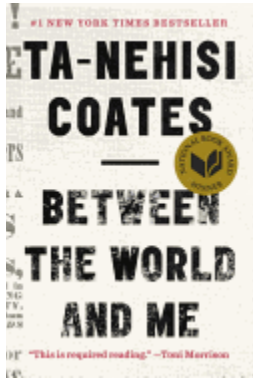




ELPL Lit Kits

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates



In this extended open letter to his young son, Samori, "Atlantic" national correspondent and senior editor Coates reflects further on his unlikely road to manhood and escape from the maw of America's tradition--nay, heritage--of destroying the black body. Mixing memoir, discourse, and outcry, Coates details what it has meant and what it means to be black in America, especially what it has meant and means to be a black male. His review pays special attention to the American Dream amid the physically painful and exhausting realities of U.S. ghettos from slavery to the killing fields of Detroit, Chicago, and Baltimore, where he grew up living in fear. Pleading for his son to understand the struggle even as it shifts in time and place,

Coates cautions against illusions that America's racism exists in a distant past that needs not be discussed.

About the Author: **Ta-Nehisi Coates** is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Between the World and Me*, a finalist for the National Book Award. A MacArthur Genius Grant fellow, Coates has received the National Magazine Award, the Hillman Prize for Opinion and Analysis Journalism, and the George Polk Award for his *Atlantic* cover story *The Case for Reparations*. He lives in New York with his wife and son.

Discussion Questions:

1. Coates is careful to avoid assuming that whiteness is a given. Rather, he calls attention to the constructedness of race when he describes families and individuals who "believe themselves to be white" or children who are "raised to be white" (10). At the same time, whiteness is a powerful social force, a descriptor for a community of those who have "maximum power and minimum responsibility," those who have the power to take the lives of others without punishment (80). What role does race play in your self-understanding? How does your understanding of yourself and your identities connect to the social and historical consequences Coates discusses?
2. Coates writes that "...race is the child of racism, not the father" (7). What does the author mean by this? How does this assertion compel us to think about the history of race and racism in the United States? How does this apparent reversal of common sense compel us to rethink the history of race and racism in the United States?

3. What does Coates mean by "the Dream"? Why does he urge himself to be "wary of every Dream" (53)? What do you think the author means when he writes that "the Dreamers...would rather live white than live free" (143)? Against the Dream, what does it mean to be "conscious citizen[s] of the terrible world" (108)? What is Coates' definition of race on p. 115? Do you agree? What other populations might this definition apply to globally, beyond those in the United States? If race is not a biological reality, then what is it? 7. In what ways does history, or the media, tell us who or what matters? Who counts and who does not? Give examples.
4. Why did Coates use manhood as an overlying theme? Would it have been less, equally, or more effective for him to incorporate the black female struggle as well into this text?
5. Can this book also be seen as a plea for education reform? When Coates says that "the schools were not concerned with curiosity," but rather with "compliance," what does that tell us about how the educational institution in America perpetuates racial injustice?
6. Rather than categorizing people as either good or bad in two distinct categories, it is clear that Coates speaks of humans as having pure and dark intentions and actions simultaneously. It is not the bad white people vs the good black people. That being said, how does Coates speak of humanity and its complexities? Give examples.
7. Coates refers to the word "people" as a political term and frequently references white people as those who "believe themselves white." What can this kind of dissociation from race do as the United States progresses? Moving forward, how can reminding people that race is purely a social construct aid in this fight? What are the different aspects of the American Dream, or "the Dream," as Coates calls it, that are discussed in this literature? How are they problematic?
8. Between the World and Me can be divided into three sections, each focused on a different era in Coates's life: his early life, before attending Howard University; his time at Howard; and his life after Howard. What is Coates's primary claim throughout the book? What is his key purpose in writing this book? As he narrates his experiences, what techniques (rhetorical, literary, etc.) does Coates use to make his ideas coherent and to organize his information