

Questions for Thought/Discussion of Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

1. What does Coates mean by the following:

- a. people who think they are white
- b. the Dream

According to Coates, what are the implications of these terms?

2. What's the difference between "people who think they are black" and a black person?

As long as there are people who think they are white, there will be people who think they are black. True or not true? If so, is there any way out of this?

3. Why does Coates place such a great emphasis on "the black body"?

"Disembodiment is a kind of terrorism, and the threat of it alters the orbit of all our lives, and like terrorism, this destruction is intentional." (p. 114) What is the author's meaning here? Agree or disagree.

4. There are certain foundational or pivotal moments in Coates's story. Explain the significance of the following:

- a. "the streets" (of West Baltimore, in particular)
- b. the schools (of West Baltimore, in particular)
- c. his mother
- d. his father
- e. Howard University
- f. experiences of friendship and love in "the Mecca"
- g. poetry
- h. journalism
- i. death of Prince Jones
- j. birth of his son/fatherhood
- k. New York City
- l. the act of a white woman who pushes his son as he steps of an escalator
- m. Paris
- n. meeting with Dr. Jones, the mother of Prince Jones

5. To his son: "It only take one person to make a change...This is a myth. Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen." (p. 96) Agree or disagree? Why?

6. What led the author to question the proposal of non-violence as a method of protest for blacks in America?

What approaches does he propose to his son for progress for him as a black man in the US?

What positive elements in his life and in that of his son give him some reason for hope?

7. React to the following:

- a. "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body — it is heritage." (p. 103)
- b. "The spirit and the soul are the body and the brain, and they are destructible. (p. 103)
- c. "The progress of those Americans who think they are white was built on looting and violence." (p. 6)

- d. "The police departments of your country have been endowed with authority to destroy your body." (p. 9)
 - e. "Respect every person as singular and extend that respect into the past." (p. 69)
 - f. Ghettos are the result of deliberate public policy, and to yell "black-on-black crime" is shoot a man and shame him for bleeding. (pp. 110-11)
8. Professors at Howard University taught him to beware of "weaponized history." (p. 53)
Explain and explore the relevance of this concept.
 9. "I was made for the library not the classroom." (p. 48) Why does he say this? Compare what he has to say with stance of playwright August Wilson, who drops out of high school and spends his days reading books at Carnegie Library.
 10. "You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives are not chapters in your redemptive history." (p. 70) Agree or disagree and explain your position.
 11. As he was growing up, "I had no sense that any just god was on my side." (p. 29)
Is this a failure on the part of churches? a given socio-economic system?
family culture? a trend among today's youth in general? or?
Are there echoes of Christianity in Coates's story?
 12. Coates does not believe in God. What perspective would a Christian take towards what he has to say in his book?
 13. Coates indicates that the Dream exerts a great cost on the Dreamers, on those not part of the world of the Dreamers, and on "the body of the earth itself." (p. 150) How does this compare with what Pope Francis has to say in his encyclical on the environment, Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home?
 14. Coates named his son Samori, after Samori Toure, a black African who died as he took part in the struggle against French colonialists. He recommends to his son that he struggle. What does he mean by this? (p. 151)
 15. Would or should students in high school be encouraged to read and discuss this book? Why or why not?
 16. Writing exercise:
Dialog with the author by writing a personal response to what he has to say.
 17. Food for thought:
What would a black woman write in a similar kind of letter to her daughter?