

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 industry—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.

