



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

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Antonio Michael Downing's emotional memoir "Saga Boy: My Life of Blackness and Becoming" chronologically illustrates Downing's life story and the overcoming of adversity. Abandoned by his biological parents, Downing's grandmother, Miss. Excellly raised him. Excellly became the most important person in his life. Unfortunately, once she passed away, Downing and his brother Junior had to move to the "promised land," Canada. Living as a minority young black man in a white community in Ontario, Downing's hardships only worsen and continue as he trudges through life. From Trinidad to Canada, Downing evolved into many different personas while trying to achieve his music career dreams. From hiding behind masks and pretending to be someone he is not, Downing finally accepts who he truly is. As readers come along for Downing's unpredictable life journey, they will be left feeling many emotions.

Downing's memoir demonstrates to readers the importance of having a stable family and what could stem from not having one. Unfortunately, in Downing's case, the void of his biological parents impacts how his life plays out. Downing states, "Junior and I were not happy children. Our trauma was that we had lost all things that gave children their bearings: parents, language, community" (p. 120). He then discusses that "For both of [them], life settled into a rhythm of exploring [their] new world while lashing out at the loss of the old one" (p. 120). His memories of

early childhood become the reason behind many of his psychological issues. The anger, guilt, depression, and envy he feels all result from the abandonment of his parents. The trauma Downing describes is a trauma that will never go away. Without having a stable family, Downing felt as though he did not belong anywhere.

With trauma rooted in an unstable family life, Downing also undergoes another life-altering traumatic experience: sexual abuse. At a very young age, Downing was taken advantage of by his neighbour in Trinidad. He exclaims, "Without doubt, the house on our street that had the most impact on my life was also the one that would be easiest to miss" (p. 55). Leaving significant damage to Downing's well-being, this quote demonstrates how his sexual abuse had also been easily missed and brushed to the side. Downing began to lash out even more than he already had; his anger and frustration resulting from his parents grew even more substantial. As he grew older, this traumatic experience continued to dwell over him. Eventually, after talking to a therapist, he realized this is also another traumatic experience that will never disappear. Downing also says, "I'd spent my life pretending that I'd never been raped. Yet such facts do not disappear because we ignore them" (p. 299). Downing asserts to readers that one should not push sexual abuse to the side. It is severe and can have significant impacts on one's mental health. Downing's childhood trauma moulded him into an alienated man who continued to feel like he did not belong. This feeling of displacement paves the way for the different identities Downing pursues.

While reading this book, I noticed another recurring theme: change and new beginnings. Throughout Downing's life, he continuously encountered change. He seemed to have never settled in one place. When he finally had that feeling of stability, it would get ripped away, and Downing

had to move on to the next thing. These changes influenced how Downing lived his adult life. Amongst his unstable life, Downing had a strong love for music, which helped keep him sane throughout his trauma. Part of Downing's new beginnings resulted from the handful of identities he masked. "Mic Dainjah" a punk rapper; "Molasses" a soul preacher; and finally becoming "John Orpheus" a pop star. These three musicians all produced a different version of Downing. By masking behind these identities, Downing felt as though he could escape his past trauma.

One of the most essential lessons from this book derives from the significance of Downing's multiple identities. Downing states in his epilogue, "I never needed to become John Orpheus. I needed to become myself" (p. 321). From my understanding, if one does not deal with past wreckage or resentments, in Downing's case, his trauma from abandonment and rape, one will never be able to live a joyous life. Downing did not live a joyful life and constantly searched for ways to feel belonged to overcome his adversities. From a punk rapper to a soul preacher and finally a successful pop musician, he was escaping where he indeed came from. Downing could never embrace his true Trinidadian self. To discover who one is, one needs to self-examine and do a thorough moral inventory of oneself, something Downing had not been able to do. Once Downing seeks therapy, he realizes that before changing who he was on the outside, he had to deal with who he was on the inside. This is a lesson many readers, including myself, should take away from this memoir.

Downing reveals that everyone has the strength to overcome adversities. As part of the title says, "My Life of Blackness and Becoming," Downing conquered these adversities as a black minority. In Trinidad, Downing immersed himself in his culture; however, upon moving to

Canada, he encountered the reality of being a minority. Downing expressed, "At first, this new world left me shocked and quiet. There were white people everywhere. You could see through their skins!" (p. 115). This was quite the change for eleven-year-old Downing. Yet another challenge in his life that would shape him into who he would become. As Downing trudged through life as a minority, this would be another reason for him to hide behind masks. He was never comfortable in his skin. In escaping his trauma, he had forgotten where he came from, Trinidad. Downing explored Trinidadian culture in the last few chapters by attending soca music festivals. These carnivals sparked a fire in Downing, "This was Mic Dainjah's madness, Molasses's raging poetry made flesh. John Orpheus, the prodigal son, returned and redeemed. For the first time in my adult life, I felt complete" (p. 304). This feeling of completion demonstrates what it can be like when a black person gets lost in a white person's world. Downing does an excellent job showcasing the struggles of being a minority. He can emerge as a leader for any minority striving to fit in.

As exhibited, Downing's formative years were full of chaos, fear, and stress that shaped him into who he is now. Downing was not living his life; he was surviving it. A survivor of sexual abuse and a survivor of an unstable family, he had overcome so many adversities. Downing has done an outstanding job displaying the hardships he underwent in chronological order of when they happened. With a compelling voice, I could stay very engaged throughout reading. Downing is the perfect person to write a memoir. He had such an unpredictable life that readers will never be able to guess what happens next. All while illustrating misfortunes, Downing was able to tie in his Trinidadian culture, which inspires Trinidadians and people from all around the world.

The feeling of belonging does not come easy for someone who has experienced trauma. Hiding behind a mask and always searching for happiness without forgiving one's past self will lead to an unhealthy lifestyle. Downing examines his life's hardships to inspire others who may feel the same. I would change nothing about this book; it captivates the audience and is the type of book that can leave the audience feeling as though they should be grateful for the life they have. I recommend this book to many different audiences: Social workers, recovering people with an addiction, someone battling hardships, teachers, and any person who may be struggling to feel comfortable in their skin. Staying true to oneself is the key to overcoming adversity during life challenges.