



Between the World and Me

2020-2021 SUFFIELD ACADEMY COMMUNITY TEXT STUDY GUIDE FOR SUFFIELD ACADEMY STUDENTS AND FACULTY

THE DREAM AND THE DREAMERS

1. How would Coates describe “the Dream”?
2. Who are the Dreamers?
3. What prevents Coates and Black America from realizing that same Dream?
4. How would you describe the “American Dream”?
5. Who decides who gets access to the American Dream?

RACE

Coates states, “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined indubitable feature of the natural world...But race is the child of racism, not the father” [page 7].

1. What do you think Coates means when he defines race in this way?
2. Coates writes that “racism is a visceral experience” [page 10]. What examples in the book does he provide?
3. When were you first aware of your racial identity?
4. Have you had conversations about race with your family? Your friends? Acquaintances? If so, what did those conversations look like?
5. Look at Coates’ definition of race on page 115. Do you agree? If race is not a biological reality, then what is it?

FEAR

Fear is palpably described in the book’s opening section and shapes much of Coates’s sense of himself and the world. He uses the word “fear” 68 times. “When I was your age,” Coates writes to his son, “the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid.” [page 14]

1. How did this inform and distort Coates’s life and way of looking at the world?
2. What do Black Americans have to be fearful of?
3. What historical evidence does Coates provide that supports the fear that many Black Americans have?
4. What advice does he give his son to overcome fear or is it impossible?

VIOLENCE

Violence is a huge part of Coates experience and the black experience in America. “A year after I watched the boy with the small eyes pull out a gun, my father beat me for letting another boy steal from me. Two years later, he beat me for threatening my ninth-grade teacher. Not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could cost me my body. We could not get out.” [page 28]

1. Examine the specific instances in which Coates describes his body, the violence enacted upon it, and his attempts to preserve his body and the bodies of loved ones. What explicit ideas about the perceived value of black life do these examples support?
2. Violence against the body is approached in several ways throughout the book: The violence initiated by “the streets,” parents, society, police and legal system at large. What examples does the author give of violence represented as protection? Control? Love?

THE BODY

Coates mentions the “body” 112 times in the book. On page 71, he writes, “But you are a Black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which somehow, will always be assigned to you.”

1. Why do you think he is so intentional in mentioning the word “body”?
2. How does the idea of the Black body fit into contemporary conversations about race [e.g., the Black Lives Matter Movement, George Floyd, etc.]?
3. What advice does he give to his son to keep his body safe, or is that impossible when you are Black in America?

PRINCE JONES

Fear, violence and the body culminate in the death of Coates' friend Prince Jones at the hands of a police officer. Prince Jones' death helps to shape the way Coates views systemic racism. Jones was killed by a police officer from Prince Georges County, one of the wealthiest Black counties in the United States.

1. What does Prince Jones death represent for Coates?
2. How is Jones' death 'typical' of so many murders by police officers? What is different?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What would you say about this book to someone who hasn't read it before?
2. What is one question you have after reading this book that you will seek out answers or other resources about?
3. How did this book challenge or change your perspective about race in America?
4. As you read this book, what points resonated as true and valid and what did you question? As you think about the things you question, step outside your own perspective and think about any possible bias.
5. While much of this book focuses on the pain and limits put upon Black Americans, towards the end Coates writes, "We have taken the one-drop rules of Dreamers and flipped them. They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people" [page 149]. Discuss what he means by this statement.

QUESTIONS ABOUT KEY QUOTES

1. "My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box." [page 28]
What does Coates mean by this?
2. Coates quotes Malcolm X as saying "if you're Black, you were born in jail." [page 36]
What kind of jail do Black Americans live in, according to Coates?
3. Saul Bellow is quoted as asking "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?" [page 43]
What does this imply about what is considered "the canon" and "white"?
4. Coates writes "...dimly perceiving the great barrier between the world and me." [page 65]
What does he mean? Who or what is the world he refers to?
5. Coates quotes Senator John C. Calhoun as saying in 1848, "The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and Black." [page 104] In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."
Now in the year 2020, what do you think? In what ways is race a divide in American society?
6. The mother of a recently murdered boy said to Coates' son, "You exist. You matter. You have value. You have every right to wear your hoodie, to play your music as loud as you want. You have every right to be you. And no one should deter you from being you. You have to be you. And you can never be afraid of you." [page 113]
How does this advice contradict what Coates has written to his son in most of the book?

TO ENHANCE YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE TEXT, HERE ARE SOME RESOURCES OR IDEAS TO ENGAGE WITH:

Coates: *Words Don't Belong to Everyone* [Video Clip](#)

Coates: The Case for Reparations [The Atlantic, 2014](#)

James Baldwin: [A Letter to My Nephew](#)

Coates mentions many influential Black writers, scholars, artists, activists, and more. To further your understanding of the issues raised in the book research the lives and ideas of: Robert Hayden, Sterling Brown, Carolyn Rodgers, Larry Neal, Greg Tate, Charles Drew, Thurgood Marshall, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Sonia Sanchez, Frank Gabon.

FURTHER CHALLENGE: PRODUCE YOUR OWN TEXT

Using Coates' book as a model, write a letter to a person you care deeply about and explain to them your concerns about our world and our future. Use this as an opportunity to develop your ideas and think deeply.