



Motor City Burning: A Novel

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Willie Bledsoe, once an idealistic young black activist, is now a burnt-out case. After leaving a snug berth at Tuskegee Institute to join the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he has become bitterly disillusioned with the civil rights movement and its leaders. He returns home to Alabama to try to write a memoir about his time in the cultural whirlwind, but the words fail to come.

The surprise return of his Vietnam veteran brother in the spring of 1967 gives Willie a chance to drive a load of smuggled guns to the Motor City – and make enough money to jump-start his stalled dream of writing his movement memoir. There, at Tiger Stadium on Opening Day of the 1968 baseball season – postponed two days in deference to the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr. – Willie learns some terrifying news: the Detroit police are still investigating the last unsolved murder from the bloody, apocalyptic riot of the previous summer, and a white cop named Frank Doyle will not rest until the case is solved. And Willie is his prime suspect.

Bill Morris's rich and thrilling new novel sets Doyle's hunt amid the history of one of America's most tortured and fascinating cities, as Doyle and Willie struggle with Detroit's deep racial divide, with revenge and forgiveness – and with the realization that justice is rarely attainable, and rarely just.

Motor City Burning: A Novel Details

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From Reader Review Motor City Burning: A Novel for online ebook

Elizabeth Moeller says

I received this book as a Goodreads giveaway.

This book is about race relations in Detroit in the year following the race riots that occurred after Martin Luther King was killed, but is wrapped up in a murder mystery. The two main characters are Willie, a black man from Alabama who originally arrived in Detroit with his brother Wes to sell some guns, and Doyle, a homicide detective who is looking to solve one of the last outstanding murders from the riot.

I really enjoyed the details about each man's experience in Detroit. The author did an excellent job of conveying how the city presents itself to each of them and how the various social layers are formed. I also was interested in the internal struggle Willie was having coming to terms with his place as a black man in America. He saw around him black people that were trying to conform to the rules to be a good person and black people who were bucking those rules and ultimately found that there was no real difference in the treatment received by each of those groups. He ultimately resolves that this is an unfair country and, therefore, he does not necessarily have to work within the rules set forth by the country.

One of my favorite parts of this book is that the baseball season of the Detroit Tigers is a constant presence in the book. The baseball park is a place where everyone in the city can come together to try to piece back together the civic thread of the city.

Chantal says

I thought there was potential for this book but for a story set in the race riots there was not very much historical context and for that reason I think the book really suffers. The characters are not very well fleshed out either. On the whole, I was disappointed

Lisa R. says

This is really a 3.5. At first, I was unimpressed with the writing, but Morris's straightforward style grew on me over time, especially as I began to care about the characters more (and by the end, I cared quite a bit). Plus, it was hard to resist a book set in the same locations I walk and drive through on a daily basis. If you're looking for a quick, engaging read and you're a fan of baseball and/or Detroit, I'd recommend this.

Barbara Gregorich says

I enjoyed reading this story for many reasons. First, I liked the characters of both Willie Bledsoe and Frank Doyle, the former a young African-American recently arrived in Detroit of 1968, the latter a young cop with the Detroit Police. Second, I loved the setting: Detroit during 1968, almost a year after the ghetto rebellions (called riots by media and police), and during the baseball season which would result in the Tigers winning the American League pennant and playing the World Series against the St. Louis Cardinals. Third, I found the character of Willie refreshingly honest. And fourth, I found the other characters in the book interesting — though I did think the male characters were much better developed than the female characters, and I wish the female characters had been less two dimensional.

I was dissatisfied with the lack of tension as the story progressed. From the start Willie is afraid that he might be in trouble with the police. From the start Frank is looking for a murderer who he slowly narrows down to . . . probably Willie Bledsoe. Even though everything that happens brings Frank closer to arresting Willie, I felt no tension over this. And I wanted to feel tension as events escalated.

Jeremy Kitchen says

I finished this although it was so corny and minstrel-y I laughed out loud several times. Does Morris really think a secretary at Motown Records would speak like this "the Tigers done won the World Series?"

Or that every black person in Detroit says "D-Troit" or lacks education in grammar? I understand that it is difficult to write colloquial dialogue, but Morris really screws the pooch. I kept reading just to see how bad it would get.

Sara says

I have a LOT of problems with this book, most of them based on a middle aged white guy writing first person as a young black activist.

Chris says

A very clever love letter to Detroit dressed up as meditation on race relations in the United States dressed up as a police procedural. Written with warmth and empathy for the characters.

Nancy says

Since I was a high school graduate and freshman at U-M during the year this novel occurs - 1968, and I well remember the riots from July 1967 being a Detroit, I brought a lot of hometown cred and memories to this (audio) book. It's a tale of Detroit in the very beginning of its decline from racial tensions that have not been fully resolved even today, but with the glow of prosperity and a great, memorable Tigers season that ended in a glorious Game 7 of the Series. The story's perspectives come from a transplanted black Alabamian, Willie Bledsoe, former SNCC member trying to make a life for himself in Detroit. and Frank Doyle, a white homicide cop in the very flawed Detroit Police Department.

