

Grand River and Joy

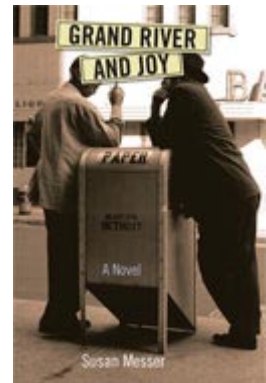
Susan Messer

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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.

The 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

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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.

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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 Detroit, 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

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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.