**Between the World and Me Summary**

*Between the World and Me*is a letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s fifteen-year-old son, Samori. He weaves his personal, historical, and intellectual development into his ruminations on how to live in a black body in America.

Coates writes of his upbringing in the ghettos of Baltimore in which he learned the codes of the street in order to survive but never fully embraced them. His father was hard on him, but Coates now sees that black parents often are so they do not lose their children. To grow up black in Baltimore was usually to grow up poor, marginalized, and desperate to assert one’s humanity. The swagger and loudness of the men on the corners was their way to protect themselves and to announce their presence as human beings.

As a young man school (and religion) seemed useless to Coates, but he pursued his studies in order to attend Howard University. There he underwent an intellectual awakening, marveling at the diversity of black people at Howard and undertaking studies of black writers and black history. He learned about his own people and confronted his imperfect understanding of this history. There he met his future wife and many lifelong friends. He began to write and eventually became a journalist.

While he was a student at Howard, he heard of the death of one of his classmates, Prince Jones. Prince was a handsome, charismatic, and well-to-do black man who was killed by police in a situation reminiscent of those that Coates brings up in the beginning of his work: Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and others. Prince’s death made Coates feel intensely angry, disillusioned, and resentful. He saw clearly how black bodies lacked value in America and could be destroyed at random; even coming from a privileged background could not save a person. It was not even just the individual officer who killed Prince, Coates asserts, because that officer was a direct expression of America’s beliefs.

This history of the destruction of the black body, which Coates avers is this country’s heritage, is not just rooted in slavery but in the battles of the Civil War, the demoralizing Jim Crow laws, police brutality and racial profiling, and the creation and promotion of the Dream. This Dream is one of the main themes of his work. It asserts that Americans desire comfort, security, a nice house in a suburban neighborhood, barbecues and pool parties, etc. It is what people who think they are white (Coates deconstructs biologically determined notions of race, explaining how whiteness and blackness are interchangeable constructs) strive for and proclaim is a noble goal. They close their eyes to anything that is uncomfortable, never actually believe themselves to be racist, and think that if they do attain the Dream it is due to their mettle and audacity alone, not the advantages provided by their putative whiteness.

Coates speaks to his son directly about the perils of being a young black boy – of having to be “twice as good” and to take responsibility for the actions of other black people, of having to know and follow “the rules,” of having to struggle more than everyone else. He knows his son has grown up differently than he did and their experiences of being black are different, but the stark reality remains that inhabiting a black body in America is fraught with peril. It pains him that he cannot help his son or make it okay; it is profoundly frustrating to always be the “below” of one’s country, to always have to try harder.

He ends his letter by describing his visit to the mother of Prince Jones, Dr. Mabel Jones. He hears her life story and marvels at her fortitude and elegance; he also comes to realize that she suffers under the weight of knowing that her country did not care about her son, murdered her son, forgot about her son.

There is little chance, Coates concludes, that the Dreamers will wake into consciousness. The Dreamers continue to plunder the earth as they plunder black bodies. There will be a reckoning someday, but this is not something to hope for because when the Dreamers reap what they sowed, everyone else will as well. Black people must revel in their community and find joy in it because it is what they have. The struggle is hard but it provides meaning in this life.

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