

BOOKSHELF

BY ROD MAC

Summer is just about over. In another month or two, we'll be ready to turn back the clocks, bundle under a sweater and head back to school. If you've been playing hooky over the summer, now it's time to catch up on your reading. There is a new crop of gay writing that showcases Black and Latino characters that guaranteed to be informative, fun ... and sexy.

They say that you can't judge a book by its cover, but long ago publishers realized a catchy, memorable cover helps to move inventory. *Hung: A Meditation on the Measure of Black Men in America* (\$23/Doubleday) will have no trouble standing out on the shelves; the book cover features a handsome, shirtless brotha and a ruler—so the subject matter is more than obvious. Writer/critic Scott Poulson-Bryant essays the myth of the Mandingo, the super-hung, hyper-sexualized Black man. Society's long-standing obsession with the sexual prowess of Black men has created a pervasive—at times, deceptive—influence on self-esteem and the perceptions by others.

Poulson-Bryant is a senior editor at *America*, but many may remember him as a founding editor of *Vibe*. Thankfully, *Hung* encompasses that same pop sensibility; it's neither heavy-handed nor fluffy. The book is part memoir of his own sexual coming of age, anecdotes from friends and interview subjects, and a clever deconstruction of the sexuality of the Black male found in film, television, books, sports, art, music and porn.

Hung: A Meditation on the Measure of Black Men in America will be debut in October. For more, visit the author's website at spbq.blogspot.com.

Down for Whatever (\$20/Kensington Books) was published in July, the first novel written by Los Angeles-based Frederick Smith. The book is creating a buzz from coast-to-coast for two reasons. One, it's the first Black, gay novel from a publishing house known for delivering gay, romantic comedies. Second, critics and readers are falling in love with the engaging, diverse cast of non-stereotyped characters.

This is the story of a contentious group of four L.A. friends. Two are Black, the other two are Latin; it's peppered with Spanglish and the language of the hood. Of the four, Keith is the most accomplished, wealthiest and ... the loneliest. The Stanford grad and Michigan transplant is frustrated that he "can't even get a Black man to look his way." Roommate Tommie is a former R&B star who is down on his luck and on the down low. Keith's best friend Marco Antonio is a social worker torn between his traditional family and a hot soap actor who could charm his way into Fort Knox. Then there's Rafael. Sigh. Young and gorgeous in a town where "everybody loves Latinos." How do we describe him? Retail queen-slash-go-go-boy-slash-serial heart-breaker who is trouble with a capital "T." His motto is "sex with gorgeous people, wherever I want, whenever I want." Rafael does get it—in clubs, with married men, high school boys working at 7-11.

The novel is marketed as a *Queer As Folk* meets *Sex and the City* meets *Waiting to Exhale*. Sure, we could say that if you needed to give a sound bite to Smith's work, but his novel is much more than that. *Down for Whatever* provides a much-needed glimpse into the sexual and racial politics within the LA's gay community. This isn't the Los Angeles familiar to many readers of gay fiction. The characters almost never go into West Hollywood; there are no airbrushed, steroid-enhanced circuit boys; and the characters are not millionaires or fabulous industry queens. Instead, these men have car trouble, flirt with each other's men, have affairs, get fired, fall in and out of love, party at Catch One instead of Rage. Frederick Smith's debut novel is real, delightful and witty.

Down for Whatever is available in bookstores and online. Go to fredericksmith.net to download a sample chapter and order a copy.

Rashid Darden is a new name—probably unfamiliar to many, but that will change. The Georgetown-educated, Washington D.C. native son is celebrating the recent paperback publication of his first novel, *Lazarus*. It's a rich and

diverse story, populated by eclectic characters, international college students, poets, student activists and intimidating fraternity brothers. Undeniably, the work is quite personal. The author is a writer, poet, teacher and frat brother. All of this experience is combined into a wonderful literary stew that becomes comfort food for the soul.

Lazarus is set at the fictional Potomac University in Washington DC, probably a composite of Georgetown and American Universities. Student NAACP leader Adrian Collins is one of the BMOCs—big men on campus. The 19-year-old sophomore is coming to terms with his own sexuality and becomes involved in his first relationship. His boyfriend is senior Savion Cortez, a Dominican hottie and the campus poet. Besides their warring personalities—Adrian is subdued and deliberate, Savion much more impulsive and argumentative—a major issue challenges their relationship and threatens to expose their love: Adrian wants to pledge Beta Chi Phi, the top Black fraternity.

Darden's prose is deliberate and simple, among the reasons why his work was compared to comfort food. The love scenes are brief but tender; the writer is not given to gratuitous intimacy, and perhaps we could have read a little more. But the relationship between Savion and Adrian is nerdy-sexy; they are intellectuals, read Niki Giovanni to each other and at times their dialogue is exquisite.

Also highly revealing is the detailed look at hazing and the fraternity induction process. Darden details many of the things that we have heard about: discipline, hazing, padding, homophobia and homoeroticism. There's much more of this than sex between the two main characters ... and that's definitely off the hook.

Lazarus is available in bookstores and online. Point and click to oldgoldsoul.com for a sample chapter and ordering information.

Rod Mac is a writer, television producer and (hopefully) will soon finish writing his first novel. Read him at rodonline.typepad.com.

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Atlanta
OutWrite Bookstore (outwritebooks.com)
991 Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, GA 30309

Brushstrokes (brushstrokesatlanta.com)
1510-J Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, GA 30309

Baltimore
Lambda Rising (lambdarising.com)
241 W. Chase Street (inside the Gay, Lesbian & Bisexual Community center)
Baltimore, MD 21201

Chicago
Afrocentric Bokstore
333 S. State Street
Chicago, IL 60604

Unabridged Bookstore
3251 N. Broadway
Chicago, IL 60657

Los Angeles/Long Beach
A Different Light (adlbooks.com)
8853 Santa Monica Blvd
West Hollywood, CA 90069

Matais Bookstore (matais.com)
3202 E. Broadway
Long Beach, CA 90803
(the nation's only Black, gay bookstore)

Washington DC
Lambda Rising (lambdarising.com)
1625 Connecticut Ave,
NW
Washington DC 20009

Online Resources
Books Are Sexy (derricklbriggs.com):
Discussions, meetings and updates on Black, gay writers.

BooksLut (bookslut.com/blog): One of the leading book review and news sites.

Galleycat (galleycat.com): Another leading publishing industry site, but more on the business and financial

side of publishing.

Jasmyne Cannick (jasmyneconnick.com):
Author, writer, activist and co-producer of Noah's Arc.

Keith Boykin (keithboykin.com): The nation's foremost Black, gay writer, activist and lecturer.

Rod2.0 (rodonline.typepad.com): Essays and reviews on books, pop culture, media, art and film as they relate to brothas.

Steven G. Fullwood (stevengfullwood.org):
Author, essayist and librarian, very well-versed in the history of Black, gay literature.

