

How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America Study Guide

**How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America by
Kiese Laymon**

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Summary

This guide was created using the following version of this text: Laymon, Kiese. *How to Kill Yourself and Others in America: Essays*. Chicago: Bolden Books, 2013.

How to Kill Yourself and Others in America is Kiese Laymon's first published collection of essays about such themes as race, politics, identity, and violence. The collection opens with "Prologue: We Will Never Ever Know: Letters to Uncle Jimmy," which is made up of letters to the author's uncle who suddenly died after getting off crack and buying some meat. In it, the author discusses that he wished he had not died, as he would have liked to get to know him better. The next essay, "The Worst of White Folks," discusses that a certain group of people are set on keeping African Americans low on the social ladder. It also encompasses the idea of personal responsibility.

The titular essay "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America," tells the story of when the author was kicked out of Millsaps College after inciting racial tensions through writing inflammatory columns about race and sex, which eventually culminates to a point in which the author pondered suicide. The essay also touches on racial profiling and police violence. The next essay, "Our Kind of Ridiculous," also delves into the idea of racial profiling and racial preconceptions that occur in American society. This essay is followed by "Hip-Hop Stole My Southern Black Boy," an essay about the author's interaction with Southern Hip-Hop music and its progression.

The collection then takes a sudden turn with the essay "Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon," which discusses acceptance and self-love in African American culture. The essay "Kanye West and HaLester Myers are Better at Their Jobs..." also analyzes African American culture, but centers more on the idea of treatment towards women than acceptance. These analyses of culture are furthered with the essay "Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012," which delves into the reactions that American politicians give regarding national problems that affect the African American community.

Towards the end of the collection, "Eulogy for Three Black Boys Who Lived" discusses the lives of three successful black entertainers, Michael Jackson, Bernie Mac, and Tupac Shakur, and their impacts on American culture. The final essay, "You Are the Second Person," attempts to use the second person pronoun in order to explain the author's difficulties with writing what he wants in the current literary climate, as well as his personal struggles during his writing process. Finally, the epilogue, acts as a sort of retrospect on the author's personal struggles and who taught him to overcome them.



"Prologue: We Will Never Ever Know: Letters to Uncle Jimmy"

Summary

The chapter opens with a letter from the author, Kiese Laymon, to his uncle, Jimmy. Laymon begins by discussing the mistakes that he has made throughout his life, from getting kicked out of high school more than once, to run-ins with law enforcement. However, he explains that he stopped doing these things because Jimmy acted as a warning.

Laymon then describes July 4th, when Jimmy threw down his crack pipe and bought Laymon's grandmother some meat. This is the last time that Laymon's family saw Jimmy alive. Laymon then recollects on the time that his aunt told him that he was going down the same road as Jimmy. After this quick tangent, the author explains that they found Jimmy's body on July 7th. Jimmy was then buried at Concord Baptist Church, where Laymon's entire family was baptized. Aunt Sue, the preacher explained that Jimmy was no different than anyone in the room.

The prologue ends with a letter from Sue to Jimmy. She explains that Jimmy was good, but failed to guard his heart, which led to his death. She then reiterates that Jimmy was just like anyone else, living at the same time in which he was dying.

Analysis

The fact that the author positioned "We Will Never Ever Know: Letters to Uncle Jimmy" as the prologue instead of one of the essays of the book is important to understanding Kiese Laymon's actions as well as who he is as a person. In this essay, Laymon states that Jimmy acted as a lesson for him; a lesson that kept his life on track when it very well could have veered in the wrong direction. Thanks to Jimmy, as a lesson, Laymon instead spent his energy on productive things like reading, writing, and schooling, rather than violence or drugs. As readers, we are meant to assume that many of the Laymon's actions throughout the book's essays are made due to Jimmy.

The prologue also introduces a recurring theme of living a "paroled life." While the meaning of this is not explicitly explained in this section, it is implied that by being African American in today's society, one has a paroled type of life. Essentially, this alludes to the idea that if an African American does anything wrong, they will be imprisoned or harm will come to them. This is a very damning indictment of the way that the contemporary American society treats African Americans, causing them to fear for their lives.

The prologue never actually explains how Jimmy died, but through context clues, it can be assumed that he died due to some sort of drug related issue. Most of the evidence



for this lies in the way that Laymon reacts to his death. If Jimmy did, in fact, die of a drug overdose of some sort, this would certainly motivate Laymon into keeping his life on the right track. Through this, the consequences of the type of life that Jimmy decided to live, would be very clear to Laymon.

Sue's letter at the end of the prologue sets up an important theme that runs throughout the collection. In the letter, Sue mentions that Jimmy, like all people, lived and began dying at the same time. Through this, the reader can assume that the collection's title "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America," alludes to this as well, as when one lives, they also begin killing themselves.

Vocabulary

sanitized, pension, diligently, deceptiveness



"The Worst of White Folks"

Summary

Laymon begins a recollection of when he and his friend David were sent to their Catholic school's principal's office because David farted in his hand and spread the smell during Mass. Right before they got to the office, David told the teacher that he was responsible and that Laymon should not be punished. When asked about this, David stated that his coach told him that people should be responsible for their team. When Laymon returned home, his mother beat him with a belt and stated that "white folks don't care if you die" (27), and Laymon acknowledged that she meant "the worst of white folks" (27). He pondered on this term and came to the conclusion that this group of people want to keep African Americans down to the point as to where they are working for the tiniest piece of the American pie.

Laymon then recollects on his first cousin, Jermaine. When Laymon's father would take him to visit Jermaine, he always wanted Jermaine to return home with them. Less than ten years later, Jermaine's sister was murdered, and Jermaine was later incarcerated for manslaughter. After Jermaine got out of prison, Laymon briefly mentioned to Jermaine that he should live with him, but neither person pursued this further.

Laymon then explains that a few years after the fart incident, David, like half the boys in his class, died. Later, Laymon told his grandmother that he was going to attend a basketball game for "Peace" that wanted to stop the violence in Chicago. His grandmother suggested that he tell the organizers to listen to the mothers and grandmothers of those involved in the violence. Not long after, Laymon remembers, that an American presidential candidate would accuse women like his grandmother of being an entitled victim. Laymon then changes the subject to responsibility and the fact that ducking responsibility has a price. The narrative then shifts back to the day after Laymon and David returned to school, where David stated "Nigga, that was yesterday!" (33) when asked about his responsibility.

