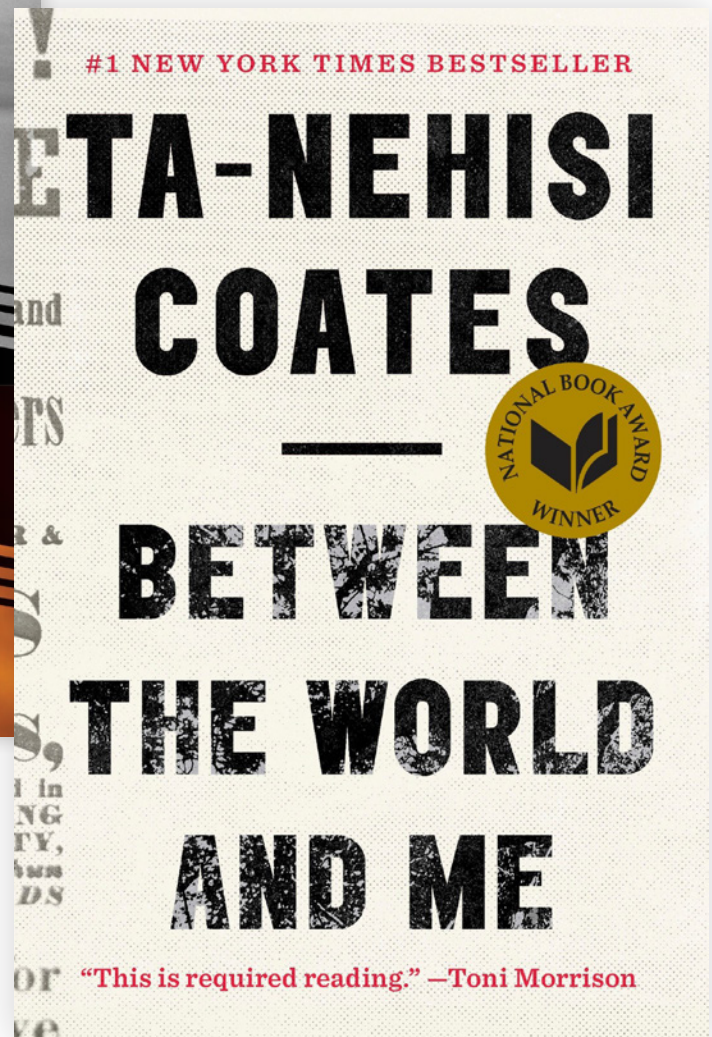
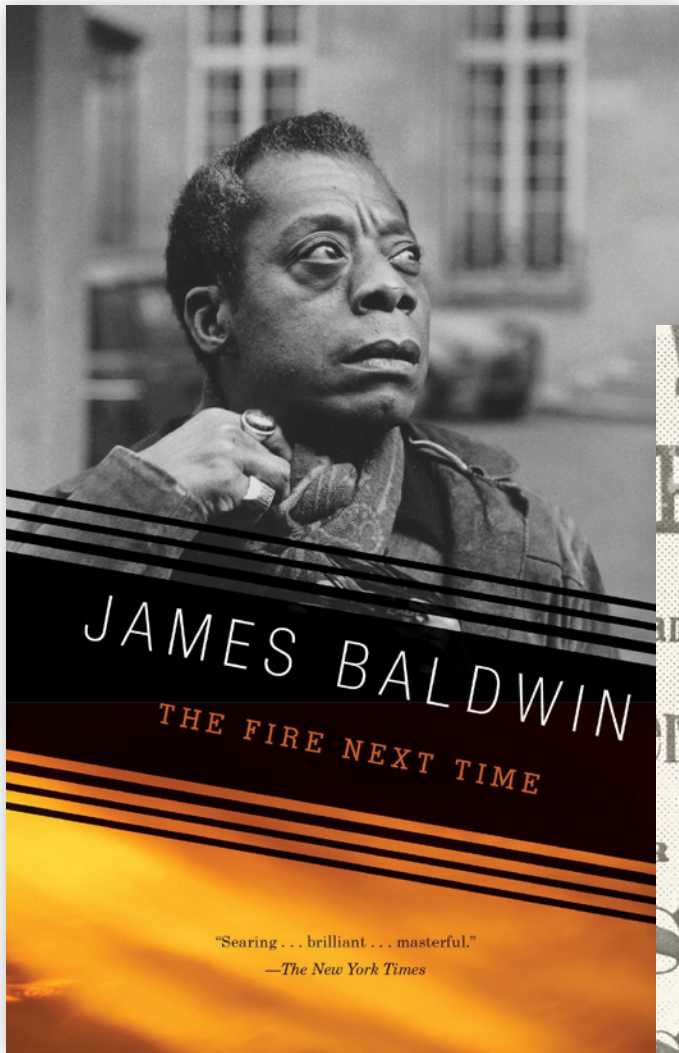
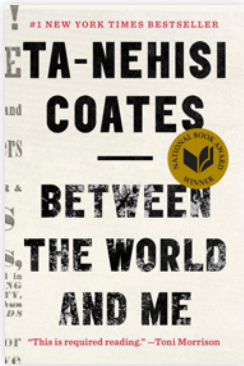
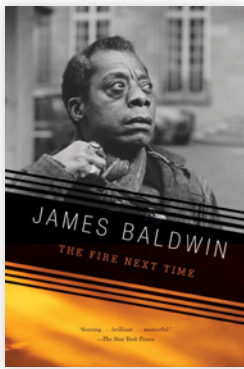


