

A Suburb's Burning Book

Mark Steel's gossipy **GROSSE POINTE INFERNO** catches fire with readers

BY NANCY NALL DERRINGER

The cover of Mark Steel's latest novel, *Grosse Pointe Inferno*, features two women — one a blonde in camouflage short shorts, the other a brunette in a leather bustier. The blonde holds an assault rifle that appears to be pouring flame into an open briefcase full of cash, while the brunette regards the camera as though it were a very, very bad boy who might need some discipline. Anyone who lives in the Pointes, perhaps the last place in metro Detroit where a woman can wear a madras headband without irony, could be forgiven for feeling a little baffled. After all, one never sees women like this on Kercheval.

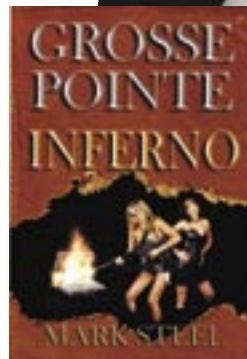
Steel thinks you just aren't looking hard enough. To him, the city's tony eastern suburbs are the proverbial seething cauldrons of lust, adultery, envy, greed and any other deadly sin you could name.

"I wanted to see if a guy who had read maybe 10,000 books, who could tell a good story at the gym, could write a book," says Steel, a former used-car dealer, personal trainer and gym owner. He added author to his résumé last summer with his vanity publication, *Grosse Pointe Pimp*, proof that servants, not the estate tax, is the true Achilles heel of the rich. Steel took the stories he overheard in the gym or experienced himself as trainer to the rich and powerful and dressed them in less fictional veiling than that worn by one of his main characters, an ex-Windsor Ballet stripper who married way, way up and found herself the mistress of a house on Windmill Pointe Drive.

Or at least that's what we're obviously expected to believe, reading the tale of "Maxwell Lexington," a "retail billionaire" who lives in an enormous mansion on Lake St. Clair, father of a large brood who, in his golden years, takes a mistress. All this is related by his trainer/bodyguard/driver/yacht captain, "Mark." Any resemblance to Steel himself, his former employer and his experience working for same is entirely, you know, coincidental. Because although the Pointes, in Steel's world, may be moral cesspools just under the surface, they're also pretty well stocked with lawyers.

But what's a lawsuit to a novelist, anyway? Free publicity and lots of book sales. And sales are something Steel thinks about — a lot. As his own publisher, he's responsible for every copy, as well as every typo, misplaced subplot and grammatical error. The fact his books have loads of the latter three aren't affecting the first. Steel won't discuss sales figures — "I have an ex who's too interested in that" — but he does claim success for *Grosse Pointe Pimp*, enough that it goaded him to write *Grosse Pointe Inferno*, the sequel. He says *Pimp* is in its fourth printing, largely through word-of-mouth recommendations, and earned Steel enough that he sold his gym, the better to write full time.

"Grosse Pointe is a close-knit community, and that really helped," he says. Chain bookstores wouldn't even consider stocking *Pimp*, so he stocked it in his gym and sold 10 copies the first night. He found outlets here and there in gift shops and other small businesses, but when the gossip mill got rolling and cus-



NAUGHTY Steel writes about the seamy side of life in the Pointes.

tomers started asking for it, even Borders and Barnes & Noble caved (the latter hosted a signing for *Inferno* the week after its publication). A librarian at the Grosse Pointe Public Library said the first book had "a long waiting list."

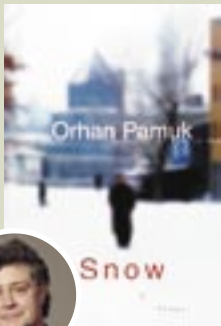
That same librarian politely described *Grosse Pointe Pimp* as a "summer-type of read." Marta Salij at the *Detroit Free Press* was ruder, making a passing reference to it as "dreck." A reader's opinion will depend on whether you find inelegant prose campy or infuriating. Jeffrey Eugenides need not look over his shoulder. Steel follows the classic advice — "write what you know" — perhaps a bit too well; we learn as much about abs, glutes and delts as we do about the motivations of his characters, who have soap opera-like names such as Rico Pagan and Norman Baights. A woman of Russian extraction has all her dialogue rendered phonetically (driving a Cadillac makes her "feel reech"). Eyes pierce when they're not narrowed to slits. Breasts are abundant. Sex is ecstatic. But Steel, although not a great writer, certainly knows a good story when he hears one, and has enough of a cornball sense of humor about himself, both on the page and in person, that neither book ever feels too serious. (Ask him whether Mark Steel is his real name, and he shoots back, "No. It used to be 'Twain.'")

Besides, what do critics know? One Grosse Pointe Farms resident I talked to loved *Grosse Pointe Pimp* and recommended it to everyone she knew, calling it "juicy and gossipy" and the talk of the city after its publication. "But you can't quote me," she said. "Our company does work for ..." She named a certain east-side billionaire. Well, they say William Randolph Hearst hated *Citizen Kane*, too. ■

Derringer is a Grosse-Pointe-based freelance writer. E-mail: editorial@hourdetroit.com.

What I'm Reading

*Culture mavens



Graham Beal

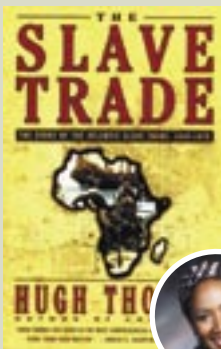
Director, DIA

Snow

by Orhan Pamuk

Don Quixote

by Miguel de Cervantes, translated by Edith Grossman

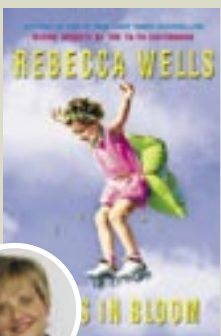


Christy Coleman

Executive Director, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History

The Slave Trade

by Hugh Thomas



Shawn Kahle

President and CEO, New Detroit Science Center

Ya-Yas in Bloom

by Rebecca Wells