I enjoyed the story lines and the many references to places and things specific to Detroit. And I loved the unspooling of the the Tigers' '68 season as a thread throughout. This pleasure, though, was marred by repeated annoyance at the narrator's pronunciation clinkers, especially Lolich (Mickey Lolich, which was pronounced "La-lick" by the narrator!) and Dave DeBusschere (pronounced Daybooshay by the narrator), though he did get Livernois right.

I will be looking for more Bill Morris for murder/crime entertainment.

Earnest Thompson says

This is a quick read and just downright fun! Oh, it's about a city I've known for most of my life (Detroit) and a baseball team (the Tigers) that won the World Series when I was a teen. So the subject matter had me in any case. But the heart of the story is a tightly told mystery tale of the 1967 racial riots that devastated the Motor City, accelerating an exodus from the urban center that still hasn't stopped. The protagonists are broadly drawn and tangled in the mystery of the only unsolved murder victim of the riots. The fast moving, highly readable story pits a cynical African American veteran of the SNCC campaigns of the South against an equally jaded Irish homicide detective whose officer brother already has moved to the far away 'burbs. (And they are both really sensitive males, in an instance of rushing the times a bit). Along the way we meet Detroit area denizens that may be composites but all are recognizable: from the country club lush who owns the biggest car dealer around to the inner city fast talking lawyer w/ mojo and connections; from the buzzed hippie chick on Plum Street to the elegant receptionist at Motown on Grand Blvd. In fact, the streets are still filled w/ people you probably knew from decades ago. The action moves back & forth between the Tigers march toward the '68 pennant to the smoky street looting & rooftop snipers of both residents and occupying National Guard troops. The angry, misunderstood Vietnam vet gets a cameo as do social misfits, black & white and both genders. What brings them all together are the bleachers of old Tiger Stadium and the constant radio calls of the venerable Detroit broadcaster, Ernie Harwell. It's clear the author has done his homework and captured the tones (and tunes) of the times. As auto guys often say about their business, this Motor City smells like gasoline.

Joan says

I enjoyed the book, but it did not ring true to me. I thought the writer had empathy for the characters. The characters are extremes: the cooking, kind, thoughtful cop, Doyle and the former Freedom Rider, writer, truth teller, Willie Bledsoe with the Uncle telling him he can succeed. The character felt more like caricatures or types than real people. Doyle is trying to find the killer of Helen Hull, a woman from his neighborhood, who was killed in the Detroit riots. Willie has just returned to Detroit after giving up on the Freedom Rides when he sees that the leaders, including Martin Luther King, don't ever ride the buses or take the abuse. Doyle finally gets a tip on who could have shot Helen. It leads him to Willie. Writer's block has stopped Bledsoe from writing a book of his memoirs. He finally starts writing again after meeting a beautiful woman, the Tigers games and realizing that he didn't kill Helen. Books leaves me questioning why would Bledsoe come back to Detroit. The book kept me reading, but does not ring true to me.

Thaddeus says

Blended my love of the city of Detroit with a fictional story of the 67 riots and the 68 Tiger World Championship.

Aaron Robertson says

A well-researched, plainly written novel about an unsolved murder that occurred during the 1967 Detroit

riots, disillusionment with certain figureheads and activist groups of the civil rights movement, and the joys and frustration of watching the Detroit Tigers. At times this felt like a Detroit promotional ad; the extensive use of place names, Michigan brands, and references to Detroit history ostensibly deepens one connection to the setting. This is usually true, but Morris can hardly hide the fact that this is, in some ways, an encomium of the city that happens to have a plot. Still, Morris is an adept writer. The writing rings of Elmore Leonard: cool, snappy, occasional flair tempered with great control. Willie Bledsoe, the protagonist who is on the run from a determined detective, is a compelling character whose transformation over the course of the book is rather directly stated, albeit still interesting. I had fun reading it.

Margaret1358 Joyce says

Just as this novel's protagonist, Willie Bledsoe, an idealistic black activist from Alabama, had to write the story of his dedication, body and soul, to the 1960's civil rights movement, so too, it feels like Bill Morris absolutely had to get this story down. And for that fictionalized 'rendering of accounts', I am deeply appreciative. This is the gargantuan story of the racial divide in the U.S., in crystallized form: Detroit, during the 1967 racial riot which tore that city apart, and 1968, the aftermath with its stunningly cathartic experience of the Detroit Tigers' win of the World Series in baseball, an event in which the whole gasoline-fueled city lifted off--as Morris is fond of saying--in ecstatic self-celebration. This is an important read.

Donald Schopflocher says

Putatively a crime novel with point of view alternating between detective and quarry, this is really a character study of these individuals. However, the largest 'character' is the city of Detroit in 1967 and 1968 and my having lived in Windsor Ontario in those times was my principal motivation for reading the novel. From that standpoint I was well satisfied. Not much tension or surprise in the crime story though.

Lena Belova says

The plot, characters, and dialogue were lifeless and cliché. About a quarter of the way in I googled the author to confirm my suspicion that he was white- its obvious. Felt a bit uncomfortable sometimes at his generalizations and stereotypes of black people and his take on the civil rights movement through a black character. Especially because he used black dialect and the n word as a third person narrator. His women characters were flat and often objectified, but at least all the other characters were just as static and uninteresting?

His rate of revelation was weird. Half the novel was too predicable and the other half relied too heavily on 'the reveal.'
