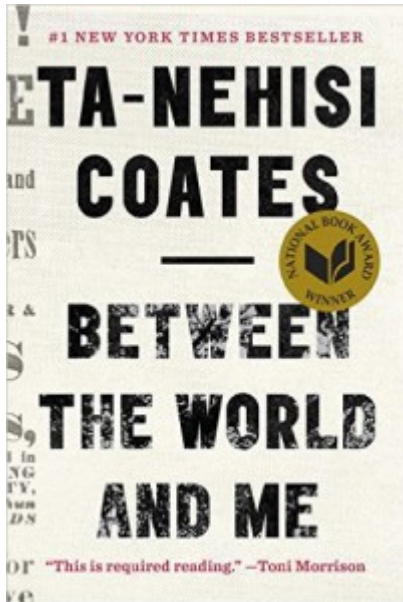


Book review: 'Between the World and Me'

By Kim Wyatt



"Between the World and Me"

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

Spiegel & Grau, 176 pages, \$24 hardcover

One-line review: A challenging, lyrical and heartbreaking must-read for Americans.

"Between the World and Me" by Ta-Nehisi Coates is titled after Richard Wright's 1935 poem of the same name about a lynching. This powerful book, written as a candid letter to Coates's 15-year-old son, offers a personal investigation into the history of the black man in the United States from slavery to a time when unarmed black men and boys are killed on film in broad daylight by police officers. The choice of epistolary structure is superb, bringing poetic urgency to the material through the father-son relationship, with the founding of our country and its aftereffects the drumbeat.

I read this short book in one sitting, and a veil was lifted. Not that I wasn't aware of racism or of my own complicity, but I hadn't considered it at the cellular level, in the DNA of the USA and in each of us. Coates asserts that the violence that breaks black bodies isn't a failure of the system, it is part of the system. It is tradition and it is legacy—the American Dream “rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies.” From Civil War battlefields and cotton plantations to our modern prison-industrial complex, it's hard to disagree.

Once we get into Coates's personal history, the book soars. “My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box.” From the streets of Baltimore to Howard University and Paris, the author's erudition and vulnerability elevate this book, and the [white] reader is given raw insight into a world we can't possibly understand. Despite progress in civil rights, black parents know on a visceral level that their children can be taken or brutalized for any reason or no reason at all.

Of Howard University student Prince Jones, who was killed by a police officer, Coates writes: “And the plunder was not just of Prince alone. Think of all the love poured into him. Think of the tuitions for Montessori and music lessons. Think of the gasoline expended, the treads worn carting him to football games, basketball tournaments, and Little League. . . . Think of the surprise birthday parties, the daycare, and the reference check on babysitters . . . Think of the checks written for family photos. Think of all the embraces, all the private jokes, customs, greetings, names, dreams, all the shared knowledge and capacity of a black family injected into that vessel of flesh and bone. And think of how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy contents, all that had gone into him, sent flowing back to the earth.”

This book requires that you bring an open mind and heart to the table. Winner of the 2015 National Book Award, “Between

the World and Me" is important, timely and immensely readable. Inspired by James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," which begins addressed to his 15-year-old nephew, Coates offers no easy prescriptions to his son (or the reader), rather, the belief that the value lies in the questioning and in the struggle. "The struggle to understand is our only advantage over this madness." It's time for all of us to struggle with his questions.

*Kim Wyatt is the owner of the independent press **Bona Fide Books**.*