Analysis

The author's main idea in this essay is responsibility and how different people and groups of people handle it. During the David narrative, the author demonstrates that personal responsibility is not constant. While David did initially take responsibility for the flatulence incident, he later ignored his responsibility involving other things. The idea that Dave's act of taking responsibility was "yesterday" (33) demonstrates that people seem to not take responsibility 100% of the time.

The author also discusses how the government does not take responsibility for its actions. Laymon seems to blame "the worst of white folks" (27) who are in and outside of the government on the current position that African Americans are in within the United



States. The example that Laymon uses is the presidential candidate whom he does not name, but is most certainly Republican candidate Mitt Romney. During his candidacy, Romney implied that those who require government assistance are victims who feel entitled to governmental benefits. Laymon brings this up, as he implies that if the government was fulfilling its responsibility towards the black population, there would be far fewer problems. This concept will appear later in the collection, in the essay “Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012.”

The final type of responsibility analyzed in this essay is Laymon’s. Laymon knew full well that his cousin, Jermaine, was in a very bad situation, and could certainly use some sort of help. However, Laymon only mentioned the possibility of Jermaine living with him once and never brought it up again. Laymon admits that he definitely did not live up to his responsibility as a friend and member of Jermaine’s family. It does seem like the author still regrets this decision.

The concept of responsibility comes up in the later essay “Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon.” However, the difference lies in how responsibility is actually thought of and carried out. For example, in this essay, responsibility is shown once (by David) and seemingly abandons the concept later on in this essay. In “Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon,” the letter writers agree that black men have a responsibility to each other through loving each other and erasing the stigma associated with it.

Vocabulary

ducked, governed, clenched, line-worker

“How to Kill Yourself and Others in America”

Summary

The essay begins with the author explaining that guns were pulled on him by four people: an undercover police officer, a mugger, his mother, and himself. During the first instance, he was 17, five years younger than Rekia Boyd was when she was killed by a police officer in 2012. Laymon and his friends were at a McDonalds and held the door open for an older white man wearing a John Deere hat. Upon leaving, he screamed “Nigger lover” at their vehicle (36). In a car, Laymon and company pursued the man, who eventually pulled them over, as he was an undercover cop. Eventually another cop showed up and deescalated the situation, and told Laymon that the other officer drank too much.

The second instance was when Laymon was 18, three years older than Edward Evans was when he was shot in the head in 2012. Laymon, Shonda, and her friends left a Subway when they were stopped by a mugger and his friends in a Corolla. Laymon yelled to the man and told him to shoot him instead of the others. Eventually, the man patted him down, found nothing, and left. Not long afterwards, Laymon acquired a gun.

The author then recalls when he was accosted by white Millsaps students after his controversial articles in the school paper. Laymon was initially going to retrieve his gun and confront the students, but instead opted for a baseball bat. Eventually, Laymon and his mother ended up in the President of the college, George Harmon’s office. Harmon told the two that Laymon would be allowed to attend the school after a period of time and psychological counseling. Not long after, the NAACP sued Millsaps on Laymon’s behalf, and Laymon received the Benjamin Brown award, he then threw his gun in the river. Sometime later, Laymon got in an argument regarding his Oberlin College application. Laymon brushed it off because Millsaps was going to send Oberlin a Dean’s Report, which caused his mother to pull out her gun and tell him to leave. After his mother left for work in the morning, Laymon retrieved his mother’s gun and thought about killing himself. He did not.

Sometime later, Laymon and his friend encountered a bloody woman, whom they sheltered and eventually called the police. Months later, Laymon left Mississippi for Oberlin, three years older than Trayvon Martin was when he was killed by George Zimmerman. After a local murder conviction, Laymon wonders if those involved remember how to kill themselves and others in America.



Analysis

Throughout the essay, the author often inserts lines comparing his age to African Americans who died tragically. This is clearly connected to the frame of the story: Laymon telling the reader about the different instances when guns were pulled on him. While Laymon does not come out and say it, the connection lies in the gun itself. All of the recollected instances in this essay could have resulted in gun violence but did not. However, the instances that the author brings up, like the shooting of Trayvon Martin and Edward Evans, did result in gun violence, as Edward Evans and Trayvon Martin were shot to death. The author considers himself lucky, as his story could have ended in the same way as Evans' and Martin's, but it did not.

This essay also discusses the institutional and cultural racism towards African Americans in contemporary America. This is most clear in the instance where Laymon is suspended from Millsaps after the incident in which white students accosted him and shouted racial slurs. While it is not clear if any physical violence occurred due to the confrontation, it does seem like Laymon was unjustly suspended. The reason why Laymon was accosted at all also demonstrates cultural racism. All Laymon did was write in the school paper about race and masturbation, and he was harassed for it due to the cultural racism that was put upon the college students.

Finally, the title and the final line of the essay has a very specific - yet unstated - meaning. The author wonders if those involved in a local murder remember how to kill themselves and others in America. He is wondering if they remember how to do this, as they are doing it already. Laymon ponders if they know they are actually killing themselves and others. Laymon implies that the crimes themselves and those involved are furthering the cultural racism and hatred that overflows American culture. Basically, according to Laymon, since the local murder was done by an African American, it only furthers the fear of African Americans.

While the connection is not explicitly made, the idea of killing oneself calls back to Aunt Sue's words regarding Jimmy in the collection's prologue. In the prologue, Sue discusses that Jimmy, like all people, died as he lived, meaning that he was dying at the same time in which he was living. In this essay, the idea of killing oneself is associated with killing others; this implies that it is possible for one to hurt others by living/dying in a particular way, and that people should be conscious of this fact.

Vocabulary

cordial, work-study, oblong, altercation

“Our Kind of Ridiculous”

Summary

The essay opens with the recollection of when Laymon lived next to man named Kurt in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, while writing his graduate thesis. Laymon and Kurt's apartments were very small, especially Kurt's as he lived with his girlfriend and her children. One day, after Kurt borrowed \$10 from Laymon, he told Laymon that he should move to Pennsylvania, because he was not like his kind (and added that he was not racist). Laymon erupted and explained dissonance and white absolutism to Kurt. They did not speak again. However, Laymon did run into Kurt's son, and learned that the son could not read, even though he was of reading age.

