



Long Division

Kiese Laymon

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Long Division includes two distinct but tightly interwoven stories--one called "All Things Considered," the other "Long Division." In the first, it's March 2012: 14-year-old Citoyen "City" Coldson and his nemesis, LaVander Peeler, become the first black male duo to win the state of Mississippi's "Can You Use This Word in a Sentence" contest finals. Both boys are asked to represent Mississippi at the televised national competition. (Hours before the contest begins, City is given a book without an author called "Long Division.") Turmoil and misunderstanding ensue, as City and LaVander learn they have reason to doubt the merit of their presence at the contest. "They want us to win," City says to LaVander moments before the contest starts. After being assigned, and then misusing, the word "niggardly" in the first round of the contest, City has a remarkable on-stage meltdown in front of a national television audience. LaVander, on the other hand, though incredibly shaken, advances to the finals and has the chance to win the contest.

The day after the contest, City is sent to spend the weekend with his grandmother in the small coastal community of Melahatchie, which is also the site of the mysterious disappearance of girl named Baize Shephard. Baize Shephard also happens to be one of the main characters in the book "Long Division," which City has been dipping into throughout the story. While in Melahatchie, City's troubled Uncle Relle reveals that City has become an overnight YouTube celebrity thanks to his on-stage meltdown, and that he is being sought to appear on a new television show called "Youtube's Black Reality All Stars." City is alternately celebrated and ridiculed by the white and black residents of Melahatchie as a result of his performance at the contest, even as he delves deeper into "Long Division" and its story of the missing Baize Shephard.

When the neighborhood is convinced that a white man nicknamed Pot-Belly has assaulted Baize and done away with her body, they beat the man to death...or so City thinks, until he finds the man alive, chained up in a workshed in the back yard of his grandmother's house. City visits the imprisoned white man four times during the course of his weekend--reading to him from "Long Division," asking him questions he's always wanted to ask white people, and promising to save him if he survives his own baptism, which his grandmother has engineered during City's visit. When LaVander appears, he and City must reluctantly work together again, this time to save the life of the white man chained in the workshed--and quite possibly the life of City's grandmother, too.

There's something else that City finds especially interesting about "Long Division," besides the story of Baize: another main character in the book is also named City Coldson--except this City Coldson, who lives in Melahatchie, is 14 in 1985. This City will do anything to make Shalaya Crump love him--including traveling 26 years into the future (via a time portal they find in the woods) to steal a laptop and cellphone from a girl--a mysterious teenaged rapper named Baize Shephard, who lost her parents in Hurricane Katrina.

The following day, Shalaya and City meet another worn down time-traveler, this one from 1964, a boy named "Jewish" Evan Altshuler. Evan is desperate to protect his family against the Klu Klux Klan during Freedom Summer. He convinces Shalaya that he can help her find her parents and her future self if she brings the laptop computer back to 1964 and does him a favor.

Unexpectedly, City and Shalaya become separated, with Shalaya stuck in 1964 and City stuck in 2012. In their wanderings back and forward through time, much is revealed about City's relationship with Baize, and

about segregation, Freedom Summer, the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf Oil spill, and the limits of technology and love. *Long Division* is a Twain-esque exploration of celebrity, authorship, racialized terror, neo-liberalism, religion, and coming of age in Post-Katrina Mississippi.

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