

The Great Birthright

Below is an excerpt from Coast Weekend contributor Matt Love's debut novel, "The Great Birthright." The premise of the book is that a Los Angeles developer, in league with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, is trying to have Oregon's famous 1967 Beach Bill constitutionally overturned as part of a sinister plan to privatize the state's publicly owned beaches. And only one writer, Love, and detective, Tom West, can stop him.

Several days went by before Love made his way out to the Mad Dog Tavern outside of Newport. It was a Saturday afternoon, and Love drove the bay road in a slashing rain while Sonny the old husky snoozed beside him.

Love had pulled off a great week in the classroom, and, naturally, it had something to do with the beach. A new student had appeared in Creative Writing, and Love had asked him where he had moved from. The boy, a senior named Steve, said, "Nebraska."

"Nebraska!" Love had roared, the class roaring even louder. There had also been a few mumbled insults about corn.

Love had calmed them down and learned that Steve's mother had taken a new job as a nurse at Newport's hospital. Love asked him what he thought of the beaches. It was his stock question to every transfer.

"I haven't been yet. I've actually never seen the ocean. We just got in a few days ago and found our apartment," said Steve.

"You're joking," said Love.

"No. I'll probably go see it this weekend."

"You're going right now."

"Now? During class?"

"Call it a field trip."

"What about a permission slip?"

"Oswald West gives you permission. The ocean doesn't care."

Steve had had no response to that. He'd appeared sort of frightened and seemed to suddenly miss boring cornfields and worksheets.

Love had announced to the class Steve's obvious sickness and immediate remedy. His students nodded silently. They knew the drill. They were a trained army. In 10 minutes they would rally at Nye Beach and execute Operation Great Birthright, as they had so many times before. Love also told them to bring wood, oil and a hacky sack. He'd round up Sonny for the indoctrination. Steve was going to see the ocean for the first time and experience his first beach bonfire — at nine in the morning. Naturally, at the bonfire, a complete stranger had showed up, claimed alien abduction, and pulled out a harmonica to entertain the students. That's what made free public beaches in Oregon so wonderful.

Steve's cure was the highlight of Love's teaching life during the week. He experienced another one in his creative life as well. Actually, it was more of an epiphany. He never saw it coming, which often happens when you visit the beach in moments of joy or distress. Anything can happen.

It started with two letters received on Wednesday afternoon from national publishers rejecting two different manuscripts about Oregon subjects. It was always the same reason —

too regional. Whenever he read these rejections, Love swore he would never submit to a national publisher again, and then a year or so later, he would. He had admitted to himself that he wanted to reach a larger audience. He believed he had unique Oregon stories and an original voice that could do it. People in New York disagreed, or they didn't say anything at all.

After reading the second letter, Love loaded up Sonny in the truck for a visit to his local beach. It was the only way he could recover — to converse with the sea. Art was on his mind, as in: What does an artist do when he submits his art to the national artistic establishment in the hope of reaching a wider audience but the establishment consistently rejects his art? Does he quit? Does he retrench and keep trying? Does he take his art in a new direction hoping to please the establishment? Does he embrace the role of maverick and put out his art his own way?

Love had been doing the maverick shtick a long time. He was tired of it, and damn near broke.

They took their familiar path to the beach. Love looked out to the ocean and noticed the tide was coming in fast, churning brown with lots of foam for good measure. He jogged out to the sand and pivoted north to the Yaquina Head Lighthouse.

But the lighthouse never came into view. Instead, Love beheld a series of some 50 sculptures, structures and altars of varying size and shape, all made from driftwood, burnt, barnacled or slimy smooth, all constructed and spaced within a 40-yard stretch of sand at the base of the cliff. As he approached, he noticed large words etched in the sand:

Sea God

Beware!!!

Dance!

Love moved closer to inspect. Over the

years, he had walked into a lot of mysteries on Oregon's beaches (and enacted a few himself), but this was like nothing he had ever seen.

He gave a gentle kick to one of the driftwood pillars, expecting it to budge easily. It did not. It was buried three feet deep, as were most of the other sculptures. Everything was firmly anchored in the sand and the amount of work required astonished Love. He and Sonny had visited this very beach 12 hours earlier, and there had been nothing but scattered wood.

A wave swept in and soaked Love's shoes. He didn't hear it washing ashore. In a half hour, the incoming tide would batter the installation and, in time, collapse it. Love realized that he might be the only person lucky enough to see this mystery. Someone didn't care if they reached a wider audience for whatever it was he was trying to do. Someone didn't care if another person saw his art. He made it because he felt like it. Or had to. Who had the time to do this? Who had this great notion to blow people's minds, or perhaps only his own?

Love called out to Sonny and started for home. He gave a silent thanks to the person or persons who made the art. He was never going to quit writing and publishing, and he wanted to pattern his future projects on the metaphor provided by the Sea God. And what the hell, maybe it wasn't even a metaphor. Maybe it could serve as a political strategy in a fight to save the beaches — blow minds with mystery and ephemeral presence.

Love knew with all his heart that if Oregon's beaches became even partially privatized, the mysteries he randomly encountered there that had brought him so much mystery achievement in his life, would soon vanish like the middle class in America had vanished in his lifetime.

It was time to go to work.

Matt Love is the author/editor of 14 books about Oregon. His books are available through coastal bookstores or nestuccaspitpress.com

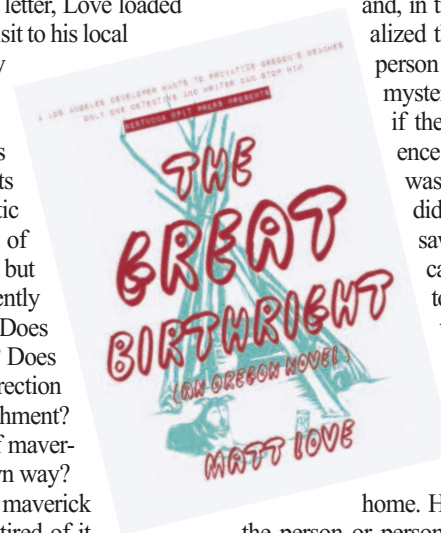


Photo by Matt Love

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