About a month later, while Nicole (his white girlfriend) and Layman were returning from a concert, they were pulled over by police. The officer claimed that Laymon threw crack out the window, so they handcuffed him. They searched Laymon and the car and found nothing but condoms. During the events, Laymon remembered the time his mother told him to not be caught riding in cars with white girls. He then asked himself if Kurt was one of the on-lookers. After the events, Laymon wrote the words ‘We are real black characters with real black character, not the stars of American racist spectacle. Blackness is not probable cause.’

Analysis

This essay explores two types of racism: individual racism and cultural racism. Individual racism is demonstrated primarily through Kurt. While Kurt argues that he is not actually a racist, it is very clear that this is not true. When he refers to other African Americans as Laymon's “kind” he is negatively generalizing the rest of the African American population. As Laymon seems to realize, Kurt does not understand the idiosyncrasies of racism, which leads him to believe that he is not actually a racist. In a way, Laymon is utilizing Kurt as a character, in order to expose the concept of casual racism in American society. Laymon also points out how Kurt seems to think African Americans are bad, yet he fails his children by not teaching them how to read.

The cultural racism lies in the behavior of the police officer that pulled Laymon and Nicole over. While the police officer does make the excuse that he saw Laymon throw drugs out of the car window, he searches Laymon anyway, assuming that he will find something on Laymon's person that could send him to jail. It is implied that the officer does this because he assumes that since Laymon is African American, he is involved in some sort of illegal activity. The police officer also has extra vitriol for Laymon because he is an African American man riding in a car with a white woman. While the police officer does not explicitly state this, Laymon believes this to be true because his mother told him not to ride in cars with white women unless he wanted trouble. This is not the first time that Laymon touches on cultural racism in the collection, as a similar situation



takes place in "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America." Laymon intentionally touches on this concept again in order to show the reader that cultural racism presents itself in many different forms.

Vocabulary

illiteracy, raggedy, bootleg



“Hip-Hop Stole My Southern Black Boy”

Summary

The author recalls the times when he and his friends would rap (they called raps “ciphers”) together in the Oberlin College bathrooms, disallowing all women and people of other races to participate. He explains that at the time, they were just spectators to New York Hip Hop. Laymon states that he had rap credibility because he spent some time in New York with his father. He then elaborates that Southern rap was looked down upon at the time. However, years later, after the group OutKast became popular, Southern rap became popular and almost the norm. When this happened, he would think of ciphers, bringing him back to his childhood in Mississippi. Layman then began accepting the fact that he was a Black Southern artist, and that this was okay, as much of the country’s culture came from Black Southern artists. He then asks the reader if they can “hear us” (72).

Analysis

Like many of the essays in this collection, this essay’s central theme is identity. It seems like the author is using the types of hip-hop and their relationships as an allegory (which becomes more obvious towards the end of the essay) for his own identity. Just as Southern hip-hop eventually accepts its own genre as valid, and is therefore thrust into the public sphere, Layman also accepted that he is a Black Southern artist, and feels comfortable explicitly stating this. It also draws the very obvious connection between Black Southern artists and Southern hip-hop music. It seems like the final line of the essay “do you hear us” is more of a proclamation than a question, as it is tied into the explanation that much of America’s culture has come from Southern Black artists (72).

In this essay, Laymon attempts to utilize information that he assumes that the reader already knows. The author does not go to great lengths to explain who particular rap figures are, as he seems to assume that the reader already knows who individuals like Puffy and Hype are. It is very possible that the author does not explain who these people are for the purpose of forcing the reader to research the individuals, therefore learning why they are important. In a way, the author forces the reader to learn and appreciate the subject in which he is writing about, regardless of whether the reader has knowledge about New York and Southern hip-hop before reading the essay.

Vocabulary

cipher, stone-washed, monologue



“Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon”

Summary

The essay is made up of a set of letters. The first is from someone named Mychal Smith, who recalls finally coming to the conclusion that he was a man when he stopped worrying and began living. When he began living, his father also began telling him that he loved him. The next letter is a response to Mychal, writing by Darnell Moore. Darnell recalls the times that he tried to end his life, even though he had a master's in counseling. During this time, he wondered if God loved him, because he thought that he would burn in Hell for being homosexual. He then declares that he is revolutionary because he is a black man who decided to live. He also states that if God should condemn anything, it should be social death.

The next letter is Layman's reply to Darnell and Mychal. Laymon discusses that black family is different. He explains that he did not really have a father figure and that the women in his life needed loving partners more than he needed a father figure, as his mother was a victim of domestic abuse. He goes on to tell Darnell that black men should not be afraid to love other black men. The next letter is a reply to the aforementioned writers by a transman named Kai. He elaborates that being a black transman is very difficult in this culture, and throughout the process of finding himself, he self-harmed. He tells Laymon that his mother also loved a bad person, a crack addict. He proclaims that crack has ruined many black love stories. His letter ends by stating that “WE” deserve to be healthy and happy.

The final letter is a reply by a man named Marlon. He states that these letters made him think deeper than ever before. He tells them that he lived the last ten years of his life in prison for second-degree murder. He ends the letter stating that he has no answers to the problems that have been discussed, and that they just have to keep the flow going.

Analysis

This essay demonstrates the difficult lives that different African Americans have in contemporary American society. Mychal did not have a real father figure that showed him affection, leading him to doubt himself and wonder if he was really a man. This type of doubt occurs due to the cultural aversion to black men being affectionate towards other black men, something that each letter writer after Laymon acknowledges.

The cultural difficulties that Darnell and Kai have are very similar. Darnell is suppressed and discriminated against because he is a black homosexual. The aforementioned cultural aversion to black men showing affection towards other black men only makes this discrimination worse, as not only does Darnell show emotional affection towards



other black men, he shows physical and intimate affection as well. According to his letter, Kai is in even more of a difficult situation. Kai is actually transgender, which comes with a whole other set of cultural aversions in African American culture (according to Kai). It is unclear whether Kai began self-harming due to the discrimination that he faced or whether it was due to the mental trauma that came through the long process of finding himself.

Marlon's letter shows much less discrimination but highlights the fact that there is no easy answer to the aforementioned problem. Overall, the vast majority of this essay is about identity, and the difficulty of finding oneself while living in a culture that does not accept who you are. While this type of discrimination exists within many cultures, the letter writers share their experiences of their difficulties within their mutual race.

