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Independent Publishers Book Award winner - a Silver IPPY!

She asks him—do you want to play your little rock 'n roll songs or change the world? He says—both.
The recessionary days of 1974. Chicago. Pepper Porter is on his improbable way to rock 'n roll stardom when his long-gone girlfriend reappears. Sooz, a subversively brilliant computer wizard, has come up with the algorithm that will forever change the direction of computer communications, fuel the birth of the personal computer and the Internet. Trouble is—she's on the lam from the FBI—she's ex-Weather Underground, radical and revolutionary. She wants to change the world, and deal with her past. So does Pepper.
Pepperland is about the search for 'it', the hard-to-describe ecstatic magic that occurs when one experiences great music and amazing technology. Or love.

Starred review on Booklist, (May 15: "Wightman's first novel is a riotous, occasionally electrifying celebration of love and music, capturing the turmoil of its times with a touch of otherworldliness that seems right in sync with rock 'n' roll."

Pepperland Details

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From Reader Review Pepperland for online ebook

Suzanne says

Although it started slowly, I eventually got hooked on this story of the confusion, paranoia and ultimate joy of the sixties generation, on the verge of the revolution of the digital, virtual world.

Jane says

This book has all the rhythm of a great rock n roll song...it catches you up and keeps the excitement going. The plot has some cool twists and turns, and the characters are so very real. Sooz is a definitive hot, brilliant woman who has the plan for our Internet futures in her soaring brain. Pepper has what it takes to be the great leading man...he has attitude, he has humor, and he knows what he wants.
The book has its own unique flow. The beat of the writing is strong, but it is also lyrical. If you knew the 70's in the Midwest the names of the radio station and the DJ's are like old friends you get to visit again. The songs Pepper creates in the book made me laugh out loud.
It is a solid read. Savor it!

Willa says

Set in Chicago in the 70's, "Pepperland" is the first-person coming-of-age account of "Pepper" Porter, a burgeoning rock star, and his techy girlfriend, Sooz. The big question she asks him is, "Do you want to play your little rock 'n roll songs or change the world?" and his answer is, "Both."

Soon, Sooz (using the alias Grace Slick) is a fugitive, involved with the Weather Underground and on the run from the FBI. When Pepper asks her what her life is like, she answers, "You get used to anything." But also, "I want my life back."

Having lived through that decade, it all rang true to me. Pepperland is part rock-n-roll, part mystery story, part revolutionary treatise, part love story, and all a crazy ride through the tie-died 70's.

I received this book from NetGalley in return for a review; I was not paid for this review, nor required to post a positive review.

Laura says

Barry Wightman immerses us in the turbulent, revolutionary, innovative, and just plain *rockin'* decade of the 1970's in his book *Pepperland* . Martin Alan (Pepper) Porter is a young tech student at University of Michigan in 1970. He's enamored with the computer frontier, and intimidated by a young woman named Susan (Sooz). She rules the boy's club through a stunning mix of good looks and intelligence. Fast forward to

summer break, and they end up camp counselors together in Northern Michigan. After their school aged charges are in their bunks for the night, they sneak down to the banks of Lake Michigan, talk, dream, and *ahem*...you get the drift. Sooz is caught up in dreams bigger than life though. Dreams of changing the world. She's not about to let a little summer romance get in the way, so in August she goes one way, and Pepper heads back to college.

Fast forward to 1973, and Pepper is a U of M graduate, and highly sought after by all the big tech companies in Chicago. He goes on a round of interviews, is courted by IBM, but he can't get Sooz and her revolution out of his mind. He can't quite picture himself as a suited lackey. So what's a 21 year old to do? Start a rock band...duh! Sooz may be shaping the future by bringing computer communication to the masses, but Pepper has some influencing of his own to do--with his Midwestern rock and roll. Nevermind that Sooz is being tailed by a shady government branch created by Nixon, and drags Pepper into her desperate attempts to garner support for her computer plan (essentially a very early form of the internet). It all adds to the crazy ride.

I was born in the 1980's so I had to look up a lot of the terminology thrown around....like a teletype machine...who knew? :) I thoroughly enjoyed reading a plausible explanation for the groundwork leading up to the technology I take for granted though! Pepper can't quite get his head around the concept of e-mail, he marvels at a modem that connects at the "lightening fast" speed of 1200 BITS per second, he plans rendezvous with Sooz by setting up times to call phone booths, and he goes blind digging through microfilm records at the public library. Sooz and Pepper wonder what kind of world their generation will create. We're living in that world now.

