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"Since I Laid My Burden Down has a fearless (sometimes reckless) humor as Brontez Purnell interrogates what it means to be black, male, queer; a son, an uncle, a lover; Southern, punk, and human. An emotional tightrope walk of a book and an important American story rarely, if ever, told." —**Michelle Tea, author of *Black Wave***

DeShawn lives a high, creative, and promiscuous life in San Francisco. But when he's called back to his cramped Alabama hometown for his uncle's funeral, he's hit by flashbacks of handsome, doomed neighbors and sweltering Sunday services. Amidst prickly reminders of his childhood, DeShawn ponders family, church, and the men in his life, prompting the question: Who deserves love?

A raw, funny, and uninhibited stumble down memory lane, Brontez Purnell's debut novel explores how one man's early sexual and artistic escapades grow into a life.

Since I Laid My Burden Down Details

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From Reader Review *Since I Laid My Burden Down* for online ebook

Trevor Kidd says

In *Since I Laid My Burden Down*, Brontez Purnell creates an amazing portrait of a character at the coming together of a lot of intersections: black, queer, Southern, San Franciscan, Lutheran, Baptist, lover, son, uncle. This book is sometimes hilarious, sexy and heartbreaking, and always honest. I devoured it in one sitting.

Deshawn is an artist living in San Francisco. He returns to Alabama for a funeral, and flashes of his life between the two spaces appear. Family and lovers enter the narrative and disappear again. The pace is fast, though there is less emphasis on plot than on character and how these seemingly contradictory identities play out in the central character. The time frame and setting shift mostly between Alabama and San Francisco.

I loved the honesty that imbues Purnell's writing about queer sexuality. It's raw, it's honest, it's sexy. It doesn't sanitize or uncomplicate itself for the hetero gaze. Nor does Purnell seem to uncomplicate blackness for a white gaze. I'm sure that others can speak more eloquently to that than I can.

Since I Laid My Burden Down is a highly effective book and one of my favorite books written in the past few years. I highly recommend it.

Andrew Chidzey says

I picked this up in the Castro in San Francisco and was not sure whether to buy it but in the end did so on a whim - I'm so glad I did. Raw, graphic, confronting and challenging this novel follows the central character as he attempts to evaluate his worth and place in life. Having moved to liberal Oakland from Alabama upon turning 18 Deshaw is thrown back to his roots following the deaths of his Uncle, Father and partner. A challenging yet gripping read I finished this within a day - it is compelling and refreshing to discover a new author who writes so genuinely.

Waffle says

A weaving path through memories. Stark and funny and honest.

Eastendleo says

This is one dense motherfucker of a short novel. Which is both great and not so.

The great is that every page steams with the heat of life. The not so is I would have lapped this story up at ten times the length.

I especially liked the sex. For its raw realness, but especially for what I took to be its combination of

liberation and oppression in the same act at the same time. Or am I reading too much into exuberant compulsive youthful rutting?

A favorite passage:

DeShawn looked in the mirror and all he saw was a man who had been absent from himself. It was a learned behavior. Years of encounters like these hadn't left him hollow, but there was a feeling that his sexual self was, more often than not, on autopilot. Experience is the only teacher, really, and one can rack up an enormous bill along the way. DeShawn's PhD in Whoreology cost him, and he would be paying for some time. He didn't lament though - he held tight to the one thing his experiences had afforded him: wisdom. He gained knowledge of both other people and himself. The kind he wouldn't have had access to had he been locked away in some boyfriend's house or the confinement of celibacy. To DeShawn, this wisdom was worth its weight in gold.

He wondered when his real life would begin, when it wouldn't seem like a mixtape of disappointments he was either enduring or surviving.

His life and the men he encountered, the quest for their presence, felt like a series of random treasure maps he followed for no reason other than for something to do.

He would get the map, sail across the ocean, make it to the deserted island, dock the boat and swim to shore, cut through a jungle, find where "X" marked the spot, dig up twelve feet of dirt, and finally find the treasure chest. Only to open it and find another set of instructions. He was often told never to look for love - "It'll come to you" - but he personally couldn't think of one great explorer who had ever found anything by not looking for it. DeShawn thought about how comfortable people were with dropping platitudes as undisputed truth.

Sometimes he felt he had looked too much. It was like searching for the Fountain of Youth, or the City of Gold, a useless pastime. All he found was the Book of Excuses, written by every lover.

"It's not the right time," or, "I would love you more if you were less like yourself," or his particular favorite, "Don't expect shit of me - ever." There were so many people offering nothing and treating that nothing like it was a prize to be fought over.

Jason says

I bought this because it was a staff pick at City Lights (itself reason enough to buy something) and a quick dive into the writing at the shop left me tickled. Well, it's quite a ride! It's very short, but its accuracy makes it concise and incisive, as well as being hilarious and depressing and everything in between.

willowdog says

If anything, it is interesting look at the life of a African American gay man who comes back to the South from Oakland for a funeral. I thought that the author tried to shock at the beginning with graphic details of

gay sex. I found the charting of the narrative with the back and forth of memories too much a ploy.

