

**Defining Detroit: Recent Detroit Fiction**  
**Peter Markus, Susan Messer, Michael Zadoorian: Introduction**  
**March 18, 2010**

Good evening. For the last several weeks, members of Marygrove's Institute for Detroit Studies have been working with New Detroit and staff and faculty at Wayne State University to produce an all-day symposium that took place earlier today. Called *Taking Charge of Our Story*, it was a response to the simplistic and ill-informed characterizations of metropolitan Detroit that often appear in the media, most recently in some of the articles in *Time Magazine's* "Assignment Detroit" series. Historians, urban planners, journalists, and community leaders assembled not to engage in cheerleading for the city, but to try to complicate the narrative, to show that the roots of Detroit's problems are deeper than usually portrayed, that blame for the problems cannot be placed on any one event, person, or group—especially not on the people of Detroit, who suffer the effects of deindustrialization, long-standing corporate disinvestment, and government programs that for decades subsidized the central city's abandonment by the white middle-class, and by businesses and institutions.

Detroit's creative writers have been complicating the narrative for a very long time. Like the scholars who spoke at today's symposium, Detroit's poets and fiction writers undercut the sensationalistic blaming-of-the-victim that often passes for serious analysis. One cannot read the poetry and fiction set in and around Detroit and arrive at the stereotypes about the city and its people commonly perpetuated in the popular media. There's too much of the human story in their work and too much stirring beneath the surface for serious readers to come away with superficial ideas about what has happened in Detroit, and this evening's guest authors in very different ways deepen our understanding of the radical changes that have beset this city and region. Detroiters from every background learn early that such changes are a fact of life, that human life is precarious, and that any sense of well-being is transitory and hope of prolonged economic prosperity illusory.

At first glance the wonderfully evocative, deceptively simple stories of **Peter Markus** might seem to be far removed from the serious issues that have beset this region. But listen and read carefully. These are not only stories about people who like to fish; they are reflections on life in the post-industrial urban world, a place downriver, where change brings diminishment, where the steel mills and factories have closed up; where the placement of a for sale sign represents the instability of urban existence and threatens everything a child knows and loves; where fishing represents, among other things, a necessary return to a subsistence existence that comes nowhere close to providing the livelihood provided by industrial employment. But the industry has left its residue. As we read Markus's descriptions of the muddy, murky waters, we cannot help but be reminded that they are no longer the source of a purely healthy food supply but have been forever altered by the factories, farms, and development that continues to pollute as well as destabilize our lives. In the strangely violent behavior of the children, too, we find represented a response to the insecurity and untrustworthiness of the adult, urban world. But the stories reveal another response, one that also reflects life in post-industrial Detroit. For although Detroit's industrial production has been on the decline for the last six decades, its artistic, literary, and musical production has risen dramatically. Peter Markus's stories are full of singing, sculpting, and imaginative re-creation, and, like his characters, Markus builds wonders with a few simple elements: water, mud, fish, and stars in the night air. Despite the perception of loss and diminishment, this post-industrial city in Markus's work, is a place of human and natural beauty and possibility.

Please welcome Peter Markus.

**Susan Messer's** novel, *Grand River and Joy*, represents a very different kind of fiction than that of Peter Markus. This novel takes us back to the 1960s when the west side of Detroit still had a sizeable, though clearly diminishing Jewish population. Messer focuses on 1967, but not, as the simplistic popular versions of the story go, to show that it was the *cause* of Detroit's decline. Instead she shows that

members of the Jewish community, like those of other white ethnic groups, had been leaving the city for some time, and that small businesses were already suffering due to the loss of population. In this she reinforces the great historian, Thomas Sugrue's assertion that the roots of Detroit's crisis predated 1967 by about two decades. Messer suggests that the movement away from the city was not a blind rush on the part of unthinking people, but instead was discussed and debated in homes, neighborhoods, businesses, and institutions throughout the city. The main characters in her novel are troubled by the social and economic turmoil around them. The "For Sale" sign here, as in Markus, becomes the signifier of this uncertainty and instability, the threat to home and neighborhood. Her white characters, even those most progressive, are clearly mystified by the complexities of race. They simply do not understand what life is like for those who, as Sugrue reminds us, "disproportionately" bear the impact of the "inequality" generated by American capitalism. They have to be educated by their African American friends and associates. But, true to the actual history, Messer shows that even these relatively sensitive, intelligent white Detroiters, succumb eventually to the forces that have made metropolitan Detroit even more segregated and its resources even more unequally distributed than in 1967. This novel grapples in thought-provoking ways with the complexities of a crucial period in Detroit's history.

Please welcome Susan Messer back home to the west side.

Like Peter Markus and Susan Messer, for **Michael Zadoorian** change become an inescapable fact of life in and around Detroit. His is a fiction of aftermath, and his characters inhabit a second-hand environment, made up of places and things that originally belonged to somebody else, the leftovers from a period of prosperity—real or imagined. They deal in antiques and period furniture, heirlooms, "relics," "junk." One character named Jeff says he lives in a house "filled with objects taken from . . . other people's houses." In the title story of his volume of short stories, the narrator takes note of an urban curiosity: Why, a character wonders, as he rides the Woodward bus downtown, was Detroit once the site of three Polynesian restaurants: the Mauna Loa, Chin Tiki, Trader Vic's—all now abandoned and in ruins? Why, another character wonders, is the city now home to so many stores that have been turned into wig shops, second-hand stores that sell second-hand hair?

There's a sense in our city that we have fallen from greatness, that there was a past that was rich and wonderful, and we cling to its relics as if they might again bring the prosperity we once had. Yet Zadoorian asks, what was the purpose of all this stuff—new or used? Why do we live in a "world of things"? Zadoorian's character Jeff has great nostalgia for the 1960s, the decade of his birth. He and his wife furnish their home in formica, mosaics, blond end tables, bi-level coffee tables. They covet Jeff's parents' stash of furniture and other stuff from the 1950s and sixties, and when his mother finally dies, they waste little time in laying claim to it. But does it all mean? What was it all for? Jeff's new possessions throw him into deep depression as he realizes that they bring him no more happiness than they brought his parents. So much of our energy in this and any American city has been absorbed in the quest for things. As we contemplate in these stories the purpose of this quest, we might just realize that, although our city's economy has clearly declined, *we* haven't fallen from anything.

If things do not bring happiness, what finally does bring meaning and purpose in life? Why are we working so hard? These are questions that we ask after reading Dudley Randall's poignant poem, "George." They are questions that Michael Zadoorian and other Detroit story tellers address with particular insight.

Here is Michael Zadoorian.

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