

# Detroit: a biography by scott martelle book review example

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## **About the author**

Scott Martelle is a veteran journalist and a former staff writer for the L. A. Times. He is a journalist of the third generation and was born in Scarborough, Maine. He spent part of his childhood there, and the rest in Wellsville, New York, which is two hours south of the town of Buffalo. He got his first newspaper job at age sixteen, where he wrote a sports column for a weekly high school newspaper called the Wellsville Patriot. He then started covering local news on a part-time basis for the Wellsville Daily Reporter. Martelle attended Fredonia State University. Here, he was the editor of The Leader newspaper. He was also the news director for the campus radio, WCVF. After graduation, he worked for Rochester Times-Union, the Jamestown Post-Journal, The Detroit News and the L. A. Times. There, he covered presidential campaigns, did book reviews, covered local news, and also did several Sunday magazine feature pieces. He also did some freelance work which appeared in the New York Times, Buffalo News, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, Solidarity and elsewhere. He also occasionally speaks at school and teaches college classes about politics, writing and journalism. He currently lives in Irvine, California. He is married to Margaret Martelle, and they have two sons, Michael and Andrew. The book Detroit: a biography was inspired by his experiences when he lived briefly in Detroit.

## **Detroit: A biography**

Martelle chose to call his work a biography instead of history so as to highlight on some of the main events in the evolution of the city and explore the main forces that shaped the city of Detroit into what it is today. This

concept remains at the back of the mind of the reader all through the book.

Another possible problem with is its subject matter.

Detroit, more so than most of the other cities in America, appears to embody one distinctive side of modern America, the story of an earlier period of blue collar prosperity which was fuelled by unions, and has long since gone into decay, decrepitude, and broken dreams. This makes it an easy mark for romanticism by politicians who are eager to build their career or advocate for an agenda, or by people advocating for the renewal of urban centers through urban consolidation, farming collectives, and widespread programs in public works. These can also be members of the imaginative lower class attracted by gritty streets, cheap rents, and stories and scenes associated a decaying society.

Martelle depicts in thorough detail the rising of Detroit as a microcosm of America during its industrial halcyon days and also the fading of the city on these same terms without falling victim to romance. In the book *Detroit: A Biography*, Martelle crafted a description of an American city that was once revered that somehow manages to be both highly informative and compelling. This book gives a clear picture of the differences and similarities between the Detroit that was and the city it is today. The book offers much insight on many social ills in Detroit, and the changes that have brought about these ills.

### **Crime and poverty**

Detroit was, and still is, plagued with many crimes. The level of poverty is also quite high, and there are remarkably few developments compared to

other cities. Eleanor Roosevelt described the city as the paradise of slumlords where most of the houses were rentals, and the rate of crime was six times higher than in other cities. Juvenile delinquency was also quite high, being ten times higher than in other cities. Infectious diseases such as tuberculosis were also much higher than in other cities. The housing conditions were exceptionally poor, and unemployment was unusually high. The present of Detroit is in dire straits. Even after the revival of the three prominent automotive companies (Ford, General Motors, Chrysler), it is still possible for Detroit to run out of money to meet its essential obligations any moment now. It is currently battling it out with the Republican governor of Michigan over possible bailout funds from the state. Crime and unemployment remain much higher than in any of the other cities of around the same size. Education, income, and health outcomes also remain lower. This was not always the case.

There was a time in history when Detroit was famous for its clean and broad streets, wide, well-kept walks, beautiful shade trees and manicured lawns, attractive public squares and parks and its magnificent architecture. Any consideration of life in Detroit-- or its continued survival on life support -- would necessarily lead to the many crises of this present day. Martelle ends his story by talking, about present day Detroit and the existing potential, to repair the ailing city.