This essay shares the subject of responsibility with the previous essay "The Worst of White Folks." However, the difference regarding responsibility between the two essays is that responsibility is not treated like a throw-away concept, like how Dave treats it in "The Worst of White Folks." All of the letter-writers insist that the responsibility of black men to take care of and love other black men cannot falter, unlike Dave's responsibility that disappears after a short period of time.

Vocabulary

transman, subjective, plight



"Kanye West and HaLester Myers are Better at Their Jobs..."

Summary

The essay opens with Laymon recollecting the time his grandmother's second husband, HaLester Myers, suddenly died. Laymon was in the room at the time and figured that HaLester was faking sleep, but he was actually unconscious due to medical reasons. The recollection then goes back in time, to an instance when Laymon and HaLester, who was very drunk, spoke about Kanye West. According to HaLester, Kanye West and Barack Obama were very good at telling white people about what black people deserve. HaLester also stated that women should be treated the same way as cats, which was problematic, according to Laymon. Laymon then makes a point that HaLester degraded women just like Kanye did.

Laymon then recollects the time when he first burned a CD of "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy" by West. This CD inspired him and his friends alike, and Laymon listened to it constantly. The narrative then shifts to the events directly after the beginning of HaLester's episode. While on the way to the hospital, HaLester gave Laymon his .357 firearm and told him to hide it. Not long after, his grandmother slipped into a diabetic coma. Laymon lied to HaLester, telling him that his grandmother wanted to see him. They then sat in the room together holding hands. Laymon then wondered if any of "us" truly deserve to have a woman hold our hands.

Analysis

While it may seem like the main idea of this essay is Kanye West, it is not. The main idea is really how certain parts of culture proliferates the suppression and mistreatment of women. Kanye West is initially used for this purpose, because he has a history of speaking poorly about women through his lyrics. This type of attitude towards women seeped into the lives of everyday people, like HaLester Myers, causing him to find that it is proper, in this culture, to treat women as such. However, he does state that this can change, just as Kanye's opinions changed throughout his career.

Laymon also touches on whether men in contemporary society actually deserve affection from women. At the beginning of the essay, HaLester compares women to cats, which is disrespectful. Later, when Laymon's grandmother is hospitalized, HaLester holds her hand. Due to the way society has ingrained misogyny into our culture, Laymon thinks that men like him do not actually deserve to hold the hands of women. HaLester seems to disagree with this notion, as he does not seem to properly receive the moral message that former President Barack Obama and Kanye West later in his career attempted to instill in people.



In this essay, the author treats "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy" in a similar way to how he treats rap figures in "Hip-Hop Stole My Southern Black Boy." Laymon never goes to great lengths to discuss the details of the album, other than the songs. Here, the author could either be simply expecting that the reader is familiar with Kanye West's work prior to reading the essay, or hoping that the reader researches West's work in order to understand the essay more fully.

Vocabulary

tartar, forty-ninth degree, acclaimed



“Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012”

Summary

The essay opens with a recollection of a conversation the author had with his mother, a political scientist, right before the 2008 election. She warned him not to wear his Obama shirt in public, for fear of violence. She also argued that white people would find a way to limit African American opportunity, even though Obama would be president. Laymon ended up wearing the shirt anyway. Years later, after Laymon asked himself why people are not asking politicians the right questions, he imagined a lost (not real) 2012 debate between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama (written in present tense as a sort of transcript).

First, the moderator tells the candidates that they can avoid two questions by stating “that’s the shit I don’t like” (104). Obama’s first question is why so many more African Americans are in jail than other races. Obama states that the rate was better than it once was. Romney responds by not fully understanding the question. The moderator questions Obama again, and he responds “that’s the shit I don’t like” (106). The moderator then asks Romney why the Republican party does not take responsibility for the state of the country, he answers “that’s the shit I don’t like” (107). Obama is then asked if he feels bad for civilians killed by drone strikes, he replies that he does, but the strikes were necessary. The final topic is spending, as the moderator explains that we spend large amounts of money on nuclear weapons and the military, but Americans are still starving and homeless. Obama admits it is hard for left-leaning president to make it easier for these people. The moderator explains that this is the wrong attitude, while Romney asks for equal time. When the topic is posed to Romney, he states “that’s the shit I don’t like” (110).

Analysis

This essay primarily discusses Laymon’s notion that the people of America are either not answering the right questions, or the politician simply refuse to answer these types of questions. The author uses the lost debate as an allegory for this, as both ideas are present in the debate’s narrative. During the debate, the moderator does ask the questions that, according to Laymon, should be asked. The issue that arises in this sequence is that both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney seem to either avoid answering these questions or answer in a vague, non-constructive manner. The idea of the “that’s the shit I don’t like” excuse symbolize the accepted avoidance of important questions (104). Laymon is commenting that the news media and those who moderate the debate let politicians intentionally avoid questions, and the moderators do not do anything about it. Even when the hypothetical moderator does pursue the answer to an asked question, the politician avoid actually answering it.



The hypothetical debate also attempts to be a neutral debate. This is demonstrated by the author bringing up negative qualities and decisions that both parties have partaken in. However, some bias does show through. Laymon seems to write Mitt Romney, the Republican, as some sort of misogynistic, uncaring, robot, while he makes Barack Obama's speech more vernacular, more like the average man speaks. This is an attempt to mirror Laymon's writing style with the false speech of Barack Obama, in order to make him more likable.

This essay explicitly connects to the previous essay "The Worst of White Folks" in its discussion about the government's relationship with the black population. In "The Worst of White Folks," the author references Romney and his comments towards those who seem to feel entitled to government assistance. Here, the moderator mentions how the government has failed those in poverty, especially the black population, and Romney does not respond in a caring way. This simply continues Laymon's aforementioned characterization of Mitt Romney as a uncaring and robotic human.

Vocabulary

stilted, prognosticating, pulpy



“Eulogy for Three Black Boys Who Lived”

Summary

The essay opens with Laymon explaining that his mother wanted him to know Michael Jackson like she did, as she grew up with the Jackson 5, and later, Michael Jackson’s solo career. Laymon recalls his childhood, when he and his mother would listen to Michael Jackson records together and bond. Laymon even admits that he wanted to be like Jackson. Laymon then argues that post-Thriller Michael Jackson changed the way we consume media due to its narrative style. This was particularly important, as it let a black man tell his story.

