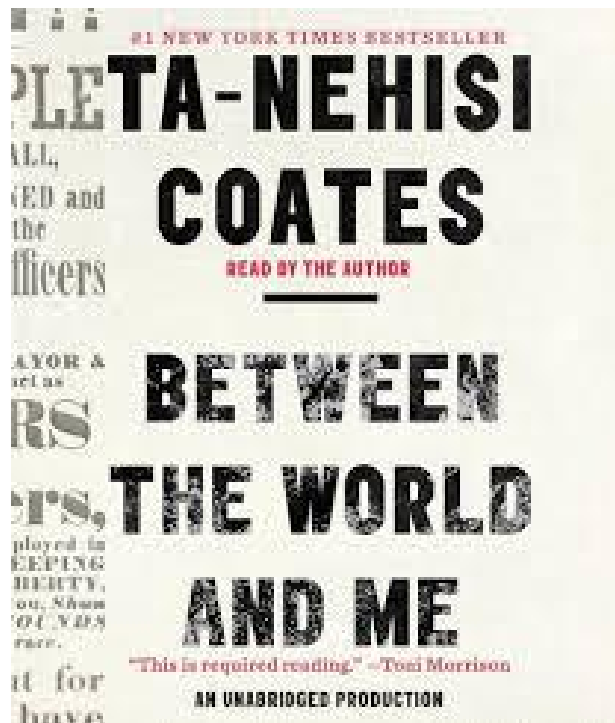


## Book Review

# Between the World and Me

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## Introduction

The letter *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates dives deep into the challenges and struggles experienced first hand by many African Americans. This book takes the stance of a father writing a letter to his son, it is one of the most powerful pieces of text that serves as raw emotions laid on a page. It is as frightening as it is beautiful. *Between the World and Me* is a novel that is a necessity to read for all Americans.

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## The Setting

*Between the World and Me* is a letter from Coates to his son Samori. There is something extremely special and unique about how this book is written, it serves as the main point of feeling, and in my opinion, setting of the book. To convey his points, Coates draws on his personal experiences spending time in numerous locations such as, Baltimore, Howard University, Chicago, Civil War Battle Field, and Paris, to investigate the larger historical and societal conditions that have influenced the Black experience in America.

The narrative of Coates's life flows smoothly from his childhood in Baltimore through his time at Howard University, his travels to Chicago and Paris, and the larger tragedies of racism and violence against Black Americans. It also expresses his thoughts on the larger social and political realities of being Black in the United States. In this book the setting lies more within the father-son relationship rather than any specific place. It jumps to the logical next necessity for his son to understand his perspective and the realities of the Black experience in America.



## The Ideas

**The American Dream From Coates Perspective** - The American dream pushes people to compete fiercely and always strive to outperform one another. However, as Coates demonstrates, racial injustice destroys this ambition. Coates's story demonstrates how racism creates obstacles for Black people while upholding white supremacy ideologies and standards, therefore limiting access to the American Dream. The fatal effects of these systemic injustices are highlighted by tragic incidents like the killings of Tamir Rice and Eric Garner. Furthermore Coates expresses his ideologies of how the American Dream is intrinsically linked to violence.

**Systemic Oppression** - As demonstrated with Coates line, “were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance,” people, African Americans especially, are forced to do what they were told (Coates, “Between the World and Me” 26). Day after day, the idea of being routinely in the same place and adhering to the authority figure is pushed onto them. School is only one system in place to separate people into the enforcers and the enforced. Society wants to create people in the same archetype that was in slavery; people should not question, they should blindly respect authority. Coates repeatedly references his ideas of the “destruction” and “dismantling” of the black body, how society tries to strip African Americans of identities and their uniqueness. He also investigates the exploitation and vulnerability of black bodies in a racist society, linking this vulnerability to the dehumanization of black people during colonialism and slavery. He provides examples of how the monetization of black bodies had a lasting impact on how black people were viewed and treated long after slavery. Coates draws attention to the physical brutality, control, and dehumanization that are signs of racism. Comparing racism to acts of terrorism directed against the Black community.

**The Fragility of the Black Body** - Coates talks about systematic racism and oppression (discussed earlier) and violence, specifically the constant threat against the black body in America. He highlights the vulnerability of black existence in a culture that devalues black bodies as he discusses the constant examples present in slavery, segregation, and police violence. Black people in American society are always at risk of being exploited and dehumanized. These threats have serious psychological and physical repercussions.


## Quotes Analysis

The systemic brutality against African Americans that is frequently supported by white authorities such as law enforcement is exemplified by Coates. He highlights these inequalities in the line “the destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. But sometimes they kill in plain view. They torture us, then make us believe that we deserve it.” (Coates, “Between the World and Me” 9). Referring to police officers as “destroyers” along with referencing it from the perspective of Coates and black people as a whole implies that these violent crimes are a part of a bigger system. A system that permits the violent treatment of Black people without consequence. Through that, promoting the idea that Black bodies are disposable.

Coates talks about his early education system experiences, and, according to Coates, the streets and the schools are just two sides of the same coin. He believes that the “‘Good intention’ [of schools in America] is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream” (Coates, “Between the World and Me” 33 - 34). The entire society will relieve itself of all accountability for the child's well being. When Coates refers to “good intention” in this context, he is referring to everyone who is stuck between the two, school and streets. Even while his teachers may have meant well, it doesn't benefit him in the long run. Good intentions have a flaw, they refuse to take on real accountability. It's simply to cover up the fact that many Black kids drop out of school and wind up homeless.

Coates describes how, for people to prove themselves as a black person, they have to put forth an unproportionate amount of effort. The idea of being less than has to be overcome somehow and, for Coates, “all [his] life [he]’d heard people tell their black boys and black girls to ‘be twice as good,’ which is to say ‘accept half as much’” (Coates, “Between the World and Me” 87). The idea of Black people having to put in twice as much effort in order to receive half as much credit or compensation suggests that white people view black people as less capable or deserving. Often, when people perceive things as less than it takes much more to respect that thing, this is reflected in the way white people see black people. A reflection of the systemic injustice that exists in the United States.

**Connecting Quote to Baldwin:** Coates overarching themes connect closely to the work of James Baldwin and specifically the idea of white people “would never, by the operation of any generous human feeling, cease to use [black people] as an outlet for [their] frustrations and hostilities.” (Baldwin, “Down at the Cross: A Letter from a Region in My Mind” 33 ) Both of these activists recognize the attempt on black bodies to take away the soul and dignity from them.



Coates meaning of more of a figurative sense of destroying the black bodies, destroying their heritage and identities, parallels to baldwins ideas of trying to break African American people through the use of them as a vessel to take out their frustrations.