## **Racism**

One key issue that arises is the relationship between the races. Martelle keeps the relationship between the African American of Detroit and the white

residents near the front, tracing its emergence from the very first introduction of slaves very early in the city's existence, through its materialization as a city with a black majority in the twentieth century (Katzman 15). Racial discrimination could be seen in job opportunities, where black people were either not hired or faced discrimination at the places of work. There was also police brutality for the black population. This was made possible by the fact that a large section of the police department was white dominated .

### **The automobile industry**

The book also documents the rise, fall, and possible rebirth of the automobile industry in considerable detail and in relation to the condition of the city as a whole. By the 1920s, the manufacturing industry was making Detroit boom. There were powerful unions, which vaulted automobile industrial workers into the comfortable middle class. The lives of many changed during this period. But, this dependence on a single industry, especially one that was cyclic, shortsighted and extremely eager to move to the suburbs, led to the eventual doom the splendid city.

The devastating 1943 and 1967 race riots; the social plagues of crime, drugs and poorly performing schools, and the inept political leadership of the city combined to make matters in Detroit worse. Martelle skillfully combines topics to illustrate how the fraught history Detroit's race relations and its reliance on this industry contributed to its decline from as early as the 1940s.

The city of Detroit has many highways, which had been built to contain the

many cars from the automobile industry. These highways only served to make the movement of people from Detroit to the suburbs easier. Many of the white people in Detroit fled to the suburbs, as did the black middle class (Carlisle 12). This affected tax base of the city and significantly reduced its chances of recovery. Detroit is one of the cities in America which have the highest population of blacks, with 80% of the people being black.

Martelle's background in journalism shines through in the epilogue and preface. This book can be seen as an excellent example of compelling narration and meticulous research. The book covers the history of Detroit from its sheer beginnings as one of the French colonies during the eighteenth century to its gradual decline in the last half of the twentieth century. Martelle supports his account with sufficient statistics and data, from trends in population to median incomes over periods of time to the production of automobiles. Although the reader may sometimes get lost in the figures, the evidence provided gives both his narrative and research credit.

In his narration, Martelle incorporates portraits of individuals in Detroit, each with some form of connection to the era being discussed at that particular point. For example, the first portrait is about a retiree who had ancestors among the important Detroiters from the eighteenth century onward. This and other snapshots of individuals serve to substantially enrich the understanding of the reader on Detroit and the people inextricably tied to it. Martelle also couches the story of Detroit within broader currents of the history of America, framing both the tragedies and triumphs of Detroit. This way the reader learns of how Detroit was captured during the 1812 War, its

crucial role as one of the main stops for the Underground Railroad, and also as a breeding ground for abolitionism before the Civil War. Detroit was also the place of birth of the automobile industry of America and a substantial depot for smuggling during the Prohibition, the "Arsenal of Democracy" during the Second World War. He also talks about the race riots during the 60s, the crack epidemic in the 80s, and how the city government mismanaged it thereafter (Bragg 24).

## Critique

Martelle's account has some serious flaws. It relies too heavily on the economic, political, and demographic history and neglects the culture, leaving a significant gap in the life and history of Detroit. Although he explicitly states in the preface of the book that he will not include culture in order to focus on those other aspects, it seems contradictory to the concept of delineating the "life" of a city, to leave out the precise elements that give vibrancy and color to that life. Detroit, without considering the cultural aspect and features such as Delta blues, Motown, jazz, hardcore, and hip-hop and the fast life, just is not the same. Martelle's account also appears to stall in the 1970s. A huge portion of the book is devoted to the history of Detroit and in documenting the steps it took so as to arrive at its current circumstances. He should have, however, devoted some much space to writing about its present.

Although he explains at considerable length about the political career of the first black mayor by the name Coleman Young his retelling of the fate of Detroit throughout the 80s to the present is not covered in depth. Martelle

also fails to provide much information about the actual tenure of Young. It makes the ending rather incomplete to a book that is otherwise excellent. It makes a delightful read which leaves the reader with an interest to know more about Detroit's next phase in life.

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