book of essays, the most powerful of which is entitled "Down at the Cross." It could serve as an epitaph for the Cavanagh years, of its hopes and of its defeats, its terrible defeats. "Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands," Baldwin wrote. "We have no right to assume otherwise. If we do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!'"

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