



Gabriel Bump speaks about his debut novel, "Everywhere You Don't Belong," at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore Feb. 17.

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HYDE PARK, WOODLAWN, SOUTH SHORE

Author Paints A 'Complex' Portrait Of South Shore In 'Everywhere You Don't Belong'

The debut novel from 28-year-old South Shore native Gabriel Bump follows protagonist, Claude, as he tries to "find a comfortable place in the world."

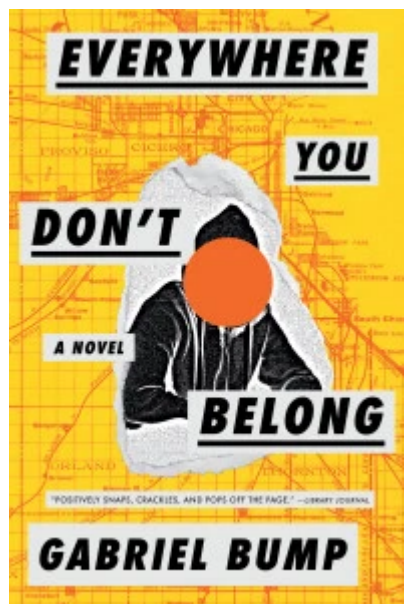
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Maxwell Evans

SOUTH SHORE — In his debut novel, author Gabriel Bump brings the complexities of South Shore [to the national stage](#) while giving a voice to the

quiet kids with a lot on their minds.



“Everywhere You Don’t Belong” is fictional protagonist Claude McKay Love’s coming-of-age story. After his parents abandon him at age five, he moves in with his grandmother and her friend Paul, who live in Jackson Park Highlands.

The first half of the story follows Claude as he attempts to “do normal kid things when society and family is pressuring him to be something else — to be extraordinary,” Bump said.

“Claude isn’t a person you hear from a lot in society — he’s a quiet, anxious kid prone to depression,” Bump said. “It was important to get in the mind of that person and see how these exceptional qualities can show themselves in non-traditional ways.”

The back half of the book sees Claude leave the neighborhood behind to study journalism in Missouri. In college, he faces pressures likely to resonate with any person of color at a predominantly-white institution.

“He’s expected to speak for his entire race; to be this voice and be this standard that he is not necessarily up for,” Bump said.

The turning point of the story is a riot that engulfs South Shore after a neighbor boy is killed by police. It brings to the fore a central theme in the book: Claude’s constant desire to belong.

“There’s a traumatic experience that happens, and he just decides, ‘Maybe this isn’t the place for me; maybe I should go see if some place else can be,’” Bump said. “If that place actually exists — if there is any place — is kind of questioned in the book.”

Bump said he finished writing the riot scene well before the [fatal shooting of Harith Augustus](#) in 2018 by Chicago Police officer Dillan Halley. The scene was inspired by the fatal shooting of Mike Brown in 2014 and the subsequent uprising in Ferguson.

Even so, Chicago writer [Audrey Petty](#) said she sees parallels between the events of the novel and Augustus’ killing.

“It really did feel like [[the protests that followed](#)] could be the moment ... there were clashes, there was violence against the protesters, and it felt like it could very well escalate,” Petty said to Bump as they discussed the novel at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore last week. “Reading your novel and seeing what plays out, it felt eerie to me.”

“That’s one thing that’s still strange to me, like why Chicago isn’t up in flames,” Bump responded. “You could probably say that about a lot of places in the country.”





Writer Audrey Petty (left) hosted the “Everywhere You Don’t Belong” book talk at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore.

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Filled with heavy topics like violence and family separation, *Bump* balances the book’s seriousness with humor and tenderness.

“Everywhere You Don’t Belong” “becomes absurd and fantastical in a lot of ways, which is how the South Shore in my mind looks,” *Bump* said. “It’s just this place I love and [was] my childhood and was really important to me.”

The novel’s focus on South Shore is a nod to Chicago writer [Stuart Dy](#) who “portrayed people as humans, just doing the best they can in somewhat-misunderstood sections of the city,” *Bump* said.

In depicting the neighborhood as a “complex and fleshed-out place,” *Bump*’s novel aims to give a voice to its residents, much like *Dybek*’s work does for

Pilsen and Little Village.

“Everywhere You Don’t Belong” comes as outsiders are beginning to change their perception of the South Side, Bump said. That’s due in part to [likeminded authors](#) who are [telling stories](#) that [break from tired narratives](#) about the area.

Bump said his novel is “in conversation” with Carlo Rotella’s deep dive into South Shore’s social climate, “[The World Is Always Coming to an End.](#)” There’s a personal connection, too — the Bump family purchased their Jackson Park Highlands home from the Rotellas.

Rotella’s book is “the first thing I’ve seen that laid out the disparities and the disconnects” between South Shore neighbors, while “Everywhere You Don’t Belong” imagines those neighbors uniting despite their disconnects, Bump said.

The efforts to [protect affordable housing](#) in Woodlawn and South Shore are “a good example of something I imagined in the book — people across socio-economic divides coming together and fighting,” Bump said.

Since moving away from the neighborhood, Bump said he hasn’t kept a close eye on it. He’s aware of big developments like the plans for the [Obama Presidential Center](#), but plenty has flown under his radar since he left in 2014. He now lives in Buffalo, N.Y.

In fact, he told the Seminary Co-op crowd last week that the book was his “Chicago novel” — he’s unlikely to write another set in the city.

“Everywhere You Don’t Belong” “seemed natural to write when I started,” Bump said. “Returning to the city and writing about it from a distance when things have changed so much — I’m not sure I could do it justice.”

As his promotional tour winds down, Bump is editing his second novel; it’s based in Massachusetts, where he went to grad school. A third novel, set in Buffalo, his current home, is on the way.

Bump’s work traces the places he’s lived, and he likes to give his characters his personality traits, but the real-life similarities end there — his day-to-day life of writing, reading and teaching “is kind of boring,” he said.

“Fiction — one of the things that makes it exciting is you can imagine these events and people responding to these events,” Bump said.

Yet “Everywhere You Don’t Belong” is undeniably personal. At the novel’s end, Claude has a vision where he talks to the people in South Shore he’s left behind to attend college.

As Bump finished reading a passage from the final chapter, “Where We Belong,” to the Seminary Co-op crowd, he started to tear up.

“Seeing high school friends and teachers come out, it’s something I don’t think I’ve necessarily processed yet,” Bump said. “Being back home after being gone for so long, that’s what made it particularly emotional.”

Paul Horton, Bump’s high school history teacher at the University of Chicago Lab School, was at the book talk. Horton hasn’t read the novel yet, but he isn’t surprised at its sentimental subject matter — or Bump’s success as an author.

“He’s just really sensitive and empathetic and he’s going to make a great novelist,” Horton said. “He’s translating his different experiences to a much broader audience. I’m extremely proud of him.”



Gabriel Bump wipes away tears after reading an excerpt from the closing chapter of “Everywhere You Don’t Belong.” He said it was the first time he had cried while reading the book.

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Bump is 28, with a positive review in the New York Times and attention from numerous local publications. A high point came as he left Phoenix after a speaking engagement this past weekend and bought a copy of People magazine.

He’s not an avid People reader — actually, he’s never bought the magazine before. But he said he had to get the most recent issue; his book was recommended in it.

It’s just one of many new milestones that’s come during the 28-year-old author’s “strange and surreal” debut on the national scene.

“My life is still pretty young,” Bump said. “I’m just starting off on this adventure.”

“Everywhere You Don’t Belong” is available now through Algonquin Books.

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