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Virgin Islander's Novel Explores Workplace Bullying and Caribbean Mysticism

Kevin Hughes' 'Corporate Climbing' tells the story of Michael Hill, a young Virgin Islander in New York City, who confronts workplace bullying and systemic racism with the help of Caribbean spiritual practices

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Kevin D. Hughes and the cover of his novel, Corporate Climbing.

“According to a Workplace Bullying Institute survey, an estimated 48.6 million Americans are actually bullied at work...With statistics like that, it’s evident why people hate Mondays.”?

That is how author Kevin Delano Hughes contextualized his book [Corporate Climbing](#), which tells the story of how Michael Hill, a Virgin Islander living in New York City, tried to deal with

his own experience with workplace bullying, and the terrible repercussions of that choice. “I took a story which at its core is about workplace bullying, and then turned that upside down by adding a scary, supernatural, black magic element to it,” Mr. Hughes told the Consortium.?

The book demonstrates, through the behavior of the characters in Michael’s toxic workplace, the unique challenges a young black transplant to the mainland can face in the corporate world. Michael must confront “all of these different ‘isms’” which “manifest themselves through his interaction with other people within the company,” Mr. Hughes remarked. “I think for us, well, for me as a black man, those things on their own would be considered horror.” He elaborated, citing as an example the pervasive phenomenon of finding the majority of black employees at a company at the lowest rungs of the corporate hierarchy – mail room attendants or security officers. Mr. Hughes also noted the “glass ceiling” effect that often limits the advancement of black workers in large companies. “These are very real topics that I think when you’re black and you work in corporate America, you see that with your eyes and you wonder why it’s like that,” he said. Immigrants and women, he noted, often have a particularly difficult time. “Out of all the stories that I had in my head, I wanted to put this one out there, because I wanted to say something. It has a message.”

?Corporate Climbing contains several messages within its approximately 230 pages. “All that glitters is not gold” is one which reverberates through the novel at different points in the story. According to Mr. Hughes, Michael “achieves all of the things that he wants to achieve, but not only does it come at a terrible cost but he realizes that it really wasn’t worth it.”?

The mechanism powering the plot is Michael’s reliance on the metaphysical to achieve his corporate goals, in a form familiar to Caribbean peoples across the archipelago. The meek, low-level employee of a hugely successful advertising firm turns to “voodoo” to help deal with overwhelming challenges at the office. At first, the supernatural intervention seems to work, but the protagonist’s upward trajectory is quickly derailed by unforeseen consequences.

“I didn’t use the term Obeah, as we are familiar with, because I wanted to make sure that a larger audience could identify specifically with what I’m talking out,” Mr. Hughes noted. He pushed back against the suggestion that he was leaning into harmful stereotypes about the regional spiritual practice by noting that before things went horribly wrong, Michael and his best friend Buns had actually looked to the voodoo practitioner Scratch for protection against the bullying Michael was experiencing at work.

Because the novel falls into horror genre, however, Hughes uses this plot point to tilt Michael’s trajectory in another direction. Scratch has ulterior motives for providing his services, and “protection” of his clients is the furthest thing from his mind. “I wanted to be very sensitive to anyone who practices voodoo, and very respectful of them, and that’s how I place the opposing viewpoints,” Mr. Hughes says. “If we were to watch American films or movies, voodoo is always portrayed as a negative but in my book, it’s not that way,” he continued. “Buns and his uncle actually represent Haitians who are proud of their culture and their interaction with voodoo and know that it can be used for good,” he explained.

It is this representation of Caribbean immigrant life that marks *Corporate Climbing* as different from other novels in the genre. Mr. Hughes infuses the book with details that shine a spotlight on the experiences of Virgin Islanders who emigrate to the mainland. Although Haitian, Buns and his family reach New York by way of St. Thomas, and Scratch, the voodoo practitioner, is originally from the Dominican Republic but learned his craft by studying under Haitian teachers. Despite being set wholly in New York City, the storyline is nevertheless a completely Caribbean one

which will be particularly familiar to Virgin Islanders; West Indians finding community with each other outside their respective home islands, code switching in different settings depending on who they are surrounded by, and dealing with challenges in ways the wider world would find highly unusual, to say the least.?

Mr. Hughes, former adjunct professor of Humanities at the University of the Virgin Islands, sees injecting authentic Virgin Islands and Caribbean culture into the mainstream with this novel as an extension of his work as a culture bearer. The founder of Virgin Islanders United, a New York-based non-profit dedicated to the interest of Virgin Islanders on the mainland, Mr. Hughes says the book is just “a new branch that I’m taking off on.”

While the contents of the novel are meant to be enjoyed by a mature audience, Mr. Hughes was able to share some insight for young aspiring writers. “If you want to be a writer...you have to be passionate,” he advised. “Always keep focused on your dreams.” He credits his late mother Rosalie P. Hughes “who really taught me to dream big,” as well as his high school Honors English teachers Jeanette Smith and Carol Henneman. According to the class of 1985 Charlotte Amalie High School graduate, Ms. Smith and Ms. Henneman taught him how to write, and how to think. “They really gave me an appreciation for English. I thank them and credit them.”

?Corporate Climbing, the first novel in an anticipated trilogy, was published last November and is available at several online booksellers.