



**Downing, Antonio Michael. (2021). Saga Boy: My Life of Blackness and Becoming.
New York City: Viking Press.**

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Antonio Michael Downey's book, "Saga Boy: My Life of Blackness and Becoming", is a memoir compiled of the good and the bad, trauma and healing, hardships, and the beauty of the life of Downey himself. Throughout his memoir Downey unravels the story of his family (including non-biological families), the importance of art as a catalyst for surviving trauma, as well as generational trauma that will consequently lead him to understanding his family on a level beneath the surface. Downey's memoir exposes his vulnerability as he delves into his addiction to escaping his life as he knows it, the attention he requires at no expense, and empty sex as an adult. The composition of these themes together express Downey's struggles he endured throughout the key points of his life and allow readers to visualize his life through his memoir.

Downing emphasizes the one thing he knows as the supposed truth about family; they show up, as he says time and time again "that's what families do: they show up" (p. 233). This is something Downey himself had never received from his biological parents; he never had parents cheering him on at basketball games, or in the crowd to support one of his many bands. This statement is always present in Downey's idyllic form of family, not only showing up but also loving in a pure way in which was unfamiliar to him. He had held hope in his mother and father

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showing up for him throughout his entire childhood and even adulthood. Not only did he hope for his parents to show up, but for anybody to show up for him to save him from him enduring a life like his fathers. When Coach Lillie rooted for him as a young boy, this filled a piece in him he had been missing: the sense of family and love.

Parents are experiencing life for the first time, making decisions as they go, just hoping it is what will be best for their children. Downey had several caregivers in his lifetime, and as he matures, he wonders why they didn't help him more. Why the adults in his life knew of the awful things he and his siblings experienced, yet they never spoke up for them or got them help. As his Auntie Joan reassured him of his grandmother's efforts, "she did her best" (p. 194). Downey reflects on all his caregivers and how they all "did their best" for him and his siblings, but was that enough? For what he experienced as a child, and later hearing that his caregiver was aware of the abuse he was victim to, is knowing they did their best enough, if they never said anything?

Downey didn't have a typical parent-child relationship growing up, he didn't experience pure love from his parents as he witnessed others receiving from their parents, but he did have others in his life show him this type of love. Miss Excellly was the first person in his life to truly love him, and he her too. He had not received a love like such until Coach Lillie and his wife Elaine took Downey into their lives, and he never left their lives; for years beyond his time living with them he would remain part of their family. As Elaine would always remind him, "you were our first big decision together" (p. 261). Through all the various caregivers Downey would go through, Miss Excellly was always in his mind, as well as his heart. Throughout many life experiences he would be reminded of her and how she would feel of how he was acting. In life

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and death, Miss Excellly was who he loved most and wanted to be good for, and to make proud. Even though he was quite young when she passed, she remained a constant drive in his life even in adulthood- specifically to not turn out like his own father, Al.

Art is often the scapegoat of those in pain, as illustrated through Downey's varying personalities, music and writing are Downey's two forms of escapism that helped him temporarily leave the hell he was in at several points in his life. As Downey named his different selves, whether he was Tony, Michael, John, etc. he would have a different taste dependent on that current self. Using art to fit in, transformed into his escape from whatever he was enduring at the time in his life. Journals were another escape, documenting his thoughts throughout his journey of life, the characters in his life at the time, even the characters he was himself at times, "I would say that your grandma and your art are what saved you...Art is sometimes the most effective therapy. All this music and writing you've been doing was not discretionary. You needed to do it. You needed it to survive." (p. 240). Art and writing were key components in Downey's survival, no matter who he was at the time, whether he was Tony, Michael, Mic Dainjah, or John- he always had his art to make him who he was.

Although Downey never wanted to be like his father, he time and time again found himself failing to his father's faults. Abuse, hiding from his demons, leaving his family, drugs, adultery, these were all things that his father was consistent with, and Downey never wanted to have in common with his father- but eventually he fell prey to most of these. Trauma is generational in this family, aware of it or not. The generational trauma leads many of the people in his life including himself to choices they are not proud of. Discovering what each family member had endured

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throughout their life led Downey to understand them more and admire their strength. As Downey says about his older brother, Junior, “you’re a lion... you’re the strongest person I’ve ever known” (p. 240). Hearing what each person had been through during their life is what also led Downey to the common statement that they did their best, letting a slight amount of anger and resentment go as he hears their stories.

In addition to Downey’s different names, he associates with his different personalities, he struggles with the idea of what culture he should fit into. The constant debacle he’s in is being too Black, or not Black enough in each city he bounced between. As he stated, “once again, I was simultaneously too Black and not Black enough” (p.250). Always feeling like the minority in every city and every school he went to, led him to not knowing who he truly was. Was he Canadian, Trinidadian, or both? The urge to fit in is imbedded in children at a young age; to wear what everyone else is wearing, to speak how everyone else speaks, be interested in what everyone else is interested in- yet this is where most people desire uniqueness in adulthood. This push and pull of who Downey is and what he likes became a lifelong search within himself, with each city and each school adding different components to who he is. Finding friends of different backgrounds led Downey to explore different parts of who he is, but ultimately feeling the most at home and genuine to who he is when he is with his family and enjoying their Trinidadian traditions they had as children.

Those interested in psychology and the sociological aspects that family can have on an individual would be very intrigued by this book. In addition, those who have experienced trauma themselves and experienced hardships with their families would find comfort and relation in this

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memoir that Downey has composed. Individuals searching for who they are and where they belong would find comfort in Downey's honesty and vulnerability that he experienced all throughout his life, learning from his experiences of his continuous attempt to fit in wherever he was at the time. Downey's transparency is admirable, even in circumstances where he is not proud of his actions and choices, he still shares it for the world to digest and learn from. I enjoyed this memoir on a level I did not expect, I appreciated hearing his story and finding comfort in not always knowing where we ought to be in life or where we thought we would be.