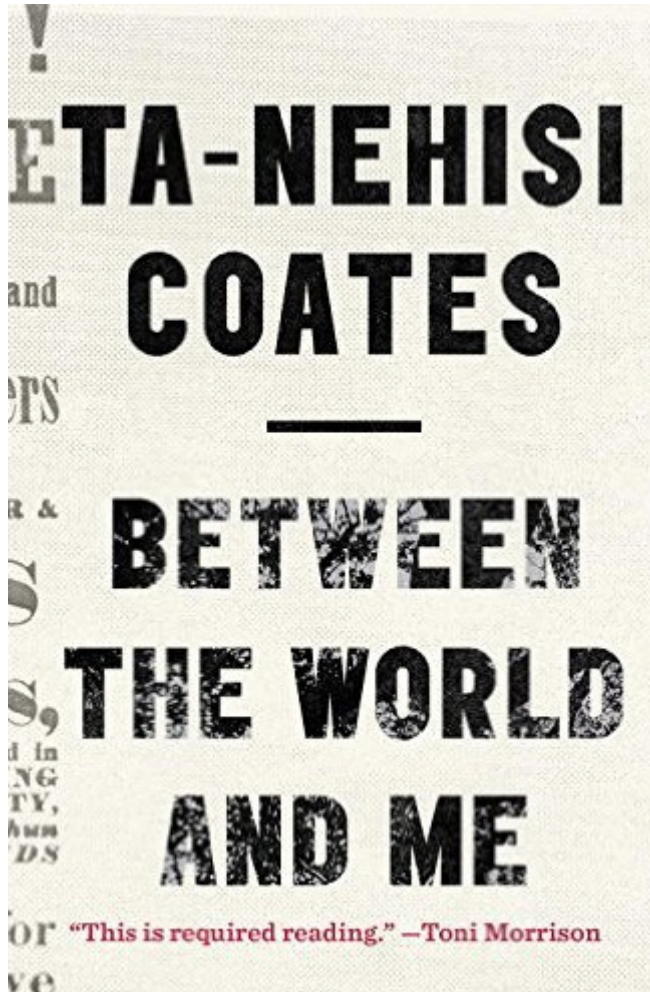


‘Between the World and Me’ is an award winner

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“Between the World and Me” by Ta-Nehisi Coates. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau (Random House), 2015, 152 pages, \$24.



“Americans deify democracy in a way that allows for a dim awareness that they have, from time to time, stood in defiance of their God,” Ta-Nehisi Coates explains near the beginning of “Between the World and Me,” his frank and unapologetic reflection on how race is inexorably intertwined with how one experiences the world. “But democracy is a forgiving God and America’s heresies – torture, theft, enslavement – are so common among individuals and nations that none can declare themselves immune.”

“In fact, Americans, in a real sense, have never betrayed their God,” he writes. “When Abraham Lincoln declared, in 1863, that the battle of Gettysburg must ensure ‘that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,’ he was not merely being aspirational; at the onset of the Civil War, the United States of America had one of the highest rates of suffrage in the world. The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant ‘government of the people’ but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term ‘people’ to actually mean.”

As I was walking down a hallway on the way to teach one of my classes at Western Kentucky University recently, I noticed one of my colleagues with a copy of “Between the World and Me” in her hand. Since I am naturally drawn to books the way some are drawn to politics or sports, I asked what it was about. She immediately handed it to me and suggested I check it out. I started reading it later that same evening and finished it sometime about 2 a.m. I literally could not put the book down once I began my journey into the author’s extraordinary and terrifying world. It’s one thing to be aware of injustice; it’s quite another to have injustice brought to the forefront of your consciousness in such a visceral and poignant manner.

Coates said “Between the World and Me” was inspired by the death of Prince Carmen Jones Jr., a college friend who was killed by police in a case of mistaken identity. The book is constructed in three parts and written as a letter to his 14-year-old son, Samori. The narrative works on multiple levels and can be interpreted in a variety of different contexts. Coates is masterful in his use of language to communicate feeling, and not just in a superficial sense. Some passages require

multiple attempts in order to uncover and appreciate the complex insights and perceptions he is conveying, while other sections hit you so forcefully you break out in a cold sweat.

As my background and upbringing was nothing like that of the author, it was often difficult for me to relate to his depiction of life on the streets of West Baltimore. I did come to understand that much of what I have taken for granted most of my life could be viewed in a substantively different manner when seen through the lens of those who are defined, like it or not, by the racial identity assigned to them primarily by others over which they have no legitimate control and minimal influence.

As “Between the World and Me” unfolds, Coates consistently refers to “the Dream.” For me, this was perhaps the most intriguing aspect of his writing. We all have an innate tendency to see the way we were raised as being kind of normal, and as a young child you naturally assume your experiences are shared by others in an almost universal sense. It is only when you start to understand the underlying dynamics that tend to characterize most human societies that it starts to dawn on you the existence you have come to assume was universal is, in fact, not the same reality for those who were, through no fault of their own, born into circumstances that defined their quality of life as more tentative and less forgiving.

See if you can relate to the following description of what Coates sees as “the Dream,” as he envisioned it as a young boy: “The Dream seemed to be the pinnacle, then – to grow rich and live in one of those disconnected houses out in the country; in one of those small communities, one of those cul-de-sacs with its gently curving ways, where they staged teen movies and children built treehouses, and in that last lost year before college, teenagers made love in cars parked at the lake. The Dream seemed to be at the end of the world for me, the height of American ambition. What more could possibly exist beyond the dispatches, beyond the suburb?”

As a young boy growing up in rural west Tennessee, the portrait Coates paints so vividly was not some abstract dream; it was my everyday life. It is still difficult to really get my head around the kind of upbringing the author must have had or how he has felt most of his life. I am, however, more empathetic to his plight and to the plight of the millions of Americans he represents, after taking the time to read his exquisite and powerful indictment of those of us who have not had to endure the relentless oppression he has known since birth.

Coates is a national correspondent for The Atlantic. He has also worked for The Village Voice, Washington City Paper and Time. A frequent contributor to The New York Times Magazine, The Washington Post, The Washington Monthly, O and other publications, he was the recipient of a “Genius Grant” from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in 2015. “Between the World and Me” won the National Book Award for Nonfiction this year. This is his second book, the first being “The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood,” which was released in 2008.

Coates spent five years at Howard University but dropped out before earning a degree in order to pursue a career in journalism. From 2012-14 he was the MLK Visiting Professor for Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He became a journalist-in-residence at the City University of New York in 2014.

After taking the time to read “Between the World and Me” in one sitting, I can see why Coates won the National Book Award and all of the other accolades this volume so rightly deserves. I recommend it highly, especially to anyone who has ever wondered whether race truly matters in our society. Read it and decide for yourself.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.