

Author's Novel Tells Story of Growing Up Gay and Black in Jamaica, the U.S.

Max Mantle read from his book this week at the North Portland library

Christen McCurdy
Of *The Skanner News*

Max Mantle wants to take back a term he says is a “sting” for gay Jamaican men like himself. He also wants to tell a story.

Mantle read Tuesday at the North Portland Library from his book *Batty Bwoy*, a coming-of-age story about a Jamaican man coming to terms with his sexuality, and also grappling with his identity as an immigrant and Black man in the United States.

Mantle, who grew up in Jamaica, emigrated to Connecticut and later studied journalism and photography at Howard University, told *The Skanner News* the book's title is an anti-gay slur in Jamaica. He wants to reclaim it, and improve the status of LGBT people in his home country, which TIME called “the most homophobic place on Earth” in 2006. (More recently, the magazine reported that cultural attitudes in the country are changing, though discriminatory laws – including a harsh anti-sodomy law – are still on the books there.)

The book is self-published and



Max Arthur Mantle

available through his website and on Amazon.

Batty Bwoy tells the story of Mark Palmer, who starts his journey in Jamaica, emigrates to the U.S. and attends Howard.

While the book is fiction, Mantle says “it runs true to my experience” but is not solely autobiographical. The book's character feels like a misfit in his own country and later, at Howard.

He discovers a gay club scene and starts to gain self-understanding, but also makes some bad

choices along the way, as well as encountering prejudice and dis-

crimination.

While the details of the story are particular, Mantle says the real

theme is the struggle for self-understanding, and the struggle to belong and to be loved – feelings that are universal.

Mantle says he wanted to bring something different than what he's seen from other writers of gay fiction, including other gay Jamaican and immigrant writers. A great deal of recent gay fiction, he says, either focused on the “coming-out” narrative, or tells sadder stories about the AIDS epidemic.

“I'm bringing something else,” he says.

The book took Mantle four years to write. He started working on it after his photography equipment was stolen from him, limiting his ability to work as a fashion photographer.

“Some stranger just took my

says.

He intends it to be part of a trilogy, and has already drafted the second installment. He also envisions a movie, which he hopes would be filmed on location in Jamaica, a country he hasn't visited in 25 years. That in turn would give him the opportunity to raise awareness and advocate for the rights of LGBT people in Jamaica.

“I think I want to make a political impact,” he says.

Mantle currently lives in Miami, but has been touring with his book since the beginning of May. He's visited Atlanta, Houston, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, New York City, Los Angeles and San Francisco – and heads to Seattle next. He'll be reading at 6 p.m. July 30 at the Capitol Hill branch of the Seattle Public Library. After Seattle, he says, he plans to tour the Midwest. He likes Portland, he says, and hopes to come back for another visit.

He's read at libraries and has also scheduled readings in conjunction with Black Gay Pride events as well as at book clubs. He's hoping to reach out to queer studies departments at universities as well.

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Wage/Working Jukebox Begins Tour at Portland Mercado July 23

A jukebox featuring the stories and sounds of working Portlanders will begin a tour of the city at Portland Mercado (Portland's first and only Latino public market) July 23. Artists Laura Hadden and Tennessee Watson, in partnership with local organization Know Your City, are presenting this project to offer community members a unique encounter with the issue of income inequality in Portland.

The stories and sounds – collected by Hadden and Watson and participants in the Wage/Working oral history workshop – are edited to the length of time it takes each worker to earn \$1 (resulting

in longer stories by those who earn the least). Throughout its month-long stay at Portland Mercado, visitors will be invited to interact with the jukebox, and listen to the stories. The opening event July 23, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., includes a Q&A with the artists and workshop participants along with a discussion about income inequality. There is no cost for the event. Food will be available for purchase.

The jukebox will be on display at Portland Mercado through August 20 when it will move to another venue in Portland. The project was awarded a small grant from SE Uplift's Neighborhood Small Grant Program and additional funding through the SEIU Local 503.

For more information, visit: wage-working.com.

DVD

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ing engagement ceremony, also known as a Sagai. In the grDVbe's conspicuous absence, she's asked Kush (Shazad Latif), a friend of the family, to fill in as a dance partner, so she can practice the elaborately-choreographed routine she plans to perform at the party with Sonny. It is subtly hinted that this handsome hunk might pose a threat, given Sonny's continued preoccupation with business matters upon his return to the Subcontinent.

That is only one of several storylines in a romance-driven sequel which unfolds more like a daytime soap opera than a fully fleshed-out feature film. Scene after scene is simply a setup for another transpar-

ent love triangle.

As she checks into the hotel, Lavinia Beach (Tamsin Grieg) has her head turned by a fellow new guest (Richard Gere), but Guy only has eyes for Sonny's widowed mom. Madge Hardcastle (Celia Imrie), a pretty British pensioner, can't decide between the two, filthy-rich Indian suitors she's dating simultaneously. And Doug (Bill Nighy) has grown fond enough of Evelyn (Judi Dench) to commit, though he hasn't yet divorced his estranged wife (Penelope Wilton) waiting in the wings. And so forth.

The irrepressible Sonny serves as a master of ceremonies of sorts supposedly tying all these loose strands together. Unfortunately, be-

cause he's more of a clown this go-round, the film feels like a joke-to-joke farce not intended to be taken seriously.

A pleasant, if predictable, romantic romp laced with far more mirth than sophistication or substance.

Very Good ★★★

Rated PG for mild epithets and suggestive material in English and Hindi with subtitles

Running time: 123 minutes
Distributor: Fox Home Entertainment

DVD Extras: Story; Cast; Returning to the Marigold Hotel; Blossoming Relationships; The Marigold Wedding; Filming in India; and a stills gallery.