At one point Pepper asks Sooz if she has come up with a name for her network. She says "Who cares? Not sure that it's the sort of thing you name. It's just a carrier sensing bandwidth allocation algorithm. Earth-shaking yes. Sexy? No." Pepper replies, "The Fifth Element of creation is the Ether--the green light path of the wisdom of perfected actions, I think it is--it's where Man will possess knowledge that will replace mere faith or belief. Technology. QED." Ethernet...here we come!

Bottom line: Wightman has written a fun book laden with witty references, and occasional elements that give the reader food for thought. Bonus points for introducing me to Percy Bysshe Shelley in the opening quote. Given 3 1/2 stars or a rating of "Very Good". Recommended!

Kate says

I thought I would hate this book's frenetic "rock n'roll" style. However, I actually enjoyed the ride, and I think this book deserves more readers! The author lives in Elm Grove, WI.

Nancy Jurss says

As a child of the 1970's, I found this to be a fun ride through those times - the music, the beginning of the computer revolution, the whole vibe of the times. Enjoyed the writing style including the "footnotes" when he wanted he wanted to add a little information that might detract from the story line.

Cathy says

Read this for book club, didn't quite finish it in time. Finished it now though. I found the interspersing of song lyrics into the normal storyline and dialog fun. Since I have worked in IT for over 30 years, the beginnings of personal computers and the internet interesting as well. The time period, mostly 1974 was my high school Junior year, so I remember Watergate, the hearings and the missing 18-1/2 minutes of tape very well. I was especially intrigued by Eliot's comings and goings. I found a number of different pieces of the story fascinating, but I'm not sure it all worked together for me.

Alyce Rocco says

Barry Wightman's novel, Pepperland, looked to be a good read. There were not as many references to 70's rock 'n roll as I expected. The musical aspect was centered around Porter Pepper's aspirations to change the world through music.

I got as far in the novel as when Porter's band, Pepperland, was former, and assumption, offered contract with Checker Records.

One of the reasons I had trouble reading Pepperland was author's use of numerous footnotes.

"We are driving Otto, our aging VW van. yes, I know it's a hippie-cliche. But our mom loved that van and named it. So it goes."

Okay, so flow of reading is interrupted by something easily incorporated into the story itself. Some of the footnotes might be helpful to readers, for instance, who do not know Jonathon Livingston Seagull or Brian Jones. Yet I could see ways such info could likewise be incorporated into the story.

The other reason I gave up reading Pepperland was due to sentences such as: "The Vice President of Systems Programming Architecture Services and Operating Systems Support. VP/SPAS/OSS and I are discussing my college thesis---*the systems and channel level handling of bisynchronous data communications in an IBM OS/VS2 370 environment.*

Not to be confused with VD/CDPS, VON, WLS, WXRT, KSHE, LSD, FM, IBM...

Again my reading was interrupted as I flipped back to find out what CDPS meant and so on. Yes, yes, I am familiar with LSD, FM, IBM and other acronyms, but too many of them on one page had my mind spinning.

I assume some of this (VP/SPAS/OSS) stuff was intended to be humorous, but was simply annoying to me. Not an easy read and there are so many books, so little time, decided not to waste time reading something hard to follow.

Julie Schoerke says

The cover gives you a sense of the fun. If you love rock 'n roll (at any age, of any generation) and wonder how we got from Batman's computer in his cave to the teeny-tiny things we hold today, this novel sheds light

on the history while also providing a story with a lot of heart. The author is a well-respected journalist who has cut his teeth in the world of literature (as well as being in a rock 'n roll band and being on the cutting edge of computer development in the 70s and 80s)...so the book has an authentic feel to it. I loved it and hope you will too!

Dan says

This book had a great idea/concept; however, it was painful to finish this book off.

To many things were left unexplained (e.g. the appearance of his dead brother and also his old guitar). The book did have some moments (a few scenes in the Playboy club); however, these were few and far between. I also didn't like the writing style - it didn't create the right mood and made me not want to read this book.