The second part of the essay is about the life of Bernie Mac. Laymon admired Bernie Mac because he made it seem like he should not be on stage and was not trying to be blacker than he was. According to the author, he made jokes about loss of innocence and family, making him feel like a comedian for “us” (the African American community). Once Mac got his own network TV show, he brought ideas of black family to his audience. Laymon then thanks Mac for his pain.

The last section of the essay is about Tupac Shakur. Laymon admires the way Tupac wrote and sang. He also wonders how Tupac would have interacted with the world if he had not died in 1996. The narrative then shifts to a hypothetical 2012 DNC convention, when Tupac rushes the stage and asks Barack Obama why all “these people” have airplanes and money while Americans have no homes or food (125).

Analysis

This essay attempts to highlight the immense contributions that three African American entertainers made, not just towards the African American community, but the American society as well. Through this and its placement in the collection, the reader is supposed to draw connections with the lives that certain African American characters in the other essays lived to the lives that the three men in questioned lived. All three of the entertainers were oppressed or suppressed in some way or another, but they made it through and changed the world, while some African Americans like Trayvon Martin did not. It must be made clear that this does not mean it was these individuals’ faults, but instead the institutional and cultural suppression was so extreme that they either could not overcome it or died.

The final part of the essay discusses a recurring theme throughout the collection: income inequality. Like the moderator in “Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012,” Tupac questions politicians about why some people have almost unfathomable wealth, while others have almost nothing. This, once again, questions



why society does not ask politicians the right questions regarding income, race, and class.

An interesting part of this essay that deviates from many of the previous essays like the prologue and the titular essay, is that living does not seem to be portrayed as a side-by-side activity along with dying. In the previous essays, the author and Aunt Sue discussed that people die at the same time in which they live, and that they must avoid killing others in the process. In the narratives about Jackson, Mac, and Shakur, dying is only really discussed when the individuals actually die at the end of their sections. This could be due the author's idolization of these figures or that he does not believe that their lives operated in the same way as everyone else's.

Vocabulary

contoured, transference, sequined



“You Are the Second Person”

Summary

The essay opens with Laymon addressing the reader as “you” (second-person perspective) even though by “you,” he means himself. Your publishing agent, Brandon tells you that he will need to target other people rather than your general audience (black men). You then wonder if you are a “black writer” (130). When thinking about black art, you think about how the film *Django Unchained* is not true black art, due to the person who made it. As your book’s publication date approaches, you stop hearing from your literary agent. You eventually get in touch with your agent and he explains that he is no longer with the company and recommends another agent. You speak with the new agent, but eventually Brandon offers you a better book deal with his new company. The same process happens, many revisions and eventually your publication date is pushed back. You yell at your agent and eventually stop speaking with him. You are then diagnosed with some sort of illness, making your predicament even worse. You then come to the conclusion that you will not give up. You finally break ties with Brandon and decide to keep writing and revising, because you are, in fact, a black writer.

Analysis

The moral that lies in this essay is that one must be resilient throughout hardship. In the essay, the reader, through the second-person pronoun, sees the hardships that the author had to go through in order to get published. The use of “you” is intentional in order to help put the reader in the shoes of the author to make the reader feel the hardships almost first-hand. Identity is also analyzed in this essay, as throughout the essay the author attempts to make himself become a real “black writer” (130). Only after a sufficient amount of set-backs does the author realize that there are no set requirements in order to be labeled a black writer. Instead, Laymon comes to the conclusion that he is a black writer and simply has to continue writing in order to make this clear to the world.

This essay also explores what it means for something to be considered black art. The second-person narrator explains that the action movie *Django Unchained* is not black art because of the person who made it, Quentin Tarantino. The clearest explanation of why the narrator believes this is because, while the film is about black characters, it is a film about black characters created by a white man. The author's main point here seems to be that black art must be created by a black person.

Vocabulary

multiculturalism, metafiction, Afrofuturist



“Epilogue: My First Teachers --- A Dialogue”

Summary

This essay consists of a series of letters. The first is from Aunt Sue to Laymon. She explains that she believes that Laymon allows himself to reach people that do not have his best interests at heart. She then cites Psalm 91, telling him that it got her through tough times. The next letter is from Laymon to his mother. He states that she told him to confront failure, which got him to the point that he is at today. He tells her that now he understands why teachers punish themselves (he is currently a college professor). He ends the letter by stating that he does want to murder anymore, and that he chooses life.

Analysis

The epilogue of this essay collection connects to “You Are the Second Person” in the realm of subject matter. Here, both Aunt Sue and Laymon discuss what teachings or people helped get them through hard times. It is implied that the events in “You Are the Second Person” was one of the tough periods of time. However, the epilogue’s purpose is one much more about closure. Throughout the collection, Laymon tackles identity and what it means to be a black writer. In the epilogue, it seems that he has once again, after the work mentioned in “You Are the Second Person” he has accepted once and for all that he is an actual black writer. This completes Laymon's quest for identity, as throughout the entire collection Laymon has been attempting to create his identity as a black writer, finally finding it after his work's publication.

Vocabulary

psalm, adversity, alumnae



Important People

Kiese Laymon

Kiese Laymon is both the author of the essay collection and whose life is the main subject of many of the essays. He grew up in Mississippi and was the subject of many instances of racism (which are highlighted in several of the essays). Laymon was later educated in English and eventually aspired to become a writer. He did so and became successful with his previous work, *Long Division*.

Laymon's main concern is relations between people. These relations include those between law enforcement and African Americans, between African Americans and White Americans, and between African Americans and their own race. Within these relations, he often expresses fear that he will be harmed, either physically or emotionally, by those he has relations with.

Laymon's secondary concern is proving himself as a "real black writer" (130). Essentially, Laymon rejects what the popular culture considers black writing, as it is simply popular writing written by African Americans. He instead strives to write as an African American, for African Americans, and those with similar mindsets.

Uncle Jimmy

Uncle Jimmy, the subject of the collection's prologue, was Laymon's uncle. While he was not a father-figure for Laymon, Laymon still feels like he missed much emotional and social growth due to his death. Laymon also uses Uncle Jimmy as an example of what not to do, as Jimmy was a crack addict and eventually drove himself to self-destruction.

Kiese's Mother

Laymon's mother is one of the driving forces in many of the collection's essays. Laymother usually gave Laymon tough love regarding both his life and his perceived place as an African American in American society. This tough love even went as far as pulling a gun on him in "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America."

