



Eddie,

Hope all is jood & blessed. I finished the book three weeks ago--and I'm *still* digesting it. Don't worry--that's a very jood thing. It may be a brief read but it isn't a brief study. And that, too, is a very jood thing.

First, a hat tip and salute: The universe you've lovingly crafted is very organic and the characters (which includes the city of Chicago; it is a living, breathing being in your hands) are both multi-dimensional and believable. I admire the way you frame the scenes, merging Seron's past and present; it's one of the more challenging aspects of constructing a novel/novella. It can be tricky if not employed correctly, altering the pace or switching the tone--so much so that it can throw off and even turn off the reader. But I was always *right there*; the transitions were smooth and made perfect sense, and you chose the right time/chapter to reveal. Sometimes authors utilize this format and they don't connect the dots. The result? They end up telling two different stories that have nothing in common except the principals featured. There's a difference between *writing* a story and *telling* a story--and you do the latter very well.

You also cover a *lot* of ground in just over a hundred pages. Sometimes "coming out/coming into"-themed works can cast a gloomy, sour spell, leaving the reader detached and depressed. You manage to avoid being heavy-handed and didactic while striking the right balance between the serious and the silly, giving the reader much to contemplate and chuckle about.

You *love* the written word. "Cowboys are the sexiest thing walking on three legs." "Love is so high maintenance." "It was all about working a glamour." "This game has lasted longer than a Monopoly game. Time to cash in my property, the houses, hotels, and all four railroads." "Let's see love undo that." The language always floats, whether the moment is light or heartbreaking. You *listen* to your characters; how they speak clearly informs who and where they are, which makes them all the more authentic.

The tenderness you document between the men--Seron and Rodney; Seron and Calvin; Seron, Marcus and Maurice; even Seron and his fathers--is so affirming and so very necessary. And their struggles to allow themselves to be vulnerable, particularly Seron, to the emotional, physical and spiritual intimacy is something one still rarely sees explored in fiction with Black male characters, regardless of sexual orientation. Whatever pretense and posturing that exists isn't exaggerated for melodramatic effect (which is often the case).

And just when I thought I knew what would come next, you threw a curve ball and yelled, "Gotcha!" (LOL)

The central theme is a basic one--as RuPaul often declares, "If you don't love yourself, how the hell you gonna love somebody else?"--but you don't deal with it in a simplistic way. One of the most important lessons imparted is that it's not easy to unlearn self-hatred and it isn't something that one overcomes totally; fragments always remain, since the societal messages of inferiority propagated against SGL (not to mention Black) people never cease. Seron is on a journey to embracing love, realizing that it is not judgmental or conditional, that one's capacity to give and receive it is endless, and that external influences and internal conflict often block that blessing and stop us from *walking in freedom*.

In that regard, Seron stands in as an (Black SGL) Everyman. Struggling to define manhood--and, by extension, himself--in a world that too often refuses to recognize him as a man. Fearing and facing rejection in the very fickle and flaky social circles gay men inhabit (I too went through that "little man's disease" phase). Balancing the secular and spiritual, the faith and the flesh, wondering whether one can actually be a child of God when you are branded as godless. Feeling alone and isolated to the point that you decide things will never get better so it would be better to check out.

But you never allow us to feel sorry or pity for him, which is no easy feat. He could've come off as tragic and hopeless; instead there is a complexity and nuance that shades his plight without pathologizing him. Which makes his taking Rodney's hand in the airport more than just a simple gesture of affection--it points to a major shift in his view of himself and his place in the world. Reading that passage, I literally threw my right fist in the air and screamed, "Yes! He is on his way!" It's not so much a resolution but an evolution, acknowledging he deserves love and the unclouded happiness it brings. He opened the door--and I'm rooting for him to someday finally walk through it.

And speaking of Rodney: he stands out as both my favorite character and an atypical yet typical SGL brutha. The majority of us do not fall into the racist, homophobic tropes that are often propagated by media (i.e., the coonish queen and the deceptive, dangerous dl man). He reminds me of the man Raheim (aka Pooquie in *B-Boy Blues*) has become. And how ironic is it that I began reading the book around the time Frank Ocean made his admission? The matter-of-fact way in which he expressed his desire and love for another man is exactly the life constitution Rodney would follow: forget what anyone else says or expects, I'm gonna do me and do me *right*. The label isn't the important thing; how one lives their life is. It's such a refreshing portrayal, and a great way to flip the script on what most would probably consider the more obvious characterization (i.e., a brutha like him not being as carefree and unapologetic about who he is with and loves). And Seron's heart *knows* he is the man for him--"The sound of his breathing is more like home to me than anything else"--but his mind and soul have to catch up. Rodney's showing up at the hospital wasn't a complete surprise for it is exactly what a man like him would do in that situation, yet I still screamed on the inside. And that opening lovemaking (*not sex*) scene is one of the hottest (not to mention clever) passages I've ever read!

Thanks much for sharing your gift and trusting me with your baby. Your debut is a dope one, and I am both proud of and inspired by it--and you. It's so exciting and jood to see us presenting *and* representing us in print, with such honor and integrity. Your talent speaks for itself and I so look forward to reading whatever sequels follow (when will part 2 drop?).

And, again, welcome to the literary bruthahood!

JEH

- New York Times and Amazon Bestselling Author of *the B-Boy Blues* series, James Earl Hardy