Meghan says

DeShawn lives in San Francisco and goes back to Alabama for his uncle's funeral. This novel follows his journey and reflections on people he's known both growing up and after he moved to San Francisco. It's sort of rambling but engaging, and has the best qualities of personal zines - funny in unexpected ways, emotional in places, authentic and raw but still polished writing.

ralowe says

there are whole industries dedicated to the commodification of our suffering. aside for nominal compensation to a given cultural worker, what's beneficial to a contingent grouping of experiential similitude imbuing particular interpretive capacities (or "community") is never anything other than accidental. this is the expectation in the case of blackness and queerness on its own. even moreso at its intersections. the name of the game is selling the pain, at the expense of the oppressed group: the opposite would be an industry liability. these oppressed experiences are inherently paradoxical: precious and disposable. i continue to struggle with determining what at this barren, depraved and desolate industrial site truly and unconstrictingly nourishes the psychic well-being, and promotes the flourishing, of the given cultural producer. it would appear the artist (depending on the medium of one's affinity) owns the means to their own production (that is, structuring and apprehending institutions notwithstanding, subjectivity), and yet art is not enough. fred moten has been my go-to for describing this ambivalent conundrum concerning black (also queer, insofar as it momentarily lapses into a discreet and also necessarily fleeting trace (indeed, in moten's own work)) traditions of cultural production that can "occasion something very much like sadness and something very much like devilish enjoyment." there's not enough of brontez purnell's demonic laughter by way of relentless stylistic proficiency in *since i laid my burden down*. i'm pretty sure brontez (deshawn?) is the devil, in the blues/judeochristian sense, a fugitive from paradise: a vital and ironic remedy for the impasse of tired political life. luminaries in this realm of demonic ideality are david wojnarowicz and assata shakur. my favorite part early on in the book is the satanic seance for kurt cobain in middle school. (think of how different my life would have been if i was into nirvana in middle school.) it's regrettable that the critique of religion throughout is not allowed to develop its confrontations further (say as a gentler alternative to a more generous edit allowing the traumatic life events chosen for narration to breathe). sure, process is rarely a luxury for real life, but this isn't: this is art, right? i'm reminded of gayl jones and toni morrison, poets of unendurable experiences. like pat parker, purnell's strength is in the articulation as much as the content, where the riot grrrl shines. but an audience straight white feminists like kathleen hanna don't get it. purnell requires an editorial staff that won't compromise. as we said before there's whole industries of varied traditions dedicated to this. plus think of all the people who have no outlet so massive. which makes the privilege all the more valuable. i'm not proposing that there's an existing resolution to the question of the artist's psychic compensation. (the whole time i was uneasy wondering what i was participating in.) the devil is the devil due to a refusal to compromise. and those fucking details.

Kate McCarthy says

As if one of my filter-less friends with scandalous proclivities (if you say so) we're recounting his exploits. A

quick and dirty read, pun intended. Happened to see the author read today and his written voice truly represents his social voice, and it is just so transparent and honest I really appreciate it.

Michael says

A strange, stylized series of vignettes detailing the inevitable shifting of life from radical innocence to a consistent maturity. Funny, disturbing, entertaining and irresistible, this slim volume would make a great offbeat television series (on HBO or Showtime, naturally).

Dan says

I love Purnell's writing. It's evocative, unapologetic, and funny. In many ways his tone reminds me of Sherman Alexie, though they are writing very different stories.

If you liked this, make sure to follow me on Goodreads for more reviews!

Nadin says

"DeShawn looked at the pantheon of men in his life - all the fathers, uncles, fuck buddies, fake boyfriends, whatever - and they all felt like a void. ... They were all such a troubled bunch. ... Maybe I didn't lose anything, he thought. Maybe I broke even.
And he felt like he didn't felt in a long, long time. He felt new."

Cara says

Got this book somewhat at random from the library. It's nothing like what I usually read or my experiences, so I thought maybe it would be a good change of pace.

The main thing about DeShawn is he doesn't seem to be able to connect with life or feel anything. That's mostly how I felt about the book, too.

DeShawn does change and become more Zen by the end of the book, but even that happens off-screen. We're told more than shown his new perspective, and we don't witness the evolution as it comes about, so it feels unlikely/unreal.

Overall, a decent book. I feel like I should have more to say about it, but I don't.

Eugenio Negro says

From negrocomics.wordpress.com:

Saw a video a few months back of Brontez Purnell reading from his up-and-coming book *Since I Laid my Burden Down* and had to get a copy as soon as it came out. Tried to read it with his voice in my head. The book has been doted upon with a marvelous thick library jacket by New York City University's Feminist Press.

