



The Truth Stares Back at You

Race isn't something that often entered into my deep consciousness. It sat in the background as a series of codewords and phrases my family would talk about when a talking head on the news would conveying information about a riot or something. I never had to think about what my skin and body did to my perception of the world.

Coates and I sit on opposite ends of a racial spectrum in the United States. He struggled to survive the twists and turns on the streets of Baltimore. Life for him was one of continual realizations of the frailty of his freedom and body. He grew up in a nation built to imprison him inside and out of institutions. I walked the streets of a little town in upstate New York, unaware of a need or desire for some sort of cultural heritage.

We paraded around a bit for St. Patrick's day (though I'm as much Belgian as Irish) but never did I have to actively think about my race and my place in the world. Mom and Dad never talked to me about what race is and what it means, and I can only assume they didn't have any discussion with their parents.

Ta-Nehisi Coates's book *Between the World and Me* sat me down and had that conversation. Coates crafts his work as a letter to his fifteen-year-old son at the moment of the exoneration of Michael Brown's killer. This is a moment of realization for Coates's son, and Coates takes this moment to teach him what he knows about race in America. Through him, we as well are allowed in on a personal and private discussion on race that many of us may not have had.

It's a jarring, beautiful, and poetic treatise on not only what it means to be black in the United States, but also what it means quintessentially to be white as well. None of that is to say this book takes an adversarial tone towards white people. Quite the contrary, it takes a stand of almost eliminating whiteness as the issue and the oppressor. "But my experience in this world has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration," Coates says in the second chapter. The true issue, to Coates, is a culture that allows white people to remove themselves from the problems generated by an American Dream created by white people for white people. Without taking any high-ground based on skin color, Coates grounds his work with his own truth of being nearly an alien in a culture that views his people with a negative light. This culture sustains itself by pretending, dreaming, or fantasizing that there is no issue but personal responsibility.

Never does Coates dip into a stereotype slamming "white devils" or anything that injects hate against another for their skin color. The other in this narrative is the American Dream, always spelled with a capital D. He works hardest to pull the curtain away from the Wizard of that Dream, exposing it as a false god that we've all idolized.

Coates insists upon keeping his gaze focused on the heritage of racism that has built this country, rather than focusing on white people as a center of evil. "At one point in American history, no police department fired its guns more than that of Prince George's County." As we learn later in chapter two, this department kills his friend from college, Prince Jones.

As the truth unfolds of Prince's death, Coates places the issue directly under our noses and forces us to look at it. Prince isn't a bonehead gang member who can be spun by corporate media into a violent criminal wildly attacking a police officer. Prince was a college graduate with extreme promise who was gunned down by a system which took the destruction of a young black body as nothing more than a necessity. What turns this narrative on its head somewhat is the fact that Prince's killer is a black man. Coates's example here drives home the issue : culture not creed kills black people every day.

Consistently, he refers to the problem people as Dreamers. "The killing fields of Chicago, of Baltimore, of Detroit, were created by the policy of Dreamers, but their weight, their shame rests solely upon those who are dying in them," he says in reference to the legacy of blaming black people for the problems created by a racist system.

Where you might expect a sort of explosive call to action, Coates takes what appears to be a defeatist attitude. At all avenues he tells his son that the racism of the United States is indelible and permanent. This is in stark contrast to the book that inspired it, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin's book features many of the

same themes, and is also formed as a letter to a young man. However, Baldwin tells his nephew of the power he has to overthrow this system.

Some might view this as a disappointment. It's easy to ask Coates to uplift us and tilt our heads toward a positive, wonderful future. Yet that would defeat the purpose of the book. Coates is using this book to bring people to consciousness about their place and heritage in the American system. He urges his son to struggle for wisdom, but not to struggle to bring the Dreamers to consciousness.

I'll admit that I felt somewhat separated in the beginning of this book, that it wasn't talking about me, or that I was already knowledgeable enough to simply step back and take in the rhetorical fireworks Coates lays down page after page. As the pages flew by, a weight was simultaneously pressed on and lifted from me. There was a weight I didn't know I had, that even as a person who accepted that the atrocities of the past clearly still come to bear on people of color in this nation every second of every day, that I was missing some crucial link to understanding.

By framing this as a letter to his son, he brings us into a deeply personal exchange that may provide that link. His journeys through his Mecca at Howard University, coming to understanding about the death of a friend, and diving through the stormy history of civil rights bring us closer to him as a man and possibly to that link of understanding.

I don't know if I've awakened from the American Dream. Maybe what it takes is making the dream more lucid, more inclusive and accepting of everyone. Maybe I only think that because I've been born with the American Dream as a birthright, but Coates's

novel reads like journalism from a world where the Dream is definitively dead, and we all must wake up in order to achieve some harmony. “Historians conjured the Dream,” Coates writes. “Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and adventure stories”

If I haven’t awoken, at least I’m aware that I’m dreaming.

Between the World and Me

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

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James Bowe is a student at SUNY Oswego, a Union Member, and an avid player of role playing games. His years in a factory have rendered him just a little bit off his rocker.