



*Book Review & Resources*

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## **Review of *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

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“Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage*” (p.103).

**B**ETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME is Ta-Nehisi Coates’ three-part autobiography of growing up as a black youth in fearful neighborhoods of Baltimore and Philadelphia, and then discovering the “Mecca” of Howard University. There he studied history and learned to write and to love poetry and art. There, too, he developed his ideas on white privilege, the import of protecting the black body, and how, as he tells his son Samori, “You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton and gold” (p. 71). This perceived legacy of American history is confronted in a poetic, expressive style that is both challenging and engaging.

The book is written as a letter to Coates’ fifteen-year-old son, mirroring James Baldwin’s (1962) “Letter to My Nephew,” published first in *The Progressive Magazine*. From Part I, Coates borrows Baldwin’s idea that Americans “became white...because of the necessity of denying the black presence and justifying the black subjugation” (Baldwin, 1984, p. 2). Yet Coates differs from Baldwin who also states “with love we shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are” (Baldwin, 1962, p. 1). Rather, Coates warns his son *not* to struggle for white “Dreamers’ conversion,” as they can only “learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all” (Coates, p. 151). Coates describes this Dream as “perfect houses with nice lawns...cookouts... treehouses and the Cub Scouts,” (pp. 10-11) contrasted with Baltimore where he felt: “...naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns...knives, crack, rape and disease” (p. 117). Coates’ moving theme of innocence destroyed is not unlike that in Philip Roth’s works, though Coates might dispute the comparison.

Parts II and III revisit the shocking death of Prince Jones, a beloved fixture in the Mecca at Howard, at the hands of another “inculpable” police officer. Coates’ travels to Paris and New York City

affect him indelibly. He concedes to Samori “we were not enslaved in France” but “to be distanced from fear...is not a passport out of the struggle” (p.127). Always Coates fears for his son, doubtful of the security Samori feels in his own black body, unlike his father.

Coates, too, questions the good intentions of teachers. As a professor in New York City—who happens to be white-skinned—I believe we must acknowledge the inequities Coates depicts, as well as the notion of American exceptionalism that underscores them, and continue to dispute white privilege as a mistaken foundation of the American Dream.

Yet, I see the most telling revelation of Coates’ childhood and subsequent success as student, writer, and cultural critic are his admission that he was taught to read by his grandmother at age four. He does not make too much of this phenomenon, yet his reading and study shaped the rest of his life. Despite the fear on the streets of Baltimore, despite being stopped “driving while black,” despite his struggles with the death of Prince Jones—Coates himself is part of a privileged class.

In my urban teaching experience, I see many of today’s students do not have the habit of reading books, nor may they all escape their neighborhoods. Coates own success comes out of these two circumstances of his life. Thus a lesson learned from Coates’ struggle between the world and himself is the crucial import of education. It is education that helps Coates to escape the heritage of the flawed American history he so decries.

The book ends on notes of hope as well as fear. Coates tells his son “If my life ended today, I would tell you it was a happy life—that I drew great joy from the study, from the struggle toward which I now urge you” (p. 115). Coates studied and struggled. As students and teachers, we too may take up his challenge.

## References

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