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Brandon Taylor's *Real Life*: A Book Review

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As we look for ways to engage graduate students and practitioners in conversation about student development, there is a variety of information available, but little of what is available deals with graduate students. This is even more true when we look at popular culture resources. Add to the dearth in graduate student development resources the need for resources that represent perspectives, identities, and experiences of Black and Queer students, there has historically been virtually nothing available for educators, supervisors, or students themselves to engage with. *Real Life: A Novel* (Taylor, 2020) gives students, supervisors, faculty, and staff a new opportunity to engage in conversations about the complex experiences of graduate students.

Summary

Brandon Taylor's (2020) *Real Life: A Novel* follows the main character Wallace, a Queer, Black Ph.D. student pursuing a degree in biochemistry over the course of one tumultuous

weekend at a nondescript institution in the Midwest. Over the course of three days, Taylor provides a raw and uncut glimpse into the life of Wallace, sparing no detail when it comes to his dealings with friends, co-workers, and his troubled family past. Not only does Taylor do an incredible job of highlighting the difficulties of what a weekend in the life of a graduate college student might look like, he does so while taking time to address issues of the power dynamics in academics, identity and intersectionality, romance, sexual assault, and so much more.

This novel addresses many issues related to graduate students and relevant to student affairs professionals. While the protagonist, Wallace, is in a STEM graduate program, the issues he must face intersect with the work of student affairs professionals. These issues include transition (new institution, new geographical region), academics (the challenges of advanced courses and the stress of research), sense of belonging (he has a social group, but they are not always supportive as friends), and especially identity.

Taylor identifies as a Black, Queer man and while he labels this work as a novel, it does mirror his experiences. Born in Alabama, Taylor attended Auburn University at Montgomery as an undergraduate before attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison to study biochemistry. Taylor left the biochemistry program and completed an MFA at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. He wrote *Real Life: A Novel* in five weeks. Orbey described the book as "a campus novel imagined from the vantage of a character who is usually shunted to the sidelines" (2020, para 2).



Strengths and Limitations

Implications for Higher Education and Student Affairs

Racism on Campus

From the beginning the novel highlights Wallace's racial background and how it informs his sense of being an imposter in the program.

Their class had been the first small one in quite some time, and the first one in three decades to include a Black person. In his less generous moments, Wallace thought these two things related . . . had made his admission possible. (Taylor, 2020, p. 4)

Wallace is not only Black but is the only Black person in his graduate biochemistry program at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwest. By giving the protagonist these identities in at STEM program at a PWI, Taylor creates considerations for the reader around academics, identity, and the role of place in a student's sense of belonging and potential success.

Following Wallace throughout the course of the weekend, the context, the ignorance of other characters, and the issues related to the protagonist's identities results in a series of microaggressions and incidents. These exchanges start small, such as Wallace's White supervisor constantly belittling him over his work. However, as Wallace seeks support and to find someone who might understand his challenges, the event culminates into a racially charged conversation between Wallace and one of his White classmates.

Wallace and his friends are having dinner when one guest, Roman, makes a comment about how Wallace should be more grateful to be part of their program because the degree will help him, and that Wallace is deficient in ways that others are not. Instead of offering support and understanding, Roman insists that Wallace consider that his "prospects would be better . . .



they brought you in knowing what your deficiencies were” (Taylor, 2020, p. 161). None of Wallace’s friends spoke up in his defense, preferring to let the moment pass so that they could pretend everything was fine. Wallace was forced to sit isolated with his anger among the others for the rest of the dinner.

This is but one of the examples Taylor gives in the book that highlights how Wallace’s experiences resemble how Black people struggle daily with racism in higher education. The injury done is not always in the form of a grand outburst, but the repeated and ongoing microaggressions Black students experience on a regular basis. What magnifies these incidents even more is the consistent White silence that follows, whether it is from White students, faculty, or staff who can just let those moments pass. White students, practitioners, and faculty who let these moments go are unaffected while the Black students (or other Students of Color) involved experience recurrent harm. This silence can fill Students of Color with anger, resentment, and hurt accompanied by the fear of speaking out. In the end, as Taylor poignantly exemplifies throughout the book, Black students are expected to continue with school and life. The text offers no specific strategies or solutions and instead leaves readers to wrestle with the issues themselves.

Past Trauma and Asking for Help

In addition to tackling issues of social identity, Taylor provides additional complexity and depth to Wallace’s character in the way he writes about Wallace’s sexual assault as a child. Chapter 5 of the book is written in stream-of-consciousness as a single paragraph. It is distinct from the rest of the text. We learn not only about the assault, but also about how that experience has impacted his life.



