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Oak Park media vet revisits Detroit's summer of '67 in new novel

By Gary Graff ggraff@medianewsgroup.com; @GraffonMusic on Twitter
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Longtime Detroit radio personality and writer Peter Werbe has published his first novel, "Summer On Fire: A Detroit Novel," via Black & Red Books. (Photo by Rebecca Cook)

Throughout his 50-year-plus career in Detroit media — at the Fifth Estate counter culture periodical and hosting the long-running "Nightcall" for WRIF — Peter Werbe dealt in fact.

But his latest project takes a significant step towards fiction.

The Detroit native and Oak Park resident has published "Summer on Fire: A Detroit Novel." Set during seven weeks of a long, hot summer of civil unrest and social unease, the book follows characters who Werbe acknowledges bear similarities to himself and those around him at the time, though the names are — in "Dragnet" fashion — changed to protect the innocent, and not so innocent.

"People will look at the central character, Paul, and say, 'Oh, that's Peter,' and his wife Michele is undoubtedly (Werbe's wife) Marilyn," Werbe, who was 27 when the events of "Summer on Fire" take place, says. He adds with a laugh, "Someone even said to me, 'If you didn't want people to think it's you and Marilyn, why did you name them Paul and Michele?'"

"But, really, the characters are an amalgam of a lot of people. And by the end of the book ... it's kind of a cliché, one I never believed, that the characters take over and write the book. I swear that's what happened."





Peter Werbe during 1969, in the offices of Detroit's Fifth Estate, a counter-culture periodical that he still works with. (Courtesy Peter Werbe)

A novel is a credible next step for Werbe, who has written "hundreds and hundreds of articles" for the Fifth Estate, which was based near the Wayne State University campus, as well as the Metro Times and other publications. The pointed and unsparing "Nightcall," meanwhile, was the longest-running talk show in radio history, from 1971 until it was ended by new WRIF station owners in 2016. That, however, provided the spark for what became "Summer on Fire" — which Werbe says took about a year to write and was a decidedly different creative endeavor than anything he'd done before.

"I didn't have any real plans for it; I just began doing it," recalls Werbe, who also worked for Detroit radio stations WABX, WWWW and WCSX and is still part of the current incarnation of the Fifth Estate. "It was all organic as I went along. The whole book was never outlined or anything like that.

"I didn't write every single day and never did what so many writers do, just spend eight hours working on it. Sometimes I would write an hour a day. There were periods when I didn't write at all."



One of those came after he wrote the book's chapter about the execution incident at the Algiers Motel during the summer's uprising — graphically recounted in Kathryn Bigelow's 2017 film "Detroit."

"That depressed me so badly I didn't write for three weeks — 'Maybe I don't want to do this...'," Werbe says. "But then I forced myself back and kept going."

Werbe is quick to explain that "Summer On Fire" isn't "nostalgia for nostalgia's sake." Rather, he created a fact-based fictional environment to both recount a pivotal time in American history — "For people of my generation, those WERE the days," Werbe says — and, he hopes, imply some relation to the present.

"It brings up all the issues that are still important today — some of them, if not all of them," Werbe explains. "The problems haven't been solved — police brutality, racism, war, civil rights. They're all still with us. So I hope (the book) attracts people back into thinking about it."

Werbe did enjoy his fictional foray — and is "inspired to write another," for which he already has the first sentence and a premise that's set in Cuba.

"This one is going to be really hard to write, because I can't draw on personal experience," Werbe says. "I'm going to have to create whole new people. I've been to Cuba many times, so I know a little but not in the same way I knew about ('Summer On Fire'). So this will be another challenge, and I'm looking forward to it."

"FIRE"-d up: Peter Werbe talks about "Summer On Fire: A Detroit Novel" at 6 p.m. Friday, March 12, virtually via Source Booksellers in Detroit. Tickets via peterwerbe.org/events.

Werbe joins Fifth Estate colleague Harvey Ovshinsky ("Scratching the Surface: Adventures in Storytelling") to talk about their new books at 7 p.m. March 16, presented via Zoom and Facebook by the Book Beat in Oak Park. Reservations via thebookbeat.com.

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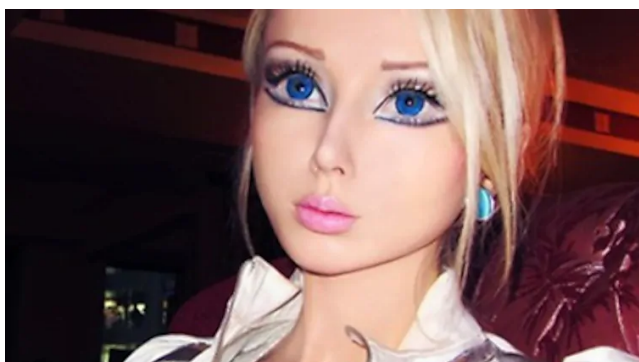
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