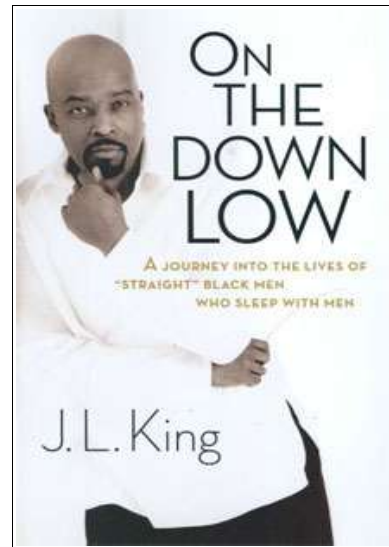


Beyond the Down Low: Examining the Politics of Black Male Desire

By Amy André

Where to begin? Writing this review—indeed, reading this book—is something that I put off for as long as I possibly could. I even missed a deadline. Why was I so hesitant? What was it about this assignment that sent me into avoidance mode?

It was J.L. King. Even prior to my reading *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep with Men*, I began ruminating on the politics of black male desire. Why was the idea of African American men sharing pleasure with other men garnering such attention? It couldn't be the novelty of such a concept. African Americans in general have a long history of being proudly same-gender-loving, as well as other-gender-loving. It's in our blues, it's in our jazz, it's in our rock-n-roll. It's in our literature and poetry too. But would it be in our politics? Would it be in our understanding of our sexual and racial civil rights? Would it be in this book?



I opened to the dedication page and read, “I dedicate this book to all the women whose health has been jeopardized and emotional state compromised by men living on the DL, and to all women in general who may use this book as a protective guide. I also dedicate this book to men on the DL, in hopes that looking in the mirror will be a catalyst to change.”

I put the book down for another week. It took me that long to unclench my teeth and my fists. All my worst fears about this book—that it would perpetuate notions of a black womanhood victimized by black male sexuality, that it would conflate issues such as safer sex and negotiated polyamory with hype and hysteria, and that it would include secrecy and deceit in the definition of the down low—were being referenced by King from the start.

I had longed for a voice of reason and diplomacy, a sex-positive and anti-racist perspective on the matter. J.L. King was not that voice, that someone, or that black man. What can I say about his 190-page volume? Where can I begin?

The short of it is that this book is poorly written and sloppily edited. Several passages ramble on about the author's own perceptions of his prowess with attracting male and female attention. Much of the text serves as a lengthy apology to his ex-wife, who “caught” him in bed with another man some twenty years ago. Oh yes, King was on the down low himself. And now? He describes himself as being formerly on the down low. He talks about his love for a God who showed him the way. He encourages other men on the down low to change their ways.

To be fair, his idea of changing one's ways includes simply telling female partners about one's male partners. He espouses honest dialogue about behavior and safety methods as a way to prevent the transmission of STDs, including HIV. What the book lacks here is a model for that dialogue and a support for what happens next. I would like to have seen a guide for the conversation, in which the partners—all the partners—make decisions regarding safer sex, ethical polyamory, and sexual identity politics.

However, there is a subtext to the book as well. Where he leaves out next steps for black men and their male and female partners to navigate physical safety and emotional well-being in a down

low sexuality, he more than makes up for it by including a great deal of information on how to cruise. After reading chapters entitled "Tops and Bottoms," "The Signs," and "Making Connections on the DL," I had all the strategies I needed to find African American men on the down low. If I were a black man myself, I'd be thrilled to start my down low adventures armed with the details from this book. And, as long as being on the down low didn't automatically mean lying to my wife and forgoing condoms, I'd be... well, I'd be J.L. King's ideal.

In fact, I might even end up being like J.L. King himself. He was on the down low, in the past, he says. And now? Now he describes himself as having "admitted the truth. The truth is that I am a man who likes having sex with men... and women. I have girlfriends with whom I am very upfront. And while being with them will not stop me from sleeping with men, I need them in my life. I give them the choice. I don't make this decision for them. I don't try and play God."

My challenge with this book is that the down low is repeatedly defined as including deceit and unsafe sex. Is it possible that someone could embrace a down low identity without the negative effects? I imagine that one could be on the down low and use safer-sex supplies. One could be on the down low and have full support from an open dialogue with partners. Instead of vilifying the down low, perhaps we could celebrate it as a valid, uniquely African American male sexual orientation.

As for King, while he is no longer on the down low, he is not some other sexual orientation either. He does not identify as heterosexual. He is not bisexual. In fact, he bi-phobically describes bisexuals as greedy men who "want it all," especially threesomes. And he is not gay, as one chapter is proudly titled, "I Love the Ladies, Too."

I also love the ladies. And the men. And anyone else who lives with integrity and passion. I would love to see the down low defined as a valid sexual orientation, not a confused bisexuality, not a sex-crazed lifestyle for liars, not the delusion of HIV-positive black men infecting "innocent" black women, and not a step on the path to finding God, as King has described it to be.

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