Taylor first goes to great lengths to describe the situation in which Wallace grew up, describing his childhood home, and place of abuse, as “fetid and stinking and sweating” (p. 197). This language provides the reader with a vivid description simultaneously about the environment and the abuse that helped shape Wallace into who he is as a young adult. There are additional details and descriptions throughout the chapter about Wallace’s experiences.

There are instances throughout the novel where Wallace made questionable decisions, where intentional outreach or a thought-provoking question from a student affairs professional might have made a difference in how a situation played out. However, a lack of trust in those around him combined with other factors during and before his graduate program resulted in Wallace responding in sometimes destructive ways, both for himself and others.

All of this provides a potential case study for student affairs practitioners to consider. In addition to the identities and experiences already discussed, Wallace is a first-generation college student. How can we help students who may not know how to ask for support or what resources are available? What about the disconnect in support between services for undergraduate students and graduate students? What resources do we highlight for graduate students and which ones do we omit from their admission, orientation, and acclimation to our campuses?

While this text provides sometimes extreme examples of how a lack of support can negatively impact students in higher education, it does provoke readers to consider the alternatives. How might early intervention for Wallace have made a significant difference in his well-being? Beyond the book, how many of our students need similar support, but do not know how to ask?



Internal Conflict About Academics

When Wallace was not hashing out issues with his friends or reliving his trauma, he could be found conducting research in the university's biology lab under the guidance of his supervisor, Simone, a White woman. Immediately, it is apparent that this space also provided significant challenges for Wallace. In addition to his supervisor, Wallace struggles to connect with his peers, and is behind academically in the program. Wallace spent a good portion of the novel wrestling with what he wanted for his future. He wondered if he wanted to continue in his chosen field, or if he was forcing himself to stay because getting that degree was how he has decided he could have a better life.

While distressing, this internal conflict is one that many students may experience. Self-doubt can be heightened when social identities are factored into the mix. Wallace being a Queer, Black man from a low socioeconomic background in an environment that is geographically distant and significantly more homogeneously White than what he was used to causes him to feel unsupported in everything he did. This was apparent in Wallace's relationship with Miller. They sleep together but Wallace worries that Miller has no real connection to him and will go back to straight relationships when he is done with Wallace. Wallace is also verbally attacked (using racist and homophobic slurs) by his lab mate, Dana, who levels false charges against Wallace with their lab supervisor.

All these things happen, and all these thoughts occur to Wallace over the course of a single weekend. Ultimately, Wallace struggles with whether he should stay in the program, but also sees that his unhappiness does create a sort of bond with other students. Taylor writes "the misery of other people, the persistence of unhappiness, is all that connects them. Only the



prospect of greater unhappiness keeps them within the circumscribed world of graduate school” (2020, p. 261). In other words, Wallace is connected through misery where he is and fears making a change would be worse than what he is already experiencing.

This prompts the question of where does student affairs support for graduate students show up? How do we provide resources and cultivate environments where all students, regardless of identity, and regardless of their academic classification, can thrive? What does community look like for graduate students? How inclusive is that community? How welcoming? How supportive? What can we do to make communities more inclusive of all students? How do we challenge our own biases in our work?

In addition to how this book relates to students, another perspective is how do some of these struggles mirror professionals' and graduates' thoughts about staying in student affairs? Just as Wallace struggled with his choices and whether he was making the right decisions, so do we as graduate students and professionals throughout our careers face moments where we question our paths. Was going into student affairs the right decision? What are the implications for fewer people deciding to go into the field? It is important to embrace the discomfort of talking about our area of work and to encourage open conversation to better support those who choose this path in the future. The support we seek for ourselves and provide one another related to our student affairs work has a direct impact on the support we can provide to students.

Conclusion

Taylor's (2020) *Real Life: A Novel* is a thought-provoking piece that gives the reader a glimpse into the life of a contemporary college graduate student over a long weekend. While some may be frustrated by the abrupt beginning and end of this story, the structure of the book



speaks about Wallace's experience and the work that we do as student affairs professionals. Rarely are we afforded the opportunity to work with a student fully across their development, knowing all their identities, and understanding them and their experiences in deep and meaningful ways. Instead, we may only get to know a student through an advising meeting or an offhand conversation; however, that one meeting might make all the difference for a student who needs support.

As student affairs practitioners, it is our responsibility to challenge and support our students in the ways that they need to be successful inside and eventually beyond the walls of our institutions. *Real Life: A Novel* is messy at times, and that is fine, because so are our lives, and so are those of the lives of the students that we serve. This text provides a wonderful opportunity to explore the ambiguity of supporting students who hold diverse identities – especially graduate students – in today's world.



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