

Discussion Questions

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates



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1. Why did Coates use manhood as an overlying theme? Would it have been less, equally, or more effective for him to incorporate the black female struggle as well into this text?
2. Can this book also be seen as a plea for education reform? When Coates says that “the schools were not concerned with curiosity,” but rather with “compliance,” what does that tell us about how the educational institution in America perpetuates racial injustice?
3. Rather than categorizing people as either good or bad in two distinct categories, it is clear that Coates speaks of humans as having pure and dark intentions and actions simultaneously. It is not the bad white people vs the good black people. That being said, how does Coates speak of humanity and its complexities?
4. Coates refers to the word “people” as a political term and frequently references white people as those who “believe themselves white.” What can this kind of dissociation from race do as the United States progresses? Moving forward, how can reminding people that race is purely a social construct aid in this fight?
5. Throughout the reading, there is a very clear theme of disembodiment as he discusses the “system that makes your body breakable” (pg 18). He also, however, says that “our bodies are ourselves, that (his) soul is the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves, and that (his) spirit is (his) flesh” (pg 79). What does this mean for the black community as a whole? When he references bodies being broken, is he really referencing the souls and spirits of the black community being crushed by the American social structure?
6. What are the different aspects of the American Dream, or “the Dream,” as Coates calls it, that are discussed in this literature? How are they problematic?
7. On pg. 78, Coates speaks of the recent talk about “diversity, sensitivity training, and body cameras.” He says that “these are all fine and applicable, but that (they) understate the task and allow the citizens of this country to pretend that there is real distance between their own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect them.” If speaking about diversity, sensitivity training, and body cameras allows the American people to dissociate racism from themselves, what is it that we should be discussing? How can we make the American people face the racial injustices and prejudices that still exist?

8. Coates says that he not only cannot tell his son it is going to be okay, he cannot even tell him that it might be okay. "The struggle is really all I have for you," he tells his son, "because it is the only portion of this world under your control." That being said, in general, is this text hopeful? Or is it pessimistic?
9. What does Coates want us to learn from this text? What should be our primary take-away?
10. Is it insightful/realistic that he does not offer answers to the problems discussed, or is it just bleak and unhelpful?