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BOOKS

True colors

Authors explore vast viewpoints
on the fantasy and reality
of black gay male sexuality

BY JEMIAH JEFFERSON

Defining "black gay erotica" is about as easy as defining "black," "gay" or "erotic"—these labels are just launch points for a vast fractal universe of individual experiences. One man's "hot" is another man's "ew!", there's that matter of a single defining drop of blood and a continually shifting cultural identity, and then there's the men "on the down low" who engage in sex with other men, and sometimes also with women, while resisting any definition whatsoever. Four new books provide a necessarily incomplete but well-rounded set of viewpoints on the fantasy and the reality of American black gay male sexuality.

Bill Clinton's staff, as a young man coming out in the early 1990s and dealing with the other scholars of the phenomenon who are not always in agreement with the author about "facts." But then again, who do you want to believe—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or *USA Today*? Boykin calls for an end to the demonization of black men who have sex with other men and an increase of information, care, understanding and tolerance in an increasingly conservative and blinkered political environment.

Whose Eye Is on Which Sparrow?

by Robert Taylor; Southern Tier Editions,
2004; \$14.95 softcover

Whose Eye Is on Which Sparrow?, a blatantly marketed interracial gay romance novel, features a protagonist on the down low—but Dr. Brendan Garrison happens to be white. A married, successful doctor, son of a beloved conservative politician and father of two, he falls in love with the thrilling, talented and altruistic Jonathan Miles after giving him a prostate exam. And if the names give you any indication, the book is as filled with overwhelming emotions, instantaneous attachments and stolen moments as any Fabio-jacketed checkout line impulse buy.

Surprisingly enough, author Robert Taylor injects quite a bit of moral ambiguity into the proceedings and refuses to flinch from the reality of the issues he is discussing—infidelity, the coming-out story and the difficulty of simply living as a black person in America—even if the character names come straight out of Harlequin. Taylor, author of several novels about gay experiences with no easy answers, has written a frothy, moody and engaging soap opera that is difficult to resist and certain to evoke debate.

Is true love always the answer, or merely a gateway to other, thornier questions? And despite the characters' cookie-cutter natures, I can't help but want those crazy kids to work it out so they can be together.

Bless the Thugz and Lil' Chil'rins

by Fredryk Traynor; GLB Publishers,
2004; \$14.95 softcover

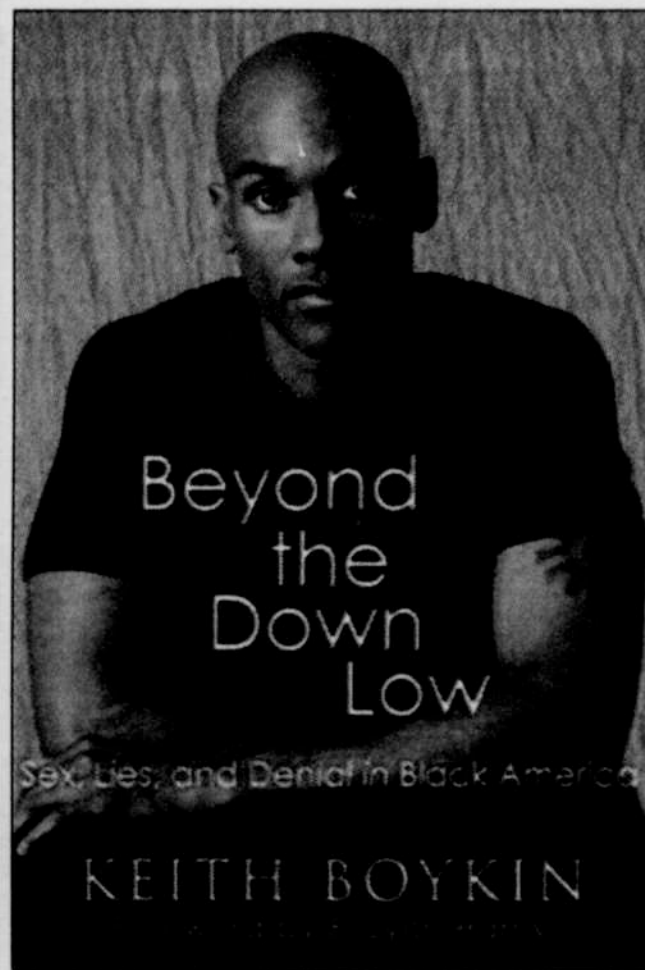
Author, songwriter, musician, rapper, street hustler and convicted bank robber Fredryk Traynor creates a universe completely untroubled by the down low: gangsta thugs openly in love with each other—as well as with guns, expensive cars, hip-hop music and robbing banks—in his first novel, the unfortunately named *Bless the Thugz and Lil' Chil'rins*.

There is no time and no place for shame when living in and for the moment for a lifetime, although, magically, there is room for compassion, loyalty and true affection. *Bless the Thugz* is touted as being the creation of a new genre—the gay gangsta novel—with an amorality chilling to any taxpaying, responsible citizen who has anything to lose, and thrilling to anyone young, angry and frustrated with the established status quo.

Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America

by Keith Boykin; Carroll & Graf,
2005; \$25 hardcover

Keith Boykin's finely researched book *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America* attempts to get to the final truth about



black American men who have sex with other men, but often pursue heterosexual roles with women and with their families and communities and, in the process, generally piss off everyone except themselves.

Black men on the down low have, in recent years, been roundly blamed for causing a rising number of reported HIV diagnoses among the African-American population, especially among women. However, the truth behind this media-hyped scare tactic is a lot simpler—and a lot more complex. It is not black men having sex with other men responsible for the spread of the disease, but risky sexual and drug-use behavior borne of a complex web of self-deception, social desperation and willful ignorance of the facts.

Boykin brings his experience and idealism to this detective mission, fleshing out the text with examples and anecdotes from his own experiences in Washington, D.C., on President