I really wanted to like this book but just couldn't.

Mike McClanahan says

Down With Entropy!
If you remember the screech of a modem's handshake signal or falling in love to "Miracles" by Marty Balin (The Jefferson Airplane/Starship's *other* lead singer), you need to read *Pepperland*. If you don't (but want to know what it was like), you need to read it, too.
It's May 4, 1970, and Martin Alan (call me Pepper) Porter is skulking through a computer lab at the University of Michigan in search of the Holy Grail…a bootleg password that gives unlimited access to the school's mainframe computer. It will allow him to immerse himself in the great whirring beast unfettered from the onerous time restrictions imposed on students. It is a love of Pepper's surpassed only by his passion for music.
Pepper's quest leads him to Susan Frommer, a computer whiz who has crashed "The Smart Boys Club" and is a Keeper of the Grail. Sooz, as she prefers to be called, is convinced she's found the key to Universal Enlightenment in her vision of decentralized, unregulated computer networks accessible by the masses and outside the control of oppressors in warmongering governments and the capitalist elite. She's committed to making her digital fantasy world a reality and solicits a reluctant and confused Pepper to join the cause as a condition of possessing the password. Seduced by her charm and beauty, Pepper signs on tentatively, unsure where it may lead, but convinced that wherever Sooz is, he wants to be.
These are heady times in both the world of computing and the world of politics. The Vietnam war is raging and a whole lot of people are unhappy about it, especially on college campuses. While the flames of revolution are being fanned by *Ramparts* magazine, *Soul on Ice*, Kent State, and the Port Huron Statement, these same campuses house legions of nerds and grinders churning out commands by the millions in new languages with exotic names like FORTRAN and COBOL—languages understood only by very large and expensive machines and the subculture that surrounds them.
When these galaxies meld in the predawn hours of Ann Arbor, tentatively at first and passionately later, a new landscape emerges—Pepperland—a countryside full of fear, uncertainty, and doubt but nourished by the kind of ardor only possible during such yeasty times.
After a summer of romance and indoctrination, Sooz informs Pepper that she won't be returning to school that fall, choosing instead to join The Weather Underground, a radical anti-war, anti-establishment cabal that

believes no crime is unjustified when it comes to "bringing down the man." She asks him to join her; he says he can't. She disappears into the bus station as Pepper's ticket takes him home to Chicago to get ready for the school year.

Three years later, still unable to shake thoughts of Sooze, her passion, and her allure, Pepper is at a crossroad. Does he take an attractive offer from IBM, or does he chase his dream of changing the world with his music?

Music wins out, and after a few months of disastrous gigs and intense songwriting, Pepper snatches his younger brother Dave away from college and a soul-crushing breakup and convinces him to help start a new band. They find a down-and-out record producer named Creech in Chicago to back them and things begin to take off.

And the postcards keep coming. For the past three years they've shown up every few months with postmarks from all parts of the country. They carry cryptic messages and are unsigned, but Pepper knows they're from Sooz. Sooz, in deep hiding after a counterculture bank robbery gone bad, reaching out to let him know she's OK and reminding him that she hasn't abandoned her dream, either. Subtly saying she still wants him to be part of it.

When Sooz reappears in Chicago, she invites Pepper to meet her in a most unlikely spot where she works under an assumed identity at an even more unlikely job. The smoldering embers reignite their passion, both visionary and amorous, and the two begin a journey through the dawning of an era. It's a time populated with long-forgotten names like Stokely Carmichael, Tom Hayden, and H. Rap Brown. It's a world full of supercharged acronyms—SDS, SNCC, CREEP, NSA, ARPA, and a mysterious quasi-governmental spy outfit called SNARB. Hugh Hefner even makes a couple of cameos.

Haunted by a Dark Stranger and the guilt-ridden memory of a long-dead brother, Pepper, Dave, and their band roll through the Midwestern countryside in a VW van called Otto playing transcendent gigs led by Pepper's ancient, magical Felix the Cat guitar and sweeping audiences off their feet.

Between gigs and meetings with fawning agents and enthusiastic deejays, Sooz drags Peeper to the home of the mysterious Dr. Flarb to be her front man on a pitch for her digital vision of the world. This eventually leads to dinner with the even more enigmatic investor Fletcher Engel, the man Sooz hopes will bring her dream to reality.

