BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

Born and raised in Jackson, Miss., Kiese Laymon saw himself as an unrefined “Black Boy looking for both acceptance and something to resist anywhere I could find it.” Acceptance began at age 20 with the award of “a boatload of financial aid” to Oberlin College and, in time, with an MFA from Indiana University and appointment as a professor of English and Africana Studies at Vassar.

“Saying yes to life,” however, has been slowed and often stopped by the settled conviction that “parts of my state, much of my country, my heart, and mostly my own reflection, had beaten the dog shit out of me.”

Sharp and funny
Laymon wishes that he could get his “Yoda on right now” and formulate a “clean socio-political analysis” that reflects “supreme knowledge and absolute emotional transformation.” But, he writes, the best he can do – in a recently published novel and a collection of essays – is to make a “lame attempt at remembering the contours of slow death and life in America for one Black American teenager under Central Mississippi skies.”

“How to Slowly Kill Yourself in America” is often sharp and funny. Laymon imagines a “lost” debate between Barack Obama, “a slightly better president than the nation deserves,” and a clueless Mitt Romney.

He has interesting things to say about hip-hop, Michael Jackson, Tupac Shakur and Kanye West. He illuminates the role of religion, sexuality and violence in contemporary America. And he’s tough on himself as “a walking regret, a truth-teller, a liar, a survivor, a frowning ellipsis, a witness, a dreamer, a teacher, a student, a failure, a joker, a writer whose eyes stay red.”

Suffused with sadness, anger
Laymon wants to avoid “a woe is we narrative,” identify healthy choices for Black Americans, and affirm life. He writes movingly of his grandmother, who remained responsible, loving, spiritual, and committed to justice in the face of “servitude, sexual assault, segregation, poverty, and psychological violence.”

Nonetheless, his work is suffused with sadness and anger. “No matter how patronizing, unashamed, deliberate, unintentional, poor, rich, rural, urban, ignorant and destructive, White Americans were,” he claims, they encouraged Black Americans “to work for them, write to them, listen to them, talk with them, run from them, emulate them, teach them, dodge them, and ultimately thank them…”

Following supposed political and policy wins, he writes, Black Americans “have always borne the brunt of domestic economic terrorism.”

Indeed, “the American story” involves “the ways that Black American ambition, unchecked by healthy doses of fear, would lead to slow, painful death. And it was” (and, he implies, still is) “inevitable” that when enough “rusty bullets” are fired at moving Black targets, “the targets would cease to exist.”

Laymon’s ‘Long Division’
“Long Division” deals with the same subjects and themes. Set in Melahatchie, Mississippi in 1985, the novel follows 14-year-old Citoyen Coldson as he gives an answer during a Can You Use That Word in a Sentence? contest that lands him on YouTube and launches him on an adventure that moves him back to 1964 and forward to 2013.

Time travel provides Laymon an opportunity to examine the history of racial oppression and the civil rights movement, as “City” and his friend Shalaya Crump struggle to make America “love itself and the kids coming after them.”

And for Laymon to establish (in two sentences written in sawdust in a shed in 1964 that resonate with the Trayvon Martin case) that “We are real black characters with real character, not the stars of American race...
spectacle. Blackness is not probable cause."

“Long Division” is, by turns, powerful and preachy, comical and confusing. It is at its satiric best when LaVander Peeler, City’s classmate and rival, uses “chitterlings” in a sentence and City stumbles on the word "niggardly."

**Fierce assault on US**
When his grandmother gives him a whupping, and when City and Shalaya discuss whether it’s good to be so “long division,” i.e. providing the background to a story instead of “getting in and getting out.”

Laymon’s assault on racism in America, in 1964, 1985, and 2013 is fierce and unremitting.

It remains unclear, however, especially in light of the pervasiveness and power he attributes to race prejudice, how seriously he takes – or wants us to take – the claim (readily reduced to a cliche) that “past, present and future exist within you and you change them by changing the way you live your life.” Or whether he believes that “knowing everything about something” rarely ends up being good for you.

As Citoyen’s journey concludes, he feels as close to a “real character” as he has ever felt.

City and LaVander Peeler think they know all they need to know “about how to survive, how to live, and how to love in Mississippi.” It’s important to remember, however, that they are only 14 years old. And that this is Kiese Laymon’s first novel.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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