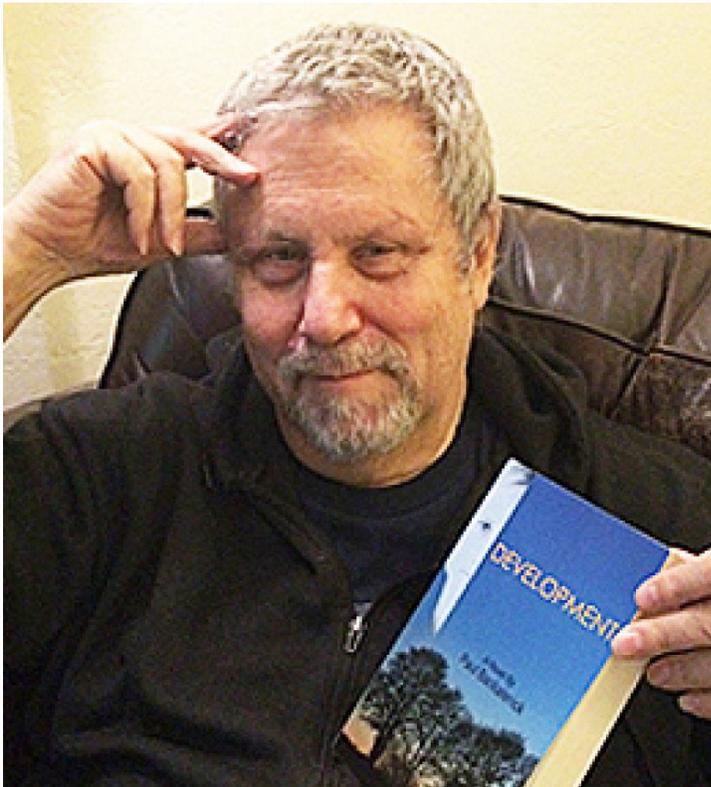


Woog's World: 'Development,' new book explores Westport cultural transitions



Paul Backalenick, a 1968 graduate of Staples High School, has written a novel, "Development," set in 1970s Westport

If benignly named Garden Homes Management has its way, the 1.16-acre parcel on the corner of Wilton Road and Kings Highway North will be transformed from a small plot next to river wetlands to a six-story, 48-unit apartment complex.

Paul Backalenick had not heard of that current battle. A 1968 Staples High School graduate now living in New York City, he's more familiar with the Westport of the 1950s and '60s.

But the proposed development resonates. As a baby boomer growing up here during those go-go days, he saw Westport's population nearly triple. He remembers ponds like Sturges and Bulkley near his home. He watched as open land was developed, woods cut down.

Nature — and the destruction of it — has been a fundamental theme of his life. Now it's a central theme of his first novel. It's called "Development" — and it's set in the early 1970s, right here in Westport.

Mysterious, tension-filled and poignant, "Development" includes characters any Westporter from that era — and plenty of others — would recognize. Hank Latour is unhappily married, disconnected from his teenage daughters, stuck in a banking career, and in debt. He invests in a real estate project, but ... well, read "Development" to find out what happens next.

Backalenick's name may be familiar. His father Bill, who died recently, was a longtime Westporter. His mother Irene is a well-known writer and editor who, in her 90s, still writes and publishes poetry. At Staples, Paul took Advanced Placement English. Instructor Dick Leonard was a major influence on his life, leading in-depth discussions on literature.

Backalenick headed to Brown, where he took Edwin Honig's poetry course. But he majored in psychology, and for a few decades after graduation — except for jotting down story ideas — he left writing behind.

For nearly a decade and a half, Backalenick had a job at psychiatric hospitals. He became a counselor at a methadone clinic. After earning a master's in psychology at [Boston University](#), he worked at psychiatric hospitals around that city. "If I write another book, it will be set there," Backalenick says.

He earned an MBA at Boston College, and in his late 30s embarked on a new career in health-care information technology. He consulted with firms including Arthur Andersen and Ernst & Young. His last project in that field was helping hospitals prepare for the dreaded Y2K disaster.

After a brief stint as a day trader, Backalenick embarked on his third career. He started his own web design firm. Now in its 14th year, Nexxite is still going strong.

As his own boss, Backalenick finally had time to do what he always wanted: write. It took three years — okay, his whole life — but he's finally a published author.

"You have to have an important idea. You'll be living with it for years," Backalenick says, explaining the writing process. For him, that idea was "Westport and nature."

"Development can be a destructive force," the author notes. "I felt a great desire to explore and expose that."

He returns to his previous thoughts, on the way Westport once was. "In the time the book is set, all the people coming to Westport needed new homes. The land was being plowed under. Nature was thrust aside. It happened then, and it's happening today around the world."

Backalenick says that every year, the earth's population increases by about 75 million. "That's untenable," he says. "We keep encroaching on our land and resources." He pauses. "This will not end well, for nature and mankind."

In "Development," Backalenick deals with characters he's created. But nature's exploitation by man is part of the book too. And it's very real.

He did not plan to set the novel in his hometown. The author wanted a "pristine, rural area" like Vermont. But the first rule of writing is "talk about what you know" — and he

knew a lot more about Westport than Vermont. Streets and stores of this place are woven throughout the book.

“Development” was published at the end of last year. It’s just starting to find its way to readers.

“I hope this is the kind of novel people want,” Backalenick says. “I know today a lot of readers want fantasy and magic.”

“Development” is not that. It’s about a superficially ordinary Westport family that suffers. There are no easy answers, or solutions.

It’s well worth reading — and I’d say that even if it was not about Westport.

As part of his marketing effort, Backalenick hopes to do a reading here. If so, he should drive by the Wilton Road site of the proposed 48-unit apartment complex. He’ll see that his 1970s novel about Westport is not completely fiction, in 2016.

For more information on “Development,” go to developmentthenovel.com.

Dan Woog is a Westport writer, and his “Woog’s World” appears each Friday. He can be reached at dwoog@optonline.net. His personal blog is www.danwoog06880.com.