

# Q & A

## Always Want More

BANKE AWOPETU - MCCULLOUGH



### Q WHAT WAS YOUR INSPIRATION FOR THE BOOK?

**A** *Always Want More* is a teacher's story. Teaching was my whole world when I was writing it and honestly I think I resented that a bit. I started teaching at 21 and was naturally good at it. Then I ended up in a small building with an incredible leader, a Black woman, who pushed me to truly develop my craft. We attended a lot of trainings, team taught, and modeled lessons for each other. It was intense. At the time I had never worked so hard to be good at anything. Do you know what I mean? I always imagined that teaching would be a passing career and when it required so much I was little rebellious. I imagined another life, one more exciting and dangerous. The character of Tracy arose from that. I wrote what I wanted to read—something soulful; rooted in Blackness that was sexy, stirring, and fast paced. By writing this story I was able to explore all that I felt in the classroom—power, obligation, pride, duty, disappointment. Professionally, there was no space for me to discuss all of that and personally my friends and family didn't understand, so I unleashed it all on the page. It was cathartic. The weight of the Black educator is unique and I didn't find that in any popular fiction. Ernest Gaines captured the Black educator's experience beautifully in *A Lesson Before Dying*, James Baldwin did it superbly in "Sonny's Blues." I wanted to do the same in a modern, accessible way.

### Q WHAT ROLE DOES HIP-HOP PLAY IN THE NOVEL?

**A** Hip-hop is the backdrop of *Always Want More*, the driving beat. It's that grit, that unapologetic aggression. It was important for me to start the story in Harlem with Tracy as a hip-hop journalist. Like I said, this story was a fantasy for me. I used to rap until college, and I was a novice hip-hop journalist. None of that worked out for me, and I like to think that it was God's protection. I was quite impressionable and would have gotten eaten alive. But of course, I always wondered what if? So I gave Tracy those experiences to see how they would play out and also to allow readers to quickly understand her. She's also a party girl and recklessly curious. All of this plays out throughout the novel.

### Q WHICH CHARACTER IS THE MOST COMPLEX AND WHY?

**A** That's a toss-up between Tracy and X. We see the most of Tracy on the page and so we have an understanding for the moves she makes. X, on the other hand, still remains a mystery. We get glimpses of his background, but our understanding of him is based on our own experiences rather than what's explicitly said. It amazes me when people say they can't stand Tracy, but they love X. This speaks to the higher standard that women are held to and maybe we should be held to. We are naturally endowed with a lot.

### Q WHAT DOES THE TITLE ALWAYS WANT MORE MEAN?

**A** The title came from a conversation between X and Tracy. That line stuck out to me because it really captures the sentiment and tension of the novel and our society. On one hand, "always want more" is about constant effort, progress, evolution. On the other, it reflects the greed, insatiability, and constant discontent that prevents us from enjoying our lives.

### Q TRACY APPEARED TO LIVE A LIFE SO FAR FROM NEGATIVE STREET INFLUENCES, WHY WAS SHE SO QUICKLY TAKEN IN BY X?

**A** I wouldn't say that she was so quickly taken in. I think that we forget Tracy's background. She's a loner and has constantly taken on lofty goals that require her to sacrifice for the people. Her own desires were stifled or not met. When she met X, all of those feelings and longing overwhelmed her. I also wouldn't say that Tracy's life was so far removed from street life. There were early warnings that signaled to her that X was a dealer. How did she recognize them if she didn't have any prior exposure? How far removed are any of us from the street life? That's the point I wanted to make. One encounter can take us from spectator to participant.

### Q WHY DID TRACY GIVE UP SO QUICKLY ON LASHONDA WHEN TRACY WAS LIVING A DOUBLE LIFE?

**A** People say that Tracy gave up on LaShonda and I push back on that. Tracy poured into LaShonda throughout the novel. Granted, she stopped pushing her, but where is LaShonda's responsibility? Tracy told her about a program that could help her; did LaShonda follow up to learn more about it? Why did she stop coming to class? What more do we want Tracy, or any teacher for that matter, to do? The conversation about education is taking a dangerous turn in this country. Yes, we need to protect students; as educators, our job is to serve them. But what is their job?

### Q WHAT WAS TRACY'S TRUE PASSION?

**A** Tracy's true passion was dreaming. She liked to imagine how things would be, how she would be in them. But once in the actual situation, she lost interest and jumped to the next dream. I can definitely relate to that.

**Q HOW DEEP WAS TRACY'S FAITH IN GOD? WHY DID SHE ALLOW HERSELF TO MAKE DECISIONS IN HER PERSONAL LIFE THAT WERE SO FAR REMOVED FROM THE TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH?**

**A** I think Tracy's faith was real, perhaps not too deep. She was alone in it really. She attended church, but we don't see her doing too much more to develop her faith. Ultimately, she gave in to temptation. It wasn't all at once. One "yes" led to another and another which led to her taking a path that she never foresaw. But isn't that how it happens with many of us? Nobody sells their soul all at once; we parcel it off bit by bit. In New York, she stood; in Rochester, she fell. Of course X was a part of that, but he was also a part of building her back up.

**Q IT APPEARS AS IF X IS USING TRACY TO FURTHER HIS AGENDA. DO YOU THINK HE REALLY LOVES HER?**

**A** I think he loves her the best way he knows how. Everybody uses everybody. We call it symbiotic, or mutually beneficial. X wouldn't be with Tracy if she didn't serve a purpose, but let's not forget the purpose that X serves for Tracy. He's an outlet; he understands her; he validates her; she learns from him.

**Q WE DON'T SEE MUCH INTERACTION BETWEEN TRACY AND HER FAMILY. WHAT WAS HER RELATIONSHIP WITH HER FAMILY?**

**A** No, we don't see much interaction. That's classic in coming of age stories. You have to remove the main character from home or family so that you can see what they would do without that influence. Tracy is an only child, her parents are immigrants, and they moved back home. If they were in the States, Tracy wouldn't have gotten into any of the trouble that she did. That would have been a boring story.

**Q WHAT IS THE TAKE-AWAY YOU WANT READERS TO HAVE AFTER READING YOUR BOOK?**

**A** I want readers to understand the danger of judgment, the danger of thinking, "that could never be me." Often people who serve develop a savior complex. We start to mask our own issues with our desire to fix other people. Those same people put us on a pedestal and the load of their expectations can be crippling. Who helps the people who help the people? All of this plays out beautifully with Tracy. Everything she cautions her students against, she ends up doing. Everything that she thought she believed in gets tested. We scoff at those we think have compromised themselves or sold out, but unless we've been in the same exact situation, we don't know that we'd do any better.

**Q IS THERE A SEQUEL TO THE BOOK?**

**A** I'm not sure. People get to that last page and they want more; they want to know what's next for the characters. I want to know what happens to them too. If I'm given a vision for the sequel, I will definitely write it.

## *Always Want More*

is a story of  
**BLACK LOVE.**

It takes us on a

*journey*

from the initial attraction to the

*full bloom*

of

**SOUL ALTERING LOVE.**

