

UDC 37.014(73=414/=45)

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Book Review “Between the World and Me” by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Abstract. This paper is a written review of the book *Between the World and Me*. It is a work by Ta-Nehisi Coates. The author found the book to be inspirational and a work that all future educators should pick up before having their own classroom. The author provides some of thoughts on the novel, and implications for teaching. This article highlights three impactful events discussed in the novel, and then reflects on how what was read will ultimately influence the classroom experience of her future students.

Between the World and Me is a 2015 novel by author Ta-Nehisi Coates framed as a letter to Coates’ son, Samori. The book focuses on Coates’ life experience, from growing up on the streets in West Baltimore to his adult life in New York City with his wife and child. He uses moments in his life to paint a picture and answer what he deems is the question of his life: “How to live in a black body in America?”

One key event in the book that is important to the development of Coates is the incident involving himself, his son, and a white woman. Coates writes, “The theater was crowded ... as we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and said, ‘Come on!’ (Coates 93-94). Words were exchanged and threats of police intervention were made as someone in the crowd threatened to call the police. Coates, like any parent, was compelled to act forcefully in defense of his child as a result of the woman's behavior. After reflecting on what happened and his actions, Coates questioned how much weight he wanted to place on his son's shoulders at such a young age. After police threats were made, Coates feared how his five-year-old son's earliest remembrance would be of his father being seized and beaten by people who were supposed to protect and serve the country. Coates’ error lies in the idea that he forgot he can be arrested simply by appearing threatening, not from his direct actions. Coates then discusses that who you are in America correlates directly to the severity of the consequences from making mistakes. He accepts the fact that all humans will misjudge at one point in their life or another but “the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen” (Coates 96). This quote helps the readers to fully dissect what Coates wants his son to understand. Mistakes are bound to happen, but Samori needs to make less mistakes in America than his white peers. There is a constant, indirect control over his body by white people forcing him to prove time and time again that he is a human, just like them, which is the idea of being “twice as good”. Coates, although he does not want this for his son, knows that Samori will grow up trying to prove his worth while also trying to disprove suspicions.

Another key event that helped Coates reflect on his life was the realization that the educational system aims at forcefully disciplining black children rather than educating and developing them, however, when black people drop out because of that mistreatment, they are seen as lazy or unmotivated. For instance, Coates’ writes,

“Fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace the country. But it does not, and while I couldn’t crunch the numbers or plumb the history back then, I sensed the fear that marked West Baltimore could not be explained by the schools. Schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them” (Coates 27).

Society teaches Coates that school is a place to avoid jail, however, he struggled with school. The schools are not concerned with the curiosities of black boys and girls. In their eyes, being a good student entails giving the school more power over the physical body. The desire for students to ask

questions and be curious is diminished in black schools. School is a place for them to go so that they stay off the streets, not a place to learn and be successful. Coates considers this idea further and observes that white schools do not tell their kids, "This will keep you out of jail," but rather, "This will get you into college" or "This is how you will have a wonderful future." Education is considered as a steppingstone to pursuing one's interests and obtaining a satisfying profession in white schools. Coates and his community are caught in a trap that they cannot get out of. He claims that his father beat him for letting another boy steal from him as well as for shouting at a teacher. Coates discovered that if an individual is either not aggressive enough or too aggressive, they might be assaulted, causing persistent anxiety. The schools have no idea the knowledge they teach, which appears to be entirely irrelevant to Coates' daily existence and struggles.

The final main life event that helped Coates reflect on his life was him being stopped by the Prince George County Police on the side of the road. While waiting for the office, Coates was terrified and anticipating the worst possible outcome. He says,

“By then I had added to the warnings of my teachers what I’d learned about PG County through reporting and reading the papers. And so I knew that the PG Country police had killed Elmer Clay Newman, then claimed he’d rammed his own head into the wall of a jail cell... I knew that they shot at moving cars, shot at the unarmed, shot through the backs of men and claimed that it had been they who’d been under fire... the police chief was rewarded with a raise” (Coates 75-76).

As Coates was replaying all these news articles in his head, he knew this moment could very well be his last as “these officers had my body, could do with that body whatever they pleased” (Coates 76). The officer returned with no word as to why Coates was stopped; the relief in his heart was immense, however, just a month later, a headline was made on the *Washington Post* that the PG Country Police had killed again. This time, it was Coates’ friend, Prince Jones. Over the next few weeks, Coates discovered that the police were meant to be following a man with a completely different physical description, but instead followed Prince through three states, where he was visiting his fiancée. No witnesses were present, and the cop claimed self-defense and shot him. There was no evidence to back up the officer's claim, and there was almost little inquiry into the officer, who went unpunished. Coates had firsthand experience with how challenging it is for a black person to get off the streets and out of poverty. Though he did not know Prince's full history, it was evident from his enrollment at Howard University that he had a strong support system and others had invested in him; he got away from the streets and mastered academics. Prince had a fiancée and was described as a loving and caring Christian. This incident opened a new perspective that if a man like Prince could be shot and forgotten, so could Coates. In addition, Coates gained insight into his own parents' fear. He realized why his father had been so afraid and why his mother always clutched his hand so firmly as they crossed the street; nobody would be held accountable, and the death of a black person would be attributed to "race" rather than human error.

I strongly recommend this novel to all as Coates wrote with so much passion and anguish. He drew from his personal experiences, both positive and negative, and used his heart to tell his story. Although the book is historical, it did not feel like we were reading a textbook, especially with the unique form of a letter to his son. As a prospective educator, I plan to incorporate the various experiences described in this book into my classroom. One of the most important ways. I will accomplish this is by teaching what is considered "uncomfortable". Skipping over key historical events, such as the Jim Crow Laws: laws which enforced racial segregation in the United States, will be more destructive to students in the long run and teaches them that those events are not important. As an aspiring English teacher, I plan to use books written throughout history to investigate how various languages and themes were evaluated and discussed. We read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school, and my teacher entirely ignored the use of racist slurs throughout the book. She dismissed it, rather than acknowledging how it was written and how society has since evolved. I can only imagine how my classmates of color felt with such a big part of their history being disregarded because a

teacher believed it to be uncomfortable. I understand that this is a difficult issue to handle but ignoring the use of constant slurs makes students feel uneasy about the situation, which they should not.

Another way I plan to incorporate Coates' experience into my classroom is to establish an environment in which all my students will collaborate. I understand how intimidating it is to be unable to work with people you are familiar with, but the information and perspective gained from working with people who are not like you is priceless. Change is unavoidable when children progress from elementary school to middle school and finally to high school. Individuals acquire more insight into the world as a result of meeting new people, which enables the development of fresh ideas and viewpoints. Students will obtain a new perspective on the world through speaking with those who have had varied experiences in life. Coates enjoyed conversing with people who were different from him and exchanging ideas on how their differences influenced who they are and what they believe. Students will never be able to adequately reflect on life if they remain in their bubble of safety. My major viewpoints have shifted dramatically since middle school as a result of my increased ability to talk with and learn about others. The person I was in high school is not the person I am today as college has opened my eyes to different experiences I did not have in high school. Staying in a box prevents individuals from flourishing, which is exactly what I want for my students. Coates wrote this book, not with all the solutions, but with suggestions for how future educators may apply what he learned in their classroom to make a more inclusive and tolerant future. *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, is one of the best pieces of writing I have read, and I hope to apply what I have learned in my own classroom to create a safe, growth-oriented environment.

Work Cited

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. (2020). *Between the World and Me*. Text Publishing Company.