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Book Review by Kam Williams

Tuskegee Love Letters
by Kim Russell
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“My father was a pilot with the all-Negro Tuskegee Airmen; my mother a steno-typist... Separated by war and duty, they shared the events of their lives through letters. They wrote about their joys, their dreams and their individual struggles. Thankfully, each preserved their letters.... This collection is a glimpse of their lives between 1942 and 1956... These letters are my parents’ legacy. They tell about a difficult but wondrous journey filled with obstacles and opportunities... [and] remind us that all young Americans begin their lives with dreams.”
-- Excerpted from the Introduction (pg. 5)

If you saw the recent World War II film *Red Tails*, you were treated to a riveting reenactment of the heroic exploits of the Tuskegee Airmen over the skies of Europe. But a glaring omission from the movie was any mention of the African-American pilots’ pining for their loved ones back in the States.

In fact, the only romance featured in the film revolved around an ill-fated, interracial liaison between an airman and a local girl he met while stationed in Italy. For that reason, a book like *Tuskegee Love Letters* couldn’t have come along at a more timely moment. This bittersweet memoir is essentially conceived as a play constructed from the notes which Bernard and Luana Knighten exchanged by mail while he was serving his country as a member of the Tuskegee Airmen. The passages were culled by their daughter, Kim, from a collection of over 400 missives she found after her father passed away in 2000 at the age of 79. The initial entries were written when the Knightens were still newlyweds in the full bloom of youth, and exhibiting an endearing combination of bravado, exuberance and vulnerability. Though their subjects of conversation ranged from safety to racism to ambitious plans for making their mark on the world upon reuniting, every message invariably included a passionate reaffirmation of their love.

For instance, Luana signs one note with a heartfelt, “Please, please, please be careful and come back to me,” well aware that some members of her hubby’s squadron had already perished in action. Bernard, in turn was just as ardent, not only naming his plane after his wife, but admitting that “I dream of you all night long.”

He also describes his reaction to Nazi POWs ‘enjoying better accommodations than black GIs. “It is really disgusting. It makes my blood boil to see how nice they treat the German prisoners... It really hurts.” But discrimination didn’t discourage him after the war from publishing with the help of “a talented young writer named Alex Haley” the debut issue of *Essence Magazine*, a short-lived precursor of the popular periodical for black females.

Meanwhile, equally-talented Luana started pursuing her acting career, only to die of a heart attack two days before she was set to make her Broadway debut co-starring in *Take a Giant Step* opposite a teenager named Lou Gossett, Jr. Because Kim was only a couple months-old at the time, she never really got to know her mother.

That makes her all the more grateful to her parents for having the inclination to save their intimate love letters and to her long-widowed dad for preserving them for posterity, knowing just how much they might mean to his darling daughter the day she discovered them in a dusty trunk in the attic after he was no longer around. A priceless slice of African-American history that can't be read without crying and which undoubtedly deserves to be on display in the Smithsonian.

To learn more about Kim Russell, visit: <http://www.speakersontour.com>

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The Sly Fox Film Reviews publishes the content of film critic Kam Williams. Voted Most Outstanding Journalist of the Decade by the Disilgold Soul Literary Review in 2008, Kam Williams is a syndicated film and book critic who writes for 100+ publications around the U.S., Europe, Asia, Africa, Canada and the Caribbean. He is a member of the New York Film Critics Online, the NAACP Image Awards Nominating Committee and Rotten Tomatoes.

In addition to a BA in Black Studies from Cornell, he has an MA in English from Brown, an MBA from The Wharton School, and a JD from Boston University. Kam lives in Princeton, NJ with his wife and son.

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