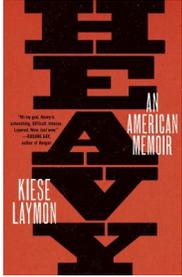


Books by the Stack



Heavy: An American Memoir by Kiese Laymon

An essayist and novelist explores what the weight of a lifetime of secrets, lies and deception does to a black body, a black family and a nation teetering on the brink of moral collapse.

Why you'll like it: Autobiography. Unconventional. Thought-provoking. Compelling.

About the Author: Kiese Laymon is an American author and professor, born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. He attended Millsap College and Jackson State University before graduating from Oberlin College and earned his MFA in Fiction from Indiana University. He is the Otilie Schillig Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Mississippi. He has written a novel entitled *Long Division*; a collection of essays, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*; and a memoir, *Heavy: An American Memoir*. He won the 2019 Andrew Carnegie Medal for nonfiction with his memoir, *Heavy*. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

1. At the beginning of *Heavy*, Laymon writes that he “wanted to write a lie” but “wrote this to [his mother] instead” (page 10). Does his assertion that he’s writing to his mother shift your understanding of the memoir? Have you ever told a kind lie to parent instead of telling the truth?
2. Why does Laymon run away from Beulah Beauford’s house? Why does his mother want him to return there?
3. When Laymon and his Grandmama go to the Mumford’s house, he feels a “rot spreading in his chest” (page 52) while he waits in her car. What causes these feelings, and how are they connected to larger social problems?
4. Laymon writes that, by eighth grade, and even before meeting “actual white folk,” he’d met the white protagonists of many, many TV shows, movies, and books, as well as in the rest of pop and contemporary culture – politicians, the coaches of sports teams, representations of Jesus and Mary, etc. “That meant,” he writes, “we knew white folk. That meant white folk did not know us” (page 72). What does he mean by this? What are some ramifications of this not knowing?
5. One of Laymon’s favorite words growing up is “meager.” How does he use I, and what does it mean to him?
6. For his final paper for Coach Schitzler’s English class, Laymon incorporates a reference to Assata Shakur. Coach Schitzler responds by telling him that the paper is a “mess of faulty logic” (page 110) and gives him a C. How does Laymon’s growing political awareness, and experience of institutional racism, shape his senior year of high school?

7. At Millsaps, Laymon realizes that “books couldn’t save [him] from a college, classes, a library, dorms, and a cafeteria that belonged to wealthy white folk ”(page 126). In what specific ways in Laymon excluded, punished, and ostracized on campus because he’s black? How is this tied to his weight?
8. How does Laymon feel about Malachi Hunter, his mother’s boyfriend? How does their relationship test his connection to his mother?
9. After Laymon writes an essay for the school paper on institutional racism, and is threatened in letters and then in person by white fraternity members, Nzola tells him he hasn’t said anything about “‘patriarchy’ or ‘sexism’ or intersectionality” (page 151) recently. In what ways are their lived experience of racism and patriarchy different?
10. Laymon is expelled from Millsaps because he took a copy of *The Red Badge of Courage* out of the library without checking it out. Eventually, he transfers to Oberlin; he promises his mother he will come back to Mississippi soon, but he does not come back soon. Why not?
11. Laymon writes that, despite all the weight he’d lost, “whenever [he] looked at [himself] in the mirror, [he] still saw a 319-pound fat black boy from Jackson” (page 178). How is his self-image affected by his family? By the world around him? By his experiences of sexual abuse?
12. On September 15, 2001, Laymon takes a commuter train to New York City to volunteer at Ground Zero. A dark-skinned South Asian family is seated in front of him, and both white and black men on the train make comments about terrorism. Laymon defends the family, then wonders if “this feeling [he] had was what ‘good white folk’ felt when we thanked them for not being as terrible as they could be” (page 183). Can you describe what that feeling might be? Do you think you’ve ever had that feeling?
13. On a college judicial board, Laymon hears the case of a “small, smart white boy” (page 193) found with cocaine, who tells the committee a black man forced him to buy it. The small, smart white boy is found not responsible for distributing drugs. How does power and privilege play into this situation?
14. After seeing his father, Laymon writes that he’d ‘never given much weight to the idea of present black fathers saving black boys” (page 200). What do you think he means by this?
15. Laymon sees his mother at a casino and does not say hello to her. Why not?
16. Laymon writes, at the very end of his memoir: “I am just trying to put you where I bend. I am just trying to put us where we bend” (page 241). Discuss this play on “been” and “bend.”

(Questions provided by the publisher)



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