

# BEHIND THE BOOK: REPRIEVE BY JAMES HAN MATTSON



When I was in college, a friend of mine took me to a party near downtown Minneapolis. I didn't think much of it at the time—being nineteen, I seized any opportunity to drink un-carded—but when we arrived and I looked around, I forgot about the booze. The group was entirely male: about 90% Asian, most in their twenties, the rest white and significantly older: squat, round men who lumbered from Asian guy to Asian guy, leering, while the Asian men giggled, or flirted, or acted strangely grateful. Some of the Asian men danced. Some stood at the perimeter, assessing. All of them, it seemed, were vying for the attention of the older white men.

I got a beer, avoided eye contact, and when I returned to my friend, a fellow gay Asian guy, I leaned in and said, “What *is* this?”

“It's an Asian group,” he said. “For Asians and their admirers.”

“And all the ‘admirers’ are old white guys?”

He shrugged, drank. “I guess,” he said.

I'd just come out of the closet, and I was excited to navigate a world of romantic possibility, but the experience at the party unnerved me: I'd never expected dating to be so heavily racialized. I'd naively thought that people simply fell in love with people, regardless of skin color. But the more I navigated the rocky terrain of dating, the more I realized that dating, at least in its beginning stages, was almost entirely about surface, making skin color an attribute of absolute importance.

Years went by.

I became closer to the people who attended these “admirer” parties. I made international student friends, both gay and straight. I dated, mostly white.

Then I retreated.

It was too tiresome, I thought. Too depressing. I found that we, as a collective minority, prostrated ourselves to the standard, media-driven depictions of romance, which were populated almost exclusively by impossibly attractive white couples. And since we weren't white, since there was no way we could fully enter that world of amorous possibility, we sacrificed the mysteries and excitements of love simply to be partnered to a white person, some of whom we didn't even like. We were often oblivious, or in denial, or so hungry for acceptance that we ignored our romantic obsessions with whiteness, chalking it up to preference. Time after time I'd see an Asian man pine after a white man who'd ignore him, or publicly disrespect him, or mock him, or dump him unceremoniously for another Asian man, their bodies seemingly interchangeable. The Asian guy would inevitably fall apart while the white guy moved on to his next body of color.

Given these unsettling observations, I concluded that love was love was love, yes, but love was also formulated and configured by large-scale forces—it was mysterious yet not.

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It was regulated by those in power, those with influence: who you loved, often times, was determined by white people, and those who professed undying allegiance to your exotic, faraway culture, no matter how or where you were raised, often became fetishists. It was easy for them, of course: there was never a shortage of willing subjects.

*Reprieve* started out as an examination of this idea of racial fetishism. I wanted to inhabit the minds of fetishists, understanding that they rarely saw themselves as such (both Jaidee and Leonard truly believe they are in love, and they are, insofar as love is an undefined feeling when one is experiencing it, but objectively, and perhaps in hindsight on their part, their loves and desires are shaped by long histories of oppression). I also wanted to discuss how these obsessions can animate complicity, particularly against the BIPOC community, and I wanted to do it under the backdrop of the horror genre: fetishism and its resulting dehumanization, I thought, was a horror in and of itself. The book highlights transactional relationships—melding money, power, sex, and violence—and exposes the dynamics I saw at that Minneapolis party on a grander scale, tracing the far-reaching fallout from the commodification of love.

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REPRIEVE: A NOVEL by James Han Mattson  
FICTION/Literary | FICTION/Psychological | FICTION/LGBT / General  
William Morrow | On Sale: 10/05/2021 | Hardcover | 9780063079915