

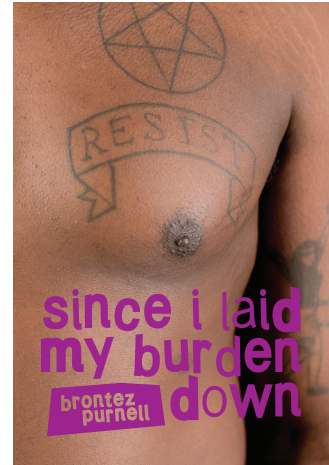
READING GROUP GUIDE

SINCE I LAID MY BURDEN DOWN

Brontez Purnell

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1. Brontez Purnell writes with an uninhibited style. He unapologetically describes gay sexual activity and uses explicit language. What effect does this style have on his characterization of DeShawn? On the other characters in the novel?
2. Teenage DeShawn considers his mother overbearing. Do you agree with his assessment? How does their mother-son relationship develop throughout the book? How does DeShawn's changing relationship with his mother compare to his relationships with others from his hometown?
3. When returning to Alabama, DeShawn revels in how many aspects of his childhood home have stayed the same over twenty years. Have you ever gone back to a childhood home? What was the same, and what had changed?
4. From being molested as a child to his past lover's recent suicide, DeShawn experiences incredible trauma throughout his life. How does he cope with this pain? Ultimately, are his coping strategies effective?
5. Religious faith plays an important role throughout the book, both as a form of healing and a form of repression. For example, DeShawn's mother wants him to become a preacher both because she believes in the power of the church and because it is an occupation that requires celibacy. What, if any, is your relationship to faith as an agent of liberation and/or repression? Do you think of healing and affliction as markers of religious adherence? Why or why not?
6. DeShawn is often "pulled back" into his memories, creating a nonlinear narrative. Why do you think the author chose to write the book in this way? How does a nonlinear narrative serve, or perhaps hinder, the telling of a story?
7. When providing background information on his stepfather, Big Daddy, DeShawn compares the United States' prison industrial complex to its military industrial complex. Similar to prisons, DeShawn explains how the military rearranged Big Daddy's life and "not always for the better" (80). How do you think these two systems regulate black lives—and black men's lives in particular? What are their effects? How are they similar, and how are they different?

8. DeShawn is raised in a family of strong women. However, when comparing his grandmother with his mother, DeShawn notes a difference in their expressions of strength. His grandmother is a quiet survivor, providing for her twelve children on her own without complaint. On the other hand, his mother loudly stands up against corrupt preachers. Do you identify with one expressions of strength more than another? When thinking about “strong women” in your own life, what comes to mind?
9. As an adult, DeShawn asks his mother, “Mom, do you think I am a whore?” (163). What does DeShawn’s question reveal about societal assumptions surrounding sex, promiscuity, and morality. Have you ever felt judged by these assumptions or held these assumptions? How have your opinions changed, if at all, after reading about DeShawn’s struggle to find and feel deserving of love?
10. After making his final return to California, DeShawn experiences a breakthrough, but does not share this breakthrough with the reader. What do you think it is that DeShawn learned?



BRONTEZ PURNELL is author of the cult zine *Fag School*, frontman for his band the Younger Lovers, and founder and choreographer of the Brontez Purnell Dance Company. He lives in Oakland, California.

Since I Laid My Burden Down is his first novel.