



Thoughts from Linda:

Between The World and Me

by Ta-Nehisi Coates
2015

Toni Morrison was quoted as saying: "This is required reading."

I agree.

What does it mean to be an African American man today, living anywhere in the United States, with a young son? For sure, we know it is perilous. This book takes you on a journey through the author's own dangerous life as he relays his experiences, learnings, and fears to his son. It is a strong piece of work. He has called it his 'manifesto.'

This book was a gift from a long-time friend in 2017, and she told me then, "you have to read this, Linda...but be ready; it is tough going." We grew up together in a very racially prejudiced environment in East Texas. We knew—only from our limited perspective based on our personal experience—a little about the topic. In my life, I have lived in both the North and South of America and the East and West, and I believe I understand how racially scarred we are in this country, even--and especially--today. I took her words to heart and have tried a few times since 2017 to pick this book up, only to experience the raw story and then to put it back down for another time. For me, this was a very difficult story to read, and I now understand--that is precisely the point.

Ta-Nehisi Coates has written a beautifully brilliant story about what it is like to inhabit a black body in America today. He accomplishes this in the framework of a letter to his adolescent son. The book offers a narrative of America, framed by him, based on his own experiences, fears, and hopes as a black man in America. It is one of the most powerful books I have ever read, and it took me on a journey of enhanced consciousness by leaps and bounds as I turned the pages. If I thought I was 'woke,

'defined by Webster as "being conscious of racial discrimination in society and other forms of oppression and injustice" before reading this book, I can say I felt 'woke on steroids' after reading it. And still, I know there is so much I do not know.

Ta Nehisi Coates is an American author and journalist, having gained a large following as a national correspondent at *The Atlantic*. He wrote about social and political issues, particularly about African Americans and white supremacy. He authored three nonfiction books, a *Black Panther* series and a *Captain America* series for *Marvel Comics*. Coates also worked for *The Village Voice* and *Time* magazine and contributed to *The NYT Magazine* and *The Washington Post*. In 2015, he received a Genius Grant, an annual prize by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. They typically give this award to 20 to 30 individuals working in any field who have shown "extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction and are citizens or residents of the USA."

Coates was born in Baltimore, and his father was a Vietnam veteran, a former Black Panther publisher, and a librarian. His mother was a teacher. He was surrounded by books for his entire childhood, as his father founded and ran Black Classic Press, a publishing company specializing in African American titles. The Press was an outgrowth of a grassroots organization, The George Jackson Prison Movement, which initially operated a black bookstore called Black Book. Later Black Classic Press was established with a table-top printing press in the basement of the Coates family home.

Coates's first name, Ta-Nehisi, derives from an Ancient Egyptian name for Nubia, the region along the Nile River in present-day northern Sudan and southern Egypt.

The book takes its title from a poem by Richard Wright about a black man discovering the site of a lynching and becoming incapacitated with fear, which created a barrier between himself and others. It begins with the lines from this poem: "*And one morning while in the woods, I stumbled suddenly upon the thing... Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks and elms... And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me.*"

As Coates says, he attempts in this book to do what he believes is the writer's work, which is "to say things in a truthful and direct way." He has often spoken in interviews about the defense of writing and his strong motivation to reflect reality and not to make people necessarily feel good or inspired. He quotes Carolyn Forché, and her famous 1981 poem, "The Country Between Us," as he describes his fundamental belief about how to write by saying the phrase: "... *there is no other way to say this...*"

meaning, if there is no kind or hopeful way through the message, he will tell it straight out. The book reflects that philosophy of writing very well.

The story of his letter to his son is of his own growth of consciousness through his difficult years growing up in tough neighborhoods of Baltimore (where today the city considers 300 or fewer homicides to be a success) to his revelatory experiences at Howard University, and from the South Side of Chicago to Paris, France.

One of the most moving stories was of his early school days as he described the sheer fear of protecting his black body and, thus, the challenge and amount of energy required each day just to be sure he survived the tough streets. He tells his son this in a passage: *"I recall learning these laws (laws of the street) clearer than I recall learning my colors and shapes because these laws were essential to the security of my body. I think of this as a great difference between us (his son and himself.) You have some acquaintance with the old rules, but they are not as essential to you as they were to me. I am sure that you have had to deal with the occasional roughneck on the subway or in the park. Still, when I was about your age, each day, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, who or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not—all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body...I think I somehow knew that that third of my brain should have been concerned with more beautiful things."*

He continues the story of his life and development, trying to make sense of it, and relays his great awakening at the Mecca of Howard University beautifully. An avid reader since childhood, he tells of his sequestering in the library and his search for making sense of the black experience there and out on the green Yard where he was, for the first time, surrounded by what he called "black intelligence in droves."

"My only Mecca was, is, and shall always be Howard University...I am not so sure that the force of my Mecca—The Mecca- can be translated into your new and eclectic tongue. I am not even sure that it should be. My work is to give you what I know of my own particular path while allowing you to walk your own. You can no more be black like I am black than I could be black like your grandfather was. And still, I maintain that even for a cosmopolitan boy like you, there is something to be found there—a base, even in these modern times, a port in the American storm. Surely I am biased by nostalgia and tradition. I was admitted to Howard but formed and shaped by The Mecca. These institutions are related but not the same. Howard University is an institution of higher education...The Mecca is a machine, crafted to capture and

concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body. The Mecca derives its power from the heritage of Howard, which in Jim Crow days enjoyed a near-monopoly on black talent. And whereas most other historically black schools were scattered like forts in the great wilderness of the old Confederacy, Howard was in Washington, D.C.—Chocolate City—and thus in proximity to both federal power and black power.” Coates goes on to explain the power of this new life he was living as he would walk the Yard and would see everything he ever “knew of my black self- multiplied out into seemingly endless variations.”

Much of the book deals with his fears for his son and the fragility of ‘his black body.’ Coates illustrates the impact of this with the story of the death of his college friend, Prince Carmen Jones, who was shot in September 2000, by police in Prince George’s County, with a police department notorious at the time for their brutality and abuse of power. Prince Jones’s story rocked Howard and the country, somewhat like the Rodney King tragedy of 1991. Coates has said that this experience was one of the book’s origins. A major theme of the book is violence toward blacks over their experience in America, from enslavement and the violence that ensued to various forms of institutional racism.

We know the names of so many others and the brutal statistics that haunt us in 2023. From 2014 to 2020, police in America killed 7680 people, with 25% being black (twice the percentage of the total population of 13%.) We know the names of George Floyd, Dante Wright, Andre Hill, Breonna Taylor, Stephon Clark, Alatianna Jefferson, and so many others today. The Prince Jones story and its aftermath are all too familiar, a decade after the writing of this book.

He concludes the book, in fact, with the moving story of a visit he made to Mable Jones, the mother of Prince Jones. His last chapter contains his final message for his son, for what he sees as the continued struggle amidst a system created by racial prejudice that still lives on in America.

This book won the 2015 National Book Award for Nonfiction and was a finalist for the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction. It was ranked 7th on The Guardian’s list of the 100 best books of the 21st century.

I highly recommend we take the advice of Toni Morrison. It is required reading.