

Back to summer of 1964

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In 1964, a young Detroit and University of Michigan student, Denise Nicholas, went to Mississippi to work in the civil rights movement.

She could act, so she joined the Free Southern Theater, a touring company that brought live theater to rural people who'd never seen it before. She acted in 17 cities that summer and saw a world very different from Detroit.

The experience stayed with Nicholas for decades. She became a successful TV actress. At midlife, she decided to try writing fiction, where she could revel in language and control the story.

And the story that came to her was set in the summer of 1964, in Mississippi. Nicholas worked five years on her book with Janet Fitch, the author of "White Oleander."

What she ended up with was "Freshwater Road" (Agate Publishing, \$23.95), a finely realized and written novel about a young Detroit and U-M student who goes to Mississippi in 1964 to register poor black people to vote. The young Detroit, Celeste Tyree, suffers disillusionment, discouragement and violence, but triumphs in the end.

QUESTION: Where did the main character, Celeste Tyree, come from?

A: Well, I thought I could do an autobiography and write about the Free Southern Theater, or I could do something that would be more important for a general reading audience, which would be to take one person and take her through the journey of being in Mississippi to do the real work, which was voter registration.

Q: You put Celeste in a fictional town, Pineyville, that's almost too small to be a town.

A: I wanted to set the story in a place I didn't know, because I wanted to discover it. So I started reading about the piney woods and the logging industry in southern Mississippi, the Pearl River, how the landscape's quite different there than it is in the delta, how there were no plantations, really, in that area, how there was a real different kind of history there.

Q: Why did you give her your Detroit background?

A: Because Detroit is a very special city. And I wanted in my first novel to lift that up as well, just as I wanted to lift up that summer of '64.

Q: Did you live on Outer Drive, as Celeste's father, Shuck, does?

A: No, nobody in the family ever lived on Outer Drive!

I wanted to set Shuck's home in an area that to me has a kind of benign and lovely quality ... on the edge of blue-collar Detroit and nice.

Q: Celeste encounters some very ugly things in "Freshwater Road." What parts of the book were the most difficult for you?

A: The hardest parts for me have to do with the black struggle during those years and I, on many occasions, had to pull back from the computer. ... It wouldn't be just because I was writing a particular passage that brought up the past in terms of that struggle, but because I was surrounding myself with that history, I was looking at documentaries all the time, I was listening to music from that period, I was reading books, so I was really immersed in a particular time and place. And it was a very difficult time and place.

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