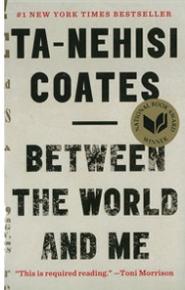


Books by the Stack



Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

In a profound work that pivots from the biggest questions about American history and ideals to the most intimate concerns of a father to his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a new framework for understanding our nation's history and current crisis.

Why you'll like it: *Bittersweet, fathers and sons, memoir, provocative.*

About the Author: Ta-Nehisi Coates was born in Baltimore, Maryland on September 30, 1975. He attended Howard University. He is a correspondent at The Atlantic, where he writes about culture, politics, and social issues. He is the author of *The Beautiful Struggle* and *Between the World and Me*, which won a National Book Award for nonfiction in 2015 and the 2016 PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay. He was included on Time magazine's annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

1. What is your personal experience of race relations in America? What experiences have you had in your life that relate, one way or another, to the Coates's contentions about being black and/or white in America?
2. Have you had an experience equivalent to the author's experience at Howard? What feels like "Mecca" to you? Where do you feel like you're part of a community?
3. On page 7, Coates writes: "But race is the child of racism, not the father." He seems to be suggesting here that racism precedes race and that without racism, there is no category of race. Do you agree?
4. In the same paragraph, Coates puts genealogy and physiognomy in opposition to hierarchy. He writes: "that the preeminence of hue and hair...can correctly organize a society...that they signify deeper attributes...is the new idea..." (page 7). What Coates appears to be saying here that in a different social system, genealogy (parents, grandparents, etc) and physiognomy (physical features of the face) would be just that, but in America (and elsewhere to be sure) they determine hierarchy. Is this way of looking at race and racism new to you? Does Coates put words to what is otherwise taken for granted or is he dispelling a myth about American social equality?
5. On page eleven, Coates introduces "the Dream." What is "the Dream" according to Coates? Who gets to access "the Dream" and who does not? Does "the Dream" seem familiar to you? To what extent is "the Dream" applicable to the American Jewish Community? What are Jewish dreams? What has been the most successful Jewish dream of the last one hundred years? Is the dream your dream?
6. Coates writes: "The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing." (page 50) What does he mean by this? Is there a relationship between the creative arts (art, writing, music, etc.) and being an outsider?

7. The Hebrew word "Ivri" can mean "the other" or "from the other side," Abraham was "the Ivri." He came as a foreigner to Canaan. What does all this mean in terms of Jews as artists, courageous thinkers and honest writers? Is Jewish creativity related to Jews historically being outside the mainstream of the societies in which Jews have lived? Is the experience of Jews in the United States different from experiences in the past?

8. On page 60, Coates states that "Hate gives identity." What does he mean? How can we make sense of this bold statement in the context of our identities as Americans? As Jews?

9. Coates writes: "But whether you fought or ran, you did it together..." (page 69) The Talmud teaches, "All Israel are responsible for one another..." (Shavuot 39a) Is this similar to what Coates is saying? What does he mean about African Americans growing up in the poorest communities in America? Do American Jews have this "thick" sense of group? Has a sense of group identity changed for American Jews over time?

10. Coates says on page 69 that "...the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning." What is he talking about here? Israel means to struggle with God. Is this the same type of struggle to which Coates refers, or a different one? What is the meaning in struggle?

11. "Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about his world is meant to be." (page 71) What is Coates saying? what does he mean that 'the god of history is an atheist?' Is the Jewish God of history an atheist? What does a God have to believe in?

12. How might the passage in question 9 be related to the biblical notion that human history takes place outside of the Garden - that we were banished from the Garden? What takes place in Genesis 4:8 and how many verses are we removed the Garden?

13. Coates writes that "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body-it is heritage." (page 103) How do you, as a Jew, an American, etc., understand that sentence? What is our Jewish mandate to respond? How might it inform our Passover?

14. Consider this passage from *Between the World and Me*

I bumped into a young black man and said, 'My bad.' Without even looking up he said, 'You straight.' And in that exchange there was so much of the private rapport that can only exist between two particular strangers of the tribe we call black.(pp119-120)

Now compare it to the following excerpt from Ze'ev Maghen's *New Essays on Zionism*:

I was in New York with my brother...we stopped to rest near the World Trade Center...Alex and I switched to Hebrew...as we were talking, this be-suited fellow...rose, walked over, and stood...in front of our bench...'Um..uh..Shalom!' I extended my hand and he shook it...what he really wanted to say was 'Hey - I'm Jewish, too...I embrace you, my brother...we share something tremendous...ancient...wonders...'" (from "Imagine: On Love and Lennon" by Ze'ev Magen in *New Essays on Zionism* edited by David Hazony, York Hazony and Michael Oren p288)

Are Coates and Mahgen having the same experience? Have you had this experience? Is it a minority experience? What does it mean or indicate?

15. Coates says that "in America, the injury is not in being born with darker skin, with fuller lips, with a broader nose but in everything that happens after." (p120) What is he saying here?

16. One of the most famous pieces of American Civil Rights History is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," written in 1963. Read it and compare King's message with Coates. How far have we come in the past 50 years? What work is yet to be done? What power or message is conveyed by composing both of the texts in the form of a letter?

17. The title of Coates's book comes from a poem by Richard Wright that recounts a lynching. Think about how the title relates to Coates's argument and then read the poem. Why might Coates have chosen this

name for his book? What understanding can we gain by reading these texts side by side?

18. What do you take away from the book? What should our response be as readers? As a Jewish community?

19. In what ways does this book inform or change your understanding of the events that have taken place in the past months from Ferguson to Baltimore and all around the country?

20. How can we bring ideas and lessons of this book to bear in the Reform Movement's campaign to advance racial justice?

(Questions issued by publisher.)



www.grpl.org/BookClub