Dodging SNARB agents and fighting extortion by a treacherous band member, Sooz and Pepper are snatched from disaster's maw on several occasions by Creech, now Pepper's producer/manager/guardian angel, as the story spins to its conclusion at a fork in a concourse at Chicago's O'Hare Airport.

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When musicians choose to write on word processors instead of treble clefs, the results can be unpredictable. The phrases can grate like a Jimi Hendrix riff or they can flow like a Lennon/McCartney classic. Fortunately for readers, computer veteran/fiction editor/guitar player Barry Wightman's first venture into novel-writing is more Abbey Road than Purple Haze—but the wa-wa pedal is there when he wants it.

Pepperland is an 8-sided four-disc rock-and-roll collection with a 9-track EP bonus that ends with the hopeful plea of Jefferson Airplane's "We Can Be Together" playing in the background—*Tear down the walls. Won't you try?*

It's Sooz's entreaty to Pepper throughout the book.

Enjoy the music while you learn if she succeeds.

Carol Surges says

If you are of a certain age you'll remember that time when notebooks were notebooks, not Notebooks, and phones had cords not cameras. Music, magic and technology all intersect in Pepperland, where crazy riffs on

summer camps, missing guitars, rock 'n roll, counter-culture, VW vans, modems, ARPANET, the Playboy Club and girls all are fodder for a revolution. Orange and turquoise, Nixon, The Carpenters, TI calculators… there isn't much that is left out of this grand fusion of a time gone by. Most of us were barely aware of the work leading to the shift from analog to digital from solitary to linked-in but that's the back story that Wightman works his storytelling magic in. Pepperland spins a fantastical tale of that moment in time and how the revolution just might have happened.

Bruce Campbell says

"Pepperland," Barry Wightman's new novel, joyfully careens from Ann Arbor to Chicago to downstate Illinois, back again, and to points beyond at a watershed moment in American history - the dawn of the Digital Information Age. The story follows the trusting, somewhat naive protagonist, Pepper, and his mysterious, driven, sometime-girlfriend, Sooz. There is plenty of music and energy, some intrigue and a hint of danger, as well as just enough magic to keep the reader engaged from start to finish. The book has plenty of authentic Chicago-in-the-Seventies flavor for those of us who grew up there. I loved the story's backdrop, but you do not have to be a Chicagoan to appreciate the scenery. There might be a loose end or two when you finish, but Mr. WIghtman clearly loves his story, his characters, and the setting.

Gretchen says

DNF. I wanted to like this book. I liked the idea of seeing through the eyes of someone who was there as the internet was being born, but was also deeply interested in music. But I just couldn't get into it. I held out past the halfway point, but in the end, I just didn't care. It's a good book, but it's not for me.

Jim Cherry says

This usually happens in modern World War II movies, there's a character in the unit who after the war his grand idea is (usually) to start a hamburger stand that will sell franchises across the country and they'll be wildly successful because everyone will like the food so much. He's usually derided but we get the joke because we already know the future and we know the guy wasn't crazy. This is the main conceit of Barry Wightman's Pepperland. It's not a one off joke and it carries the story!

Pepperland is about Martin Porter, Pepper to his friends, who include Susan Frommer, Sooz to her friends. Both are in the computer sciences department of the University of Michigan in 1970, they have a summer time affair, then Sooz is off to change the world and become a radical, joining the Weatherman Underground while Pepper finishes his degree. After graduation Pepper turns down a lucrative job at IBM to start a rock band, Pepperland. Soon Pepperland has a minor regional hit with their song "Your Aunt is Cool." Soon they have a record deal, are touring and being interviewed by Rolling Stone interviewer Stanley Wong-Garcia! Then Sooz contacts Pepper wanting to come in from the cold of the fugitive Weather Underground, and she has a crazy idea that will make that possible, computers in every home with people able to communicate with each other electronically!

It's a maxim that we should never judge a book by it's cover, but maybe we can with Pepperland. The rainbow of colors across the front gives you a feel not only for the times the book is set in (1970-1974), but

the feel of the story as well. The writing in Pepperland moves at the velocity of rock 'n' roll, at the velocity of youth in a rush of pop culture references that will transport you back to the times either nostalgically or as a first time visitor.