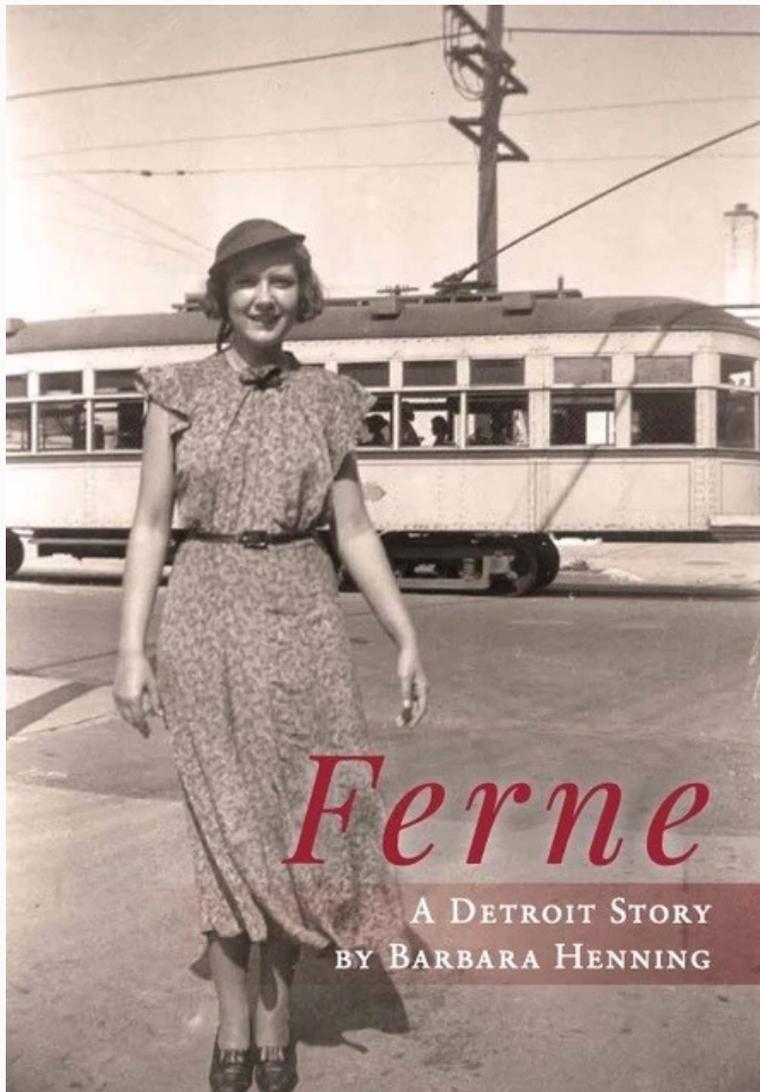


## THINGS TO DO

# Author chronicles the life of her mother in 'Ferne: A Detroit Story'



A virtual book launch for "Ferne: A Detroit Story" is planned for

3 p.m. Sunday, March 6, via Zoom. (Photo courtesy of Michah Saperstein)

---

By **KURT ANTHONY KRUG** |

PUBLISHED: March 3, 2022 at 1:02 p.m. | UPDATED: March 3, 2022 at 1:03 p.m.

---

Barbara Henning was 11 years old when her mother, Ferne, died on Jan. 4, 1960, putting her in a difficult position to look after her three younger siblings.

“I was groomed to take care of them, but I wasn’t old enough to be much help,” recalled Henning, a Detroit native who lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Henning chronicles all that and more in “Ferne: A Detroit Story” (Spuyten Duyvil Publishing \$22), her 13th book.

“My mother impressed upon me the importance of reading and school,” said Henning. “She was the only one in her family to graduate from high school, and she took us to the library on most weekends. Also, we didn’t have a television for part of my childhood; we read books instead. That’s how I initially became attuned to the possibilities of language. Writing and reading also offered me a way to grapple with the loss of my mother and a difficult childhood. When I was 23, I moved downtown to the Cass Corridor to finish school and became involved with the community of artists, writers, and politically active folks. I was inspired by all of my creative friends.”

A 1966 alumna of East Detroit High School (now Eastpointe High School), Henning earned both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in English from Wayne State University. She went on to earn her PhD in English from Union Graduate School (now Union Institute and University) in Cincinnati.

Henning spoke about the genesis of writing about Ferne, who was born in 1921. Ferne died from heart damage caused by childhood strep throat and rheumatic fever. She was 38.

“The loss was immense for our family,” said Henning. “My mother had



Barbara Henning

documented her life in a set of small photo albums. As a child, I would pour over these books, but after she died, my father locked them away. I think he was afraid we would ruin them, and they were also the record of his lost love, which were precious to him. Many years later after my father died, my stepmother gave me the books.”

Henning continued: “When I started scanning the photos for my siblings, I would reflect on the photos in my journal. Those notes grew into this book. In a way, I guess I wrote to keep my mother, her family and my early childhood alive. Maybe I was also writing to understand the loss. When you’re young and you lose a mother – a mother who loved you – that loss can dominate your way of living and relating to others.”

This isn’t the first time Henning wrote about her mother. During her undergrad days, she interviewed Ferne’s three sisters when writing a short biography about her.

“I remember (Ferne) would talk on the phone everyday to her mother and her sister. I would sit at the kitchen table with my elbow on the table, my chin in my hand, listening to her. I tapped into these memories to invent her phone calls and letters. I remember her sitting in her rocking chair while she told me stories about her childhood. I have written several novels, so I had the skills to reinvent my mother’s life with as many facts as I could,” she recalled.

Henning did copious research pertaining to the era Ferne came of age.

“Besides following Ferne’s life in this book, I also explore the life of the city and class issues,” said Henning. “She lived through major turmoil: Prohibition, the Great Depression, World War II. Ferne’s personal life – and mine as a young child – is just one strand of the story.”

In the book, Henning included a letter Ferne wrote to her prior to her death. Clippings from various newspapers appear, including The Macomb Daily and The Detroit Times, which ceased publication in 1960.

“There was a photograph that I really liked in one of the photo books, taken in 1939, inscribed: ‘The Times Paper Boys.’ Four boys posed around a bicycle. My grandparents had rented out garage space to The Detroit Times and the paper boys would pick up their papers there. And the paper was in existence almost the same years that Ferne lived...” she said. “I decided to look through the archives of the paper to research the historical context... The text of her life story weaves around the photographs and clippings.”

Writing about Ferne was cathartic.

“I suppose I went through every emotion possible by writing it, identifying with my mother as a child and a young woman, and finally coming to understand my father’s loss and to forgive him,” said Henning.

The most challenging part was the book kept growing.

“I didn’t decide to write the book until after all of Ferne’s siblings were dead, and I had only known her for 11 childhood years. I had to gather information and stories wherever I could find them. Then before I could write the chapters, I needed to immerse myself in the context of the time,” said Henning. “I remember lying in bed with my eyes closed, absorbing the details. Suddenly, I would walk across the room and start typing away, the story unfolding. I remember feeling so high after finishing a section.”

A virtual book launch for “Ferne: A Detroit Story” will be held via Zoom at 3 p.m. on Sunday, March 6. Henning will read an excerpt during the event, hosted by Detroit’s Three Fold Press. For more information about the book and a link to the Zoom event, visit [barbarahenning.com](http://barbarahenning.com).

---

Tags: **Suburban Life**



**Kurt  
Anthony  
Krug**