The punk rocker, performance artist and otherwise notable Oakland figure, whom I remember as one of the few interesting people on Earth in the vacuous universal hell of 2005, published the zine *Fag School* beginning in 2003. He has also published the *Cruising Diaries* in 2014 with the collaboration of Janelle Hessig, from whose *Tales of Blarg* I first heard of his exploits, as well as 2015's diary-style *Johnny Would You Love Me if my Dick Were Bigger*. *Since I Laid my Burden Down* is sort of a Bildungsroman framed in a memoir. Is there a word for that?

DeShawn, blessed with the emotional receptivity that marks a faggot amongst his church-centered community, reflects during a funeral trip to his Alabama hometown of his trajectory in making his life meaningful, and not wasting his faggot people skills in the office of a rural preacher. Regardless of his shifting relationship with his mother, there is the feeling that he thinks his mother has limited her life becoming a preacher herself.

DeShawn is drawn as a product of generations raised by women, with men absent or devoid of father quality. The protagonist seeks mentorship and trust naturally, nevertheless, through his everyday channels, even through an older married lover. Despite making his own way, fleeing Alabama for California, DeShawn never really feels like he can stand the weight of his life on his shoulders, and has problems with memory and scale. Like a lot of us. The story

The book is full of family, church, death, sex, and the perverse distortion of time and place unique to being in one's early thirties. Particularly rewarding are the terse but deft descriptions of family members, such as "DeShawn's mother always spoke recklessly when it was unnecessary, and coolly when it was greatly needed." Wait –how do they ever know when is which? Does the narrator mean this in hindsight or...?

Throughout the story DeShawn visits two funerals and relates cleaning out several dead people's houses, visits the gracious and lovable mother of both an early lover and an early abuser, and wears out the patience of a girlfriend in New York, all the while taking stock of the relationships he put on hold or fled when he left Alabama. Along the way he sees some ghosts that grow more vivid and some that thankfully fade.

The prose is unadorned and direct, more diary-like in the beginning, with creams of sly humor beaten in. The back of the book features quotes that I personally found a little hysterical, such as "foul-mouthed and evil." Perhaps these refer more to Johnny. Purnell's narrator swears a lot, but only in that the book irreverently records the living language, and is meant to be read out loud. This, in my opinion, is one of the book's greatest strengths. Anyone obsessed with Pitchfork-level simile-spraying could find any great oral art in corners of Brontez' sentences, from beat literature to Henry Roth to ... I don't even know, I hate that phony free-association name-dropping stuff. Altogether I appreciated that the prose, though steeped in contemporary slang and naturally-occurring humor, betrays none of the lascivious revelry of Johnny but rather a deep and true affection and understanding for most of DeShawn's characters, regardless of whether he gets along with them.

Reading the sexual escapades and mentions of a youth steeped in punk rock, it was kind of hard for me, at least, not to place Brontez himself in for DeShawn –as he placed himself as close to the fictional glass as can be in Johnny –so I recommend the reader enjoy the book first and then go cyber-stalk the poor, highly-exposed author. The night their post-Loma Prieta freedom punk warehouse gets closed down, even a

fictional lover tells DeShawn “everyone knows who you are.”

I also appreciated how Purnell manages to fit the realities of Deep South life into the story in tiny but excellent bites. This stuff is unimaginable for us west-coast types with our Hollywood-deadened intellects, and the author even points that out in a funny moment. He relates how the principal at the school would remind DeShawn, when he got in trouble, that “your great-granpappy used to raise chickens for my family...” This is the medium of DeShawn’s family’s story that must never be overlooked: in the south there are these horseshit relationships that can be evoked as if to show loyalty, but are really just threats of force. In turn, the protagonists internalize this doublespeak and wield it on each other with varying degrees of purpose (we’ve got this out west with Latino immigrants too). Maybe I just found this insightful and brilliant as a dumb Californian beach bum. What am I gonna school the reader with, the abusive roundabouts of various pelagic fish?

It’s probably clear by now that my only challenge for Purnell for next time, should he decide to do a next time, is to work out before writing who the narrator is. This way the key emotion, be it sex-crazed enthusiasm or reflective love, can really shine through consistently. The reader also could really get cozy within the work’s world if Purnell takes the above decision, moving on some from the format that seems to have begun with Johnny. Finally, this will doubtlessly also address some nitpicky tonal issues I have with some parts.

Since I Laid my Burden Down is a document of a unique life within its unique time and place, an effective and efficient balance of the personal and the universal. Cut that self-conscious crap out about “I don’t recommend every book to everyone.” Get Brontez’ new book and have everyone you know read it!

Alvin says

A modern classic! In a matter-of-fact tone that's simultaneously wry and heartfelt, the narrator - a lovable scamp by the name of DeShawn - weaves a web of stories in which the reader cannot help but become ensnared. Though brief enough to read in a couple of sittings, SILMBD feels epic with Southern queens, California punks, strong women, bewildered boys, and damaged men all jumbling against each other kaleidoscopically. This is a Must Read.
