

**Freshman Year Reading/Common Reading Guide from Penguin Random House Academic Resources: *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

“I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates. The language of *Between the World and Me*, like Coates’s journey, is visceral, eloquent, and beautifully redemptive. As profound as it is revelatory.” — Toni Morrison

“Powerful and passionate . . . profoundly moving . . . a searing meditation on what it means to be black in America today.” —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

**about the author**

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*. A MacArthur “Genius Grant” Fellow, Coates has received the National Magazine Award, the Hillman Prize for Opinion and Analysis Journalism, and the George Polk Award for his *Atlantic* cover story “The Case for Reparations.” He lives in New York with his wife and son. *Between the World and Me* won the 2015 National Book Award for Nonfiction.

**discussion questions**

1. Coates modeled the book’s epistolary structure on James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, which is also written as a series of letters. Why do you think Coates chose the epistolary form, rather than that of the traditional essay? Why do you think Coates wrote this book in the form of a letter to his son, specifically? How does the format affect your relationship to the text? Do you think this format might make some readers uncomfortable? How might black readers have a different experience reading this text than white readers?

2. Consider the title

*Between the World and Me*; it comes from a poem by Richard Wright, which is printed at the beginning of the book. To whom do you think the “Me” in both the book title and the poem refers? What are the “sooty details of the scene” in Wright’s poem? How are these “sooty details” portrayed in Coates’s book?

3. How does Coates define and describe the black body throughout the book? What does Coates mean when he refers to the idea of losing his own body? Consider your own body, and the influences and individuals that have control over it. How is your experience similar to or different than the experiences Coates writes about? Why does Coates include physical descriptions of black bodies when writing about slavery and historical racism?

4. Coates identifies race in the United States as a social construct that has its origins in a history of violence and oppression. Why do you think this conception of race is not universally accepted? Who defines race in America? How do racial boundaries and categories benefit some people and harm others? Does race play a role in determining who has political power,

economic privilege, and social benefits? Have social influences such as race, power, and privilege played a role in shaping your own personal identity?

5. Why did Coates choose not to comfort his son when the news broke that the police officer who killed Eric Garner would not be indicted? What was your own reaction to this verdict? How do you think people throughout the country reacted to this decision? How did this incident spark conversations about race and police violence in the media and in your personal life? What have you observed about the Black Lives Matter movement on the streets of Ferguson, New York City, Baltimore, and Charleston? How are young people resisting and organizing locally against police brutality?

6. Coates writes about the profound fear he felt growing up in Baltimore, and the sense he had, even then, that he was being excluded from other, more beneficial childhood experiences and opportunities. What unspoken rules was Coates forced to learn? How do you think these rules affected his experiences as a child? How does Coates's childhood compare to your own? How do childhood experiences affect our personal stories and identities?

7. As a young person, Coates witnessed another boy brandish a gun. He writes, "He did not need to shoot. He had affirmed my place in the order of things. He had let it be known how easily I could be selected." Why didn't Coates tell anyone about this experience? How did this incident affect Coates's sense of belonging in Baltimore? How did it affect his level of fear? Have you ever had an experience that reminded you of your own mortality? Did you have control over the situation, or were you unable to prevent it?

8. Coates writes that public schools in Baltimore were "not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance" and that education was "a means of escape from death and penal warehousing." In what ways do public schools fail the communities they are meant to serve? Why did Coates choose to focus on his education, despite not feeling engaged or supported by his school? Is this different than your own experience with education? Coates writes that 60% of all young black men who drop out of high school will eventually go to jail. Why do you think this statistic is so high?

9. Whenever Coates got into trouble at school, his grandmother made him write about the incident. He calls these moments "the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness." Recall your own early "acts of interrogation." How did you reflect on your actions and your place in the world? How and why did you choose that particular process of reflection? How can writing help you both ask and answer questions, and discover and develop your own identity? When did you first become aware of your own racial identity and how it affects your life?

10. Coates writes, "Perhaps there has been, at some point in history, some great power whose elevation was exempt from the violent exploitation of other human bodies. If there has been, I have yet to discover it." What were you taught about America's history of slavery and racism? How was it different than the American history that Coates writes about? Why are children

shielded from learning about historical racism early in their education? What prevents individuals from studying racism and histories of violent exploitation as they grow older?

11. Coates writes, “Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made.” How does Coates’s description of parental discipline within the black community compare to your own philosophy regarding behavior, discipline, and punishment? What do you think of the practice of “violence administered in fear and love”? How is this form of discipline influenced by black parents’ perceived lack of control over their children, and inability to protect them?

12. What is “The Dream” that Coates describes, and who is seeking it? Why did Coates choose to capitalize “Dream”? How is Coates’s definition similar to or different than your own perception of the American Dream? What does Coates mean when he writes, “I am convinced that the Dreamers, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than live free”? What is the relationship between “The Dream” as Coates describes it and both historical and contemporary racism? What does Coates believe needs to happen for Dreamers to “wake up,” so to speak?

13. Coates writes, “my only Mecca was, is, and shall always be Howard University.” Why does he refer to Howard as the Mecca? Coates lists dozens of authors, leaders, and intellectuals who studied at Howard. Why does he list so many names? What role do they play in his experiences as a student and as a writer? What does he learn about the diversity of black people from the students on the Howard campus?

14. Coates tells his son that he “must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you.” What are the social responsibilities assigned to young black people? Coates also tells his son “the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen, and so that America might justify itself, the story of a black body’s destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined.” How do you see error and blame represented in the narratives of black people who are killed by police? How is this similar to or different than the portrayals of police officers who are killed while on duty?

15. How does Coates react to the death of Prince Jones? How is his process of grieving different than that of his peers? What does Coates mean when he writes, “I knew that Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth”? How is Coates’s experience of learning about Prince Jones’s death similar to his son’s experience of learning about the death of Eric Garner? What does Coates learn from talking to Prince Jones’s mother?

16. What happens when Coates confronts a white woman who pushed his son in a movie theater? What is his reaction when a white man interjects into the confrontation and tells Coates, “I could have you arrested!”? What role does race play in this incident? What does it

demonstrate about the different types of safety and protection available to black people and white people?

17. Coates writes, “in America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage.” What does Coates share about the varied narratives of slavery, the Civil War, and the civil rights movement? Who shapes these narratives? In your own education, were you taught a “comfortable narrative” about race, slavery, and the historical oppression of black people? How does this oppression continue to persist as structural and institutional racism today? How can individuals and communities resist this type of racism?

18. Why does Coates initially not value travel abroad? What realizations does Coates have when his wife returns from Paris? How is he affected by his own travels in Europe? How does his experience abroad shed light on his life experiences in the US? Have you had an experience of foreign travel that made you question or reconsider your own identity?

19. How does Coates describe black religious communities? What is his relationship with Christianity and the black church? What are some ways in which religious communities can empower or hinder their members? Why does Coates challenge those religious beliefs that focus solely on hope and optimism?

20. Coates tells his son, “I am sorry that I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you. But not that sorry . . . The struggle is really all I have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control.” What is the struggle that Coates identifies? In what ways does Coates encourage his son to be vulnerable while participating in the struggle? How does Coates encourage his son to find his own answers to his questions?

### **about the guide writer**

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