

Book Review: Between the World and Me

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Coates, T-N. (2015). *Between the World and Me*. New York, New York: Spiegel & Gram.
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“This is your country, this is your world, this is your body and you must find some way to live within the all of it”

Given the tenor of our times, it is not unexpected that voices will emerge speaking to the compounding issues faced by oppressed communities around the world. What is sometimes unexpected is what appears to be the resurrected souls of social justice warriors from the past whose work is recalled by images of raised fists, sit-ins, locked arms, and unified masses in communities around the world. Among these resurrected warriors is the voice one of this generation’s most gifted writers, one who represents one of the groups who has been victimized in historical proportions.

The title of the book is borrowed from a 1935 poem written by Richard Wright, a genius author whose work defined a group of writers, activists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. Wright’s poem eerily describes the fear and torrid emotions that surrounded the site of a lynching, hidden away, but in clear sight of observers and victims who shared that experience too frequently in prior generations (Fabre, 1985). The poem’s deeply moving language provokes the reader to participate as a bystander in the murderous event of a lynching. This form of socially accepted murder of a Black man in the early twentieth century America was a stain on our nation’s history that has yet to be removed. This is the backdrop with which Coates begins this letter to his son. This letter which makes the effort to help his son understand the tragic and dreadful life of being a Black man in America today.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is the voice of a generation. He is also a Black male and the father of a young Black male. These facts are meaningful as this book is read and analyzed. *Between the World and Me* is Coates’ second book. This autobiographical diary/letter is full of power, tragedy, insight, and a turning inside out of a young Black man’s soul as he attempts to prepare his son for the world he will face now and in the future.

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Coates is not just speaking to his son in this diary; in this letter, he is speaking to the Black community, the White community, America, all at once. At the core of the story is the brutal death of a dear friend of Coates. One whose tragic death was so similar to the unnecessary brutality that has been escalating against the Black community in recent years. This case of Prince Jones' murder received only minimal attention in the media. It happened and then, it was done. However, not for Coates. The case changed his life in dramatic ways.

Coates explores his life before and after the tragedy, explicating his own experiences in a way that draws the reader into the pages. He shares his experiences as a student at Howard University where he met so many Black students whose lives intersected with his own and from whom he learned so much. It was the death of his friend that started him on a journey away from college and out into the world to find out more of what America was like outside of the protective boundaries of a Black college campus. The book takes the reader on Coates' journey from the mid-Atlantic as a college student and then to the mecca of all cultures -- New York City -- to live with family members.

In the northeast, Coates began to see more starkly visible signs of White privilege and how that unearned favor negatively impacts the lives of the Black community daily. He speaks with his son candidly when he compares the differences between the way the White community in Manhattan lives compared to the Black community in Harlem.... just a short distance away – *'the galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to them'* (Coates, p. 89). The words in this book jump off of the page, sometimes stabbing the reader in the heart, at other times sinking deep into the mind. This book meaningfully forces the reader to question the lies and deceptions created by a systemically discriminating society. This letter, this treatise, is written for all of us, it is between the world and us, as well as Coates. Any experience that he has as a Black man is the experience of all of us, of all humanity, whether we claim it or not.

The messages that move across the words of the pages of this book have the capacity to move our society by causing us to reflect on our actions and deeds. The awards and acclaim given to Coates for this book are most deserving. Social scientists, philosophers, intellectuals of all kinds, families, and caregivers will read this book for years to come and know better the quest of Black men and fathers in America who want to and must become visible, validated, and victorious in the midst of a world determined to pull him apart and destroy him. *Between the World and Me* should be required reading for anyone working to impact the lives of the Black community today and in the future, and in doing so, improve conditions for all of humanity.

References

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