David

Davis is Laymon's friend, beginning from when they were both in primary school. Together, in "The Worst of White Folks," they were both kicked out of school for activities such as farting in Mass. In this essay, they learned to look out for each other through sticking up for one another and admitting guilt to school administrators.



Nicole

Nicole was Laymon's girlfriend during the events of "Our Kind of Ridiculous." She was also present when Laymon was accused by a police officer of throwing crack cocaine out of his car window.

Kurt

Kurt was Laymon's neighbor during the events of "Our Kind of Ridiculous." Keither is described as an unintelligent and impoverished white man who does not understand the nature of race relations.

Kai Green

Kai Green is one of the letter writers in "Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon." Kai informs the other letter writers that much of his life has been very difficult due to the fact that he is an LGBTQ African American.

George Harmon

President George Harmon was the president of Millsaps College, where Laymon attended, during the events of "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America." George Harmon suspended Laymon after the events that resulted from Laymon's writings on race in the magazine he helped create.

Brandon Farley

Brandon Farley is Laymon's literary agent during the events of "You are the Second Person." Laymon seems to have mixed emotions about Farley, as Farley seemed to lie to Laymon about publishing his book, while still giving him an option to move publishers with him. Laymon's biggest issue with Farley is that Farley seemed to think that Laymon is not a real black writer, which Laymon disagrees with.

Shonda

Shona was Laymon's coworker during the events of "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America." She was present when Laymon was harassed by other students due to his writing in the magazine.



Objects/Places

Mississippi

Mississippi is where most of the events of Laymon's childhood and young adult life took place. Laymon was raised in Mississippi and is where his "Southern Black Boy" identity was formed. Throughout the collection, Laymon describes that not only was his identity formed in Mississippi, but many of his ideas regarding race were as well, including his views on white Americans discussed in "The Worst of White Folks."

Millsaps College

Millsaps College is where much of the events of "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America" took place. Millsaps is the college Laymon was suspended from due to the content of his newspaper articles. Through the events of the essay, Laymon implies that Millsaps is a rather racist institution and alludes to the idea that he was suspended differently than the white students due to his race.

Oberlin College

Laymon attended Oberlin after the events that took place at Millsaps. The bathrooms of Oberlin is where much of the rhyming in "Hip-Hop Stole My Southern Black Boy" took place. Oberlin is described as being much more tolerant and diverse than Millsaps. Laymon describes that he was glad that he decided to attend Oberlin, because many of his memories were formed there, such as those in the aforementioned "Hip-Hop Stole My Southern Black Boy."

"The School Paper"

The school paper (which the author does not specify) is where Laymon published controversial writing about race and masturbation. The content of the newspaper articles eventually lead to his departure from Millsaps. However, Laymon seems to believe that it was not the content of the articles that led to his expulsion, but the institutional racism of Millsaps.

Laymon's Gun

After his experience with law enforcement in "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America," Laymon acquired a gun to protect him from his angry classmates. Later, he also thought about using the gun to commit suicide. Eventually, Laymon comes to the conclusion that he does not need a gun when he learned that committing violence would not help anyone's situation.



HaLester's Gun

During his medical episode, HaLester gave Laymon his gun. Laymon was very unsure of why HaLester had a gun, but accepted it anyway. It is implied that, due to Mississippi's race relations, the gun was to defend him from intolerant white Americans, but this is never explained.

Long Division

Long Division is Laymon's first novel and is mentioned throughout the book, especially in "You Are the Second Person." Laymon implies that Long Division's publication was what led him to consider himself a real writer.

"My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy"

"My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy" is the Kanye West album that was released during the time of "Kanye West and HaLester Myers are Better at Their Jobs..." This album gave the author and his friends a large amount of inspiration.

Emmaus, Pennsylvania

Emmaus, Pennsylvania is where Laymon lived during the events of "Our Kind of Ridiculous." Like many of the settings within the collection, Emmaus does not have the greatest race relations.

Django Unchained

According to the author, the film Django Unchained is a false black movie and is not representative of the black experience.



Themes

Police Brutality/Racial Profiling

The author uses the theme of police brutality and racial profiling in order to highlight the importance of race issues in contemporary America. This is most prominent in the essay, "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America," as when Laymon changes time periods, he compares his own age to that of someone who was killed either by a police officer or by a firearm. By doing this, he further humanizes the victim by comparing them to the individual whose perspective the reader views the story from, Laymon's. The author decides to mention it constantly in many essays in order to inform the reader of the frequency of which African Americans die of violence.

The author also uses the theme of racial profiling to inform the reader of how exactly it happens. In order to do this, the author used real-world examples of being racially profiled. In the essays "Our Kind of Ridiculous" and "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America," Laymon makes it very clear that he believes that he was pulled over for his race, later writing "Blackness is not probable cause" (58). What the author means by this is that the color of one's skin should not make it more likely for them to be suspected of a crime or searched by the police. This particularly an issue of note in the United States, as several states have legalized practices that essentially makes it legal for law enforcement to search people due to their appearance, whether they are white, black, Hispanic, or Middle-Eastern. The author insists that the color of his skin should not make him a suspicious person, as not every black man is a dangerous criminal, as some of the police officers in the collection's essay seem to have believed. Essentially, the author makes this point very clear in order to assure that the reader understands that both race issues are incredible important and that action must be taken in order to minimize them.

The author's motive for discussing this subject in this essay collection is to bring the reader's awareness to the concepts as large problems. The reader assumes that the reader knows that these problems exist, as they are constantly spoken about through the media. However, through the theme within the essay collection, Layman attempts to humanize the issue, showing that racism and racial profiling can happen to almost anyone, even the writer of the essay.

Income Inequality

In the essays, the reader uses the theme of income inequality to inform the reader that not all Americans have the same types of opportunities. For example, in "Eulogy for Three Black Boys Who Lived," the author uses Tupac Shakur as a mouthpiece on this issue. In this instance, within a hypothetical situation, Tupac steals the stage at the Democratic National Convention and asks those in attendance why some have so much while many have little. This is a subject that has become more prominent during the



time of this collection's publication, as populist politicians have brought the spotlight on the way that wealth seems to be distributed in the United States. Laymon/Tupac suggest that the system is not working if people have luxurious items such as planes, boats, and mansions, while some live in poverty while working pay-check to pay-check. The author implies that much of this is due to race, as during "Eulogy for Three Black Boys Who Lived," Tupac seems to primarily focus (without explicitly stating) on black Americans, through the essay's subject matter of black entertainers who lived and defied stereotypes. It is most likely not a coincidence that Barack Obama is on the stage as Tupac enters, as Obama was the first black president of the United States. This exemplifies that even though the country has had a black president, the problems facing black Americans, especially economic ones have not disappeared.

