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Local Writers with Contrasting Voices

Guest - Non ADN Writer:

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Brooke Newman and Dennis Vaughn release two diverging books

Even as the publishing world is in major flux, local writers have remained busy.

In the past weeks, we've been introduced to two books by Aspen-based authors: Brooke Newman's "Jenniemaë & James," and Dennis Vaughn's "The Price of Revenge."

In many ways, the two books couldn't be more different. "Jenniemaë & James" is a moving family memoir, while "The Price of Revenge" is an upbeat legal thriller. The same could be said about the authors. Newman is an experienced writer whose previous book, "The Little Tern," has sold more than 1 million copies, whereas Vaughn is a first-time novelist who has spent the majority of his career as a nationally respected lawyer.

Though mining their material from vastly different backgrounds, both Newman and Vaughn bring unique perspectives to their subject matter, and give the local community reason to pick up both of their books:

A Memoir in Black and White:

Set in a rabidly segregated Washington D.C. in the 1940s and 1950s, "Jenniemaë & James" explores the household and life of Newman's father, James Newman. He was an eccentric, brilliant mathematician with a penchant for out-of-wedlock relations and expensive cars. He was married three times by the age of 24. Moving in the highest social circles, James was closely connected to luminaries such as Albert Einstein.

As is the case with many creative and successful people, James' interior life is a bit unpredictable, and, at times, dark. He suffers from excruciating bouts of depression that compromise his ability to produce work.

The most stable aspect of James' life is his African-American household maid, Jenniemaë, who migrated from Alabama to D.C. She's full of southern sayings, wit and charm. But perhaps the most intriguing facet of Jenniemaë's character is her love of numbers, which connects her with James and his passion for mathematics. She claims that every night the Lord sends her lucky numbers through her dreams. And through these numbers, Jenniemaë is able to place bets in a local lottery system, where she wins a surprising amount of times.

The crux of "Jenniemaë & James" is how these characters, from disparate backgrounds, are able to form an improbably unique relationship. It's not an amorous relationship. It's a friendship in which

they each somehow provide what the other is lacking. James provides a protective haven in a time of racism. Jenniemae infuses a sense of peace, balance and hope into James' intricate mental world.

At the same time, we also get a sense of the author, Brooke Newman, who grows up with these two tremendous characters as her guardians. She carefully interweaves her insights into a memoir that says as much about America on a political level as it does on a personal level.

The Darker Shades of the Art World

The story of how Dennis Vaughn came to write "The Price of Revenge" is both unexpected and inspiring. Fifteen years ago, Vaughn was approached by the famed screen writer Lorenzo Semple Jr., to co-author a novel set in a performing arts center.

At that time, Vaughn was a sought-after lawyer with a deep passion for writing and literature. However, he had no experience in creative writing. With the support of Lorenzo, Vaughn set out on this large task — one that would take him more than decade to complete, even as Lorenzo became sidetracked with other projects and allowed Vaughn to complete the manuscript alone.

Now, at the age of 76, he has finished his first book.

"The Price of Revenge" follows the life of David Fox, a Denver-based attorney with a thick wallet and beautiful girlfriend. When Fox begins investing a case at the Denver City Ballet, he unknowingly enters a world rarely seen in the arts world. There are murky layers of secrets and lies, all of which become more complicated when he contemplates what his girlfriend is discussing at her psychiatrist.

Wielding multi-million dollar budgets and attracting influential donors, major centers for the arts are complicated beasts. They have also been passed over by writers thinking they are not worthy of a substantial story. Vaughn gives us an insider's view of how they operate, and why they are ripe for writers looking to tell a unique story.

Jonathan works at Explore Booksellers, where you can pick up a copy of "Jenniemae & James" and "The Price of Revenge." Come into the store and look for the lanky guy. You can also email him at jonathan@explorebooksellers.com.

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