

FEAR AND HOPE IN THE 1980s

a review by Elaine Thomas

Paul Crenshaw. *Melt with Me: Coming of Age and Other '80s Perils*. The Ohio State University Press / Mad Creek Books, 2023.

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PAUL CRENSHAW is the author of previous essay collections *This One Will Hurt You* (Mad Creek Books, 2019) and *This We'll Defend: A Noncombat Veteran on War and Its Aftermath* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019). His essays and short fiction have appeared in numerous venues, including *The Pushcart Prize*, *Best American Essays*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Rumpus*, *Oxford American*, and *NCLR* (an essay in the 2012 issue). He earned his MFA from UNC Greensboro.

Melt with Me: Coming of Age and Other '80s Perils, an essay collection by Paul Crenshaw, examines a seeming multitude of fears faced, or at least felt, by child-ren and adolescents during the 1980s. They lived in the shadow of international, national, and localized threats that ranged from nuclear missile proliferation amid geopolitical tensions to stranger danger, razor blades in candy apples, and exaggerated claims of Satanism with accompanying ritual sacrifice. Popular culture of the time gave voice to and reinforced those anxieties. As surely as Crenshaw's book is a memoir-in-essays, it also provides thoughtful cultural critique.

Crenshaw looks back at the experiences he and his friends shared – and endured. He brings to the task the mature analytical and descriptive skills of an essayist recognized for his craft. The copious perils of the 1980s, real and imagined, are evoked in a manner which also contains flashes of humor. Dark humor, to be sure, but conveyed in such a way that the reader understands and feels the drive toward connection and love that underlies the fear and, at times, anger. It is this desire to balance fear with hope that clearly hung over the author's childhood and adolescence – and which packs an emotional wallop. Crenshaw's writing is clean and clear, devoid of showy gimmicks or pyrotechnics. His precise images put the reader right inside the scene and deep inside the boy's head and heart and make you think and feel along with him. Courage is required for an introspective boy to excavate his own thoughts and feelings as he tries to understand a peril-

ous world, learning what part of its perceived dangers ring true and what under careful scrutiny emerge as mythical constructs.

If memories or mentions of the 1980s evoke in you a personal "greed is good" ethos, something in the manner of the movie *Wall Street* or of any other decade-of-decadence tropes based in urban affluence, such as Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, you almost certainly did not grow up in a small, gritty Southern town. In contrast, Crenshaw's childhood and adolescence included all the requisite images from that environment – revivals, church camps, football games, riding around town with friends – ordinary small-town events that are recognized and understood immediately by those from similar backgrounds. In *Melt with Me*, however, Crenshaw does far more than tell another story of one boy coming of age in a specific time and place. He possesses a sensitive awareness of the wider cultural influences that created anxiety for him and his peers, the omnipresent fear they felt threatening not only their day-to-day lives but their very existence.

The book's title, and the cover image, call out the fear of thermonuclear war and its threat of annihilation. Crenshaw states, "I knew, even before Billy Joel began to write about fires and who started them, that the United States and Soviet Union were fanning fires that might burn us all" (176). The title also references the 1982 song by the band Modern English, "I Melt with You." Its lyrics suggest we will melt together when the end comes. Love and war were easy to confuse and conflate in a

world on fire, and bring to mind another '80s song mentioned, "Love Is a Battlefield."

One of Crenshaw's essays is titled "Candy Cigarettes." Almost everyone seemed to smoke in the 1980s. Cigarette smoke, like the fear of nuclear war, hung over everything. Even children participated, through candy cigarettes. In a sense, the world was literally on fire. Other essay titles (and topics) include "Morgue," an exploration with his friends of the morgue of an old, abandoned tuberculosis sanatorium; "Dead Baby," which jarringly intersperses dead-baby jokes with the true story of a toddler who died after suffering physical abuse at the hands of a stepfather; and "Professional Wrestling Is Real," a look at good and evil playing out right before one's eyes, along with implicit cultural stereotypes and "other" hatred. As Crenshaw says about that good/evil battle, "It's a simple solution, to love symbols. Much easier than looking inside at what causes such enmity in the first place . . . why we accept so easily that anyone outside our own small spheres is worthy of our suspicion" (76).

Some of the material is difficult, but this reviewer read and learned from all but two of the book's twenty-two essays. "Arc" involved a mouse shocked to death during a high school science experiment. "Cold" told about a feral cat encountered during rabbit hunting. Failure to finish these two short pieces is in no way a criticism of Crenshaw's writing; conversely, it had to do with his descriptive



COURTESY OF PAUL CRENSHAW

power. The reviewer holds a particular sensitivity toward animal suffering. The failure to finish reading them is noted as a warning that every essay may not be for every reader.

Some of the material contains humorous moments, one example being the description of riding on a church bus as a young adolescent. At random intervals the minister's wife stood up at the front of the bus and instructed everyone to raise their hands. The goal, to ensure that no inappropriate touching was going on, taught "a lesson [he] learned early – that if they don't want you to do it, it's probably awesome" (22).

Melt with Me should appeal to anyone (1980s or not) who has ever been a young adolescent male or who has ever wanted to look inside the mind of one. Crenshaw found longed-for hope in cartoons, in the way Bugs Bunny overcame adversity: "Where I failed, Bugs triumphed" (42). Immersion in video games

offered the same sense of escape and the desire for a better world. Later, popular music met those same needs, even as the author confesses that he frequently failed to fully grasp the meaning of many of the lyrics.

The book suggests connection, the basis for love, is where hope lies. In an essay titled "The Sadness Scale, As Measured by Stars and Whales," Crenshaw writes, "There's a whale in the Pacific Ocean that sings at such a high frequency no other whales can hear it. Scientists have been monitoring it for twenty years, and for all that time, it's been alone, still hoping someone is listening" (197).

Melt with Me engages the thoughtful reader. Even when it hurts. Maybe especially when it hurts. Crenshaw's is not an easy outlook. The universal, existential struggle for meaning and hope is always there, yet he makes it clear that in the end readers must make their own choices on hope. ■

ABOVE Paul Crenshaw (right) with writer/musician Tom Maxwell, "Mixtape Musings: How the Pop Culture of the 80s and Music Scene of the 90s Shaped Our Lives" panelists at the Greensboro Bound Literary Festival, Greensboro, NC, 18 May 2024