This topic appears again in "Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012." In this essay, the hypothetical debate moderator asks Obama and Romney and asks a similar question that Tupac asks in the previously mentioned essay. In both cases, those who are being questioned do not give full answers, and Obama admits that he does not know how to fix the problem. While Laymon does not give any solutions himself, it seems like he speaks about income inequality in his essays in order to bring awareness to an immensely important problem. However, the main ideas of the collection's essays are not to give answers to the discussed problems, but to instead simply discuss them.

Identity

The author uses the theme of identity to demonstrate the process and difficulties associated with finding oneself. The primary example of this is Laymon himself. Throughout many of the essays, like "You Are the Second Person," Laymon attempts to find out how to truly become a black writer; this is difficult for him, as his agent has a differing opinion regarding what a black writer actually is. Through much introspection, the author finally determines that he is, in fact, a black writer, even though it does not follow others' definitions of the label. However, by the end of the epilogue, Laymon seems to have labeled himself as a real black writer, as he succeeded in breaking the mold and publishing his first novel without many changes to his intended message.

This theme is also prominently displayed in the essay "Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon." Here, while we do not see an individual coming into their literary identity, like Laymon, we learn about Darnell and Kai's process of finding themselves as homosexual and transgender respectively. The difference between these two particular types of finding oneself are very different, it highlights that even through adversity, it is possible to find oneself in contemporary society.

The essays also touch on philosophical identity as well. The most prominent example of this is in "How to Kill Yourself and Others in America," when Laymon struggles with his reaction to adversity. After an incident, Laymon first purchases a firearm in order to protect himself in dangerous situations. At one point, he even thought about using it after being accosted by other students thanks to the content of his newspaper articles.



After he picked up the gun, he put it down, as he began to believe that using violence does not fit into his identity. Eventually, he threw the gun in the river, acknowledging that his philosophy does not allow for its use.

Politics

The author uses the theme of politics in order to critique contemporary American politicians' responses to race issues and economic inequality. This is most clearly demonstrated in the essay "Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012," when hypothetical versions of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney are asked questions on the subjects. Prior to the hypothetical debate actually taking place, Laymon states that people are not asking politicians the right questions. These questions about race and economic inequality are then asked to the candidates, whom mostly brush off the questions or basically refuse to answer, one of the biggest questions asking if the candidates believe it is right for some individuals to have almost unimaginable wealth while other have almost nothing.

Essentially, not only is Laymon critiquing the actions and word of political figures, he is critiquing society itself. According to Laymon, the politicians do not seem to feel accountable for their actions, and the public does not seem to ask them to. For example, the moderator in "Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012" asks Obama about civilians that were killed in drone strikes and he does not directly answer the question. Since the public (not in at the hypothetical debate) do not ask these questions, the politicians do not have to answer them, thus making them accountable. What Laymon seems to be doing with this theme is a sort of call to action. The author wants American society to ask these very important questions in order to start a sort of discourse that will hopefully lead to some sort of solution. Again, as mentioned in the "Income Inequality" theme section, Laymon is not proposing any sort of solution, but simply arguing that some sort of conversation must be started in order to achieve any sort of progress. Essentially, it is very clear that the author is not satisfied both with the ways that constituents interact towards their politicians and how the politicians interact towards the people.

Adversity

The author uses the theme of adversity to inform the reader about great amount of adversity that many types of people face in America. The most common example that Laymon uses is the adversity and suppression that African Americans still face. Most of the African American individuals in the collection either talk about, or in the case of Laymon, recall and elaborate upon the personal type of adversity that they have faced. Much of this is cultural adversity leading to a lack of acceptance. The two main types of adversity in this collection are racial adversity, identity adversity, and professional adversity.



Racial adversity runs throughout the vast majority of the entire collection. Through the essays, Laymon elaborates and comments on the current state of race relations in the United States and the current problems within those relations. The racial adversity that individuals face throughout the essays are racial profiling/police brutality (see the Racial Profiling/Police Brutality theme section) and cultural racism. Laymon states that the fact that racial adversity is an issue in contemporary America is a problem that needs to be discussed (it is hypothetically discussed with Mitt Romney in “Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012”).

This is most prominent in “Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon,” as Darnell and Kai explain that the African American culture is generally not accepting of homosexuals or transgender persons. The letter-writers argue that in order to reduce the frequency of this type of adversity, homosexuality and transgender persons need to be accepted in African American culture. The writers argue that one way to do this is to destigmatize the idea of black men loving and helping other black men. Other types of personal adversity also exist, such as Laymon trying to write what he wants to write in a literary world where it is often not accepted.

A less discussed form of adversity in this collection is professional adversity. In “You Are the Second Person,” the narrator expresses frustration and difficulty with the current state of American literature. His agent argues that the type of literature that the narrator wants to write is not popular right now and that he should switch genres in order to succeed. The narrator does get through this adversity by continuing to try and publish his work, which he does as evident by the fact that the essay collection exists and the content of the collection’s epilogue.

Styles

Structure

How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America consists of nine essays that make up the vast majority of the content of the book as well as a prologue and epilogue. These essays are, in a way, interconnected, as some of the individuals who are mentioned within one essay often appear in others. However, these essays are not ordered in a fashion that portrays a consistent narrative. While all the essays are about the author's life, the time periods in which they discuss are not ordered in chronological order.

Perspective

Since many of the book's essays are about Kiese Laymon's life, much of the essays are told through his perspective. There are instances in which this is not so, but they usually involve hypothetical scenarios in which Laymon could not have been present (like the debate between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama in "Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012") or letters ("Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon"). Laymon's first person perspective is also not seen in essays that discuss historical events ("Eulogy for Three Black Boys Who Lived") and when he explicitly discusses the second-person perspective in "You Are the Second Person."

Tone

The tone of many of the essays is very consistent. This tone is one of introspection or reflection, whether it is about the author's life, historical events, or people the author knows (or knew). Sometimes, along with this tone of reflection, comes anger. This angry tone is seen during essays that discuss the injustices done to African Americans, like in "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America".



Quotes

Your heart was good but you forgot to guard it. You killed yourself slowly because of this. The heart is the true measure of a man or woman. I loved you and I know that you knew I loved you. We all have addictions. Some are just more obvious to the eye. We are all dying, but we are all living.”

-- Sue ("Prologue: We Will Never Ever Know: letters to Uncle Jimmy" paragraph 34)

Importance: Here, Sue, Uncle Jimmy's sister, proclaims the basis of one of the collection's themes, that everyone is dying but living as well.

Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers have paid more than their fair share, and our nation owes them and their children, and their children's children, a lifetime of healthy choices and second chances. That would be responsible.”

-- Kiese Laymon ("The Worst of White Folks" paragraph 28)

Importance: The author discusses his frustration with how the United States treats African Americans, especially after the nation's mistreatment of the race during the Civil Rights movement and prior.

A few weeks later, an irresponsible American aspiring to be the leader of our nation, who got the majority of the vote from the worst of white folks, called her a "victim" who feels entitled to health care, food, and housing.

-- Kiese Laymon ("The Worst of White Folks" paragraph 21)

Importance: The author not-so-subtly brings up a statement by former Presidential candidate Mitt Romney who was accused of victimizing those who need government assistance.

The worst of me wants credit for intending to do right by Jermaine, and has no intentions of disrupting my life for the needs of a cousin I always looked up to.”

-- Kiese Laymon ("The Worst of White Folks" paragraph 21)

Importance: Here, the author seems to acknowledge that part of him is selfish towards people, regardless of the impact that they may have had on his life.

Mama's antidote to being born a black boy on parole in Central Mississippi is not for us to seek freedom, but to insist on excellence at all times. Mama takes it personal when she realizes that I realize she is wrong. There ain't no antidote to life, I tell her. How free can you be if you really accept that white folks are the traffic cops of your life? Mama tells me that she is not talking about freedom. She says that she is talking about survival.”

-- Kiese Laymon ("How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America" paragraph 39)

Importance: Laymon recalls a disagreement with his mother regarding the nature of his



existence in America. Laymon seems to strive for freedom, while his mother simply wants to ensure his survival in a hostile environment.

I think of my grandma and remember that old feeling of being so in love that nothing matters except seeing and being seen by her. I drop the gun to my chest. I'm so sad and I can't really see a way out of what I'm feeling but I'm leaning on memory for help. Faster. Slower. I think I want to hurt myself more than I'm already hurting. I'm not the smartest boy in the world by a long shot, but even in my funk I know that easy remedies like eating your way out of sad, or fucking your way out of sad, or lying your way out of sad, or slanging your way out of sad, or robbing your way out of sad, or gambling your way out of sad, or shooting your way out of sad, are just slower, more acceptable ways for desperate folks, and especially paroled black boys in our country, to kill ourselves and others close to us in America."

-- Kiese Laymon ("How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America" paragraph 42)

Importance: Laymon discusses the all-too-common cycle of self-destruction that African Americans face in the United States. He rejects this cycle and decides to not kill himself.

The handcuffs hurt more than the thought of bullets."

-- Kiese Laymon ("Our Kind of Ridiculous" paragraph 24)

Importance: The author does not mean this regarding physical hurt, but mental hurt. The idea of being imprisoned and suppressed mentally hurts him more than the thought of being killed by the police.

We are real black characters with real character, not the stars of American racist spectacle. Blackness is not probable cause."

-- Kiese Laymon ("Our Kind of Ridiculous" paragraph 52)

Importance: Here, the author comments on the concept of racial profiling by law enforcement. The author proclaims that the color of one's skin is not cause for suspicion or violence.

We black Southerners, through life, love, and labor, are the generators and architects of American music, narrative, language, capital, and morality. That belongs to us. Take away all those stolen West African girls and boys forced to find an oral culture to express, resist, and signify in the South, and we have no rich American idiom."

-- Kiese Laymon ("Hip-Hop Stole My Southern Black Boy" paragraph 28)

Importance: The author argues that the United States would hardly have any cultural artifacts without African Americans.

You got Kanye telling the white man the truth about what the black man deserve.

-- HaLester "Les" Myers ("Kanye West and HaLester Myers are Better at Their Jobs..." paragraph 5)



Importance: HaLester, one who the author did not suspect to know who Kanye West was, informs Laymon that Kanye West is telling an important message to white individuals in America.

Obama will win. We will win. Then we will continue to lose. And the right questions will never be honestly asked or answered, and it's all just too much."

-- Kiese Laymon ("Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012" paragraph 21)

Importance: Laymon states that regardless of whether Barack Obama wins in 2012, the candidates and lawmakers will not be asked the right questions regarding race, leading to an absence of progress in U.S. race relations.

Your letter reminds me that any love that necessitates deception is not love. It doesn't matter if that supposed love is institutional or personal.

-- Kiese Laymon ("Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon" paragraph 22)

Importance: In a letter, Laymon argues that love that is inherently involved with deception is not actually love, implying that institutional love regarding race and gender identity is not actually love.



Topics for Discussion

Laymon's Style

The back of the book compares the way that the author uses language to canonical writers such as Mark Twain. What about Laymon's writing style makes this comparison valid (or not)?

Barack Obama

Throughout the book, the author seems to portray mixed feelings about Barack Obama's presidency. What seems to be the clearest summary of Laymon's view on President Obama?

"Paroled Life"

Throughout the book, Laymon expresses that African American boys are born in a "paroled life" (43). What does he mean by this, and what are some features of Laymon's "paroled life" (43)?

Law Enforcement

The book contains many mentions of law enforcement. What seems to be the author's opinion about the current nature of law enforcement?

The Right Questions

In "Reasonable Doubt and the Lost Presidential Debate of 2012," Laymon states that we may never ask politicians the right questions. What questions is he referring to?

Jimmy and Fatherhood

In "Prologue: We Will Never Ever Know: letters to Uncle Jimmy," Laymon states that he is glad that Jimmy was his uncle rather than his father. What does he mean by this?

Guns

Throughout the book, guns make multiple appearances. What purpose do guns play within Laymon's life and his essays?



Laymon's Path

Laymon states that his family stopped him from going down the wrong path. What could Laymon mean by this? What is the wrong path?

Laymon's Occupation

It is very clear that Laymon is a writer. What seemed to be the reasons why he made the decision to enter this profession?

"Southern Black Boy"

Laymon considers himself to be a "Southern Black Boy," even though he has not lived in the South for years. Why is this?