We the People Book Club

THE FIRE NEXT TIME AND BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME
Reading Guide





The We the People Book Club sets side-by-side two authors who might be considered a literary father and son: **JAMES BALDWIN** and **TA-NEHISI COATES**. The content and form of Baldwin's memoir *The Fire Next Time* provided inspiration for Coates's *Between the World and Me*: As Baldwin addresses "My Dungeon Shook" for his namesake nephew, Coates addresses *Between the World and Me* to his son, Samori; both books are concise, remarkably candid reflections on growing up black in America.

The Fire and *Between* were both published at times when a critical number of white people were ready to listen to hard truths about the dangers of being black in America; Baldwin wrote during the Civil Rights movement and Coates's book came out as media attention on (the consistent problem of) police brutality had intensified. These contexts do not explain their brilliance but rather their wide appeal, for the traction they gained in the popular imagination while offering incisive commentary on white violence and complicity.

While both books speak uncomfortable truths, they seem to do so from an *intimate* place: the conceit of private conversation with a loved one helps this sense, but so does the deep reflectiveness of both writers, their commitment to complex truth presented plainly. For both, lies and ignorance are at the heart of white supremacy, so their candor in writing is not just an act of self-expression but an act of protest.

The Fire and *Between* speak what folks on both sides of W.E.B. DuBois's "color line" need to hear: for some, they articulate clearly the otherwise vexed or silenced truths of one's lived experience, lifting somewhat the weight of oppression and invisibility; for others, they reveal a whole world of knowledge obscured by one's own ignorance and privilege, challenging whites with facts counter to the American narrative, facts that demand to be acted upon if we are all to be free.

In 1963, *The Fire Next Time* spent 41 weeks in the top 5 of *The New York Times* Bestseller List, the first "essay" book to do so. Before this literary feat, Baldwin had already been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Ford Foundation grant. Later in his career, he earned an Honorary Doctor of Letters Degree from Morehouse College as well as La Légion D'Honneur, France's highest honor.

Between the World and Me won the National Book Award in 2015, a watershed year for recognition of Coates's talent. That same year, "The Case for Reparations" won a National Magazine Award, and Coates was given a MacArthur Fellowship (also known as "the genius grant").

About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates, an overview of *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me*, and observations on the authors's literary styles. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and

(3) practices for you to try that animate the novel's democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

Background

James Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924 in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Baldwin's first novel, the largely autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, earned him critical and popular acclaim, high sales, and specific expectations. He was hailed as the next Richard Wright, the next "voice of black America." Baldwin disappointed expectations — and lost his publisher — when he decided to follow *Go Tell It on the Mountain* with *Giovanni's Room*, which explored the queer identity of its protagonist, a white expatriot named David. Rather than meet others's expectations for his career, Baldwin followed his own artistic conscience.

This conscience led him to expatriate to Paris for much of his career so that his artistic genius could gain some distance from the racism of the United States. The candid and incisive mirror he held up to white America in *Going to Meet the Man* and in *The Fire Next Time*, as well as his famous public debate with William F. Buckley, are the gifts of this distance — and are as relevant to the present day as they were to the 1960s.

Baldwin's inner voice eventually called him home to be an activist and witness in the Civil Rights movement. At his death in 1987, he left behind an unfinished manuscript, a reflection on the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X. In 2017 the manuscript became the award-winning documentary *I am Not Your Negro*.

Ta-Nehisi Coates was born on September 30, 1975 in Baltimore Maryland. He went to Howard University in 1993 but decided to pursue his writing career before finishing his degree.

Coates first gained an audience writing blogs and articles for *The Atlantic*, including the longform pieces "The Case for Reparations" and "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration." In 2008, he published his first book, *The Beautiful Struggle*, a moving memoir about coming of age in Baltimore and about his relationship with his father, a member of the Black Panthers. The stunning poetry of the memoir reads as if Shakespeare had grown up listening to hip hop.

After the fantastically well-received (and, for some, controversial) *Between the World and Me*, Coates published *We Were Eight Years in Power*, a collection of essays written during the Obama era, each introduced with a personal reflection. In 2016, Coates published the first installment of the rebooted Black Panther comic book series; he is also current author of the Captain America series.

Like Baldwin, Coates decided to spend an extended period in France once his writing career really took off. Currently, he lives in New York City with his wife and son and serves as distinguished writer in residence at the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at New York University.

Overview

The Fire Next Time is composed of two essays: “My Dungeon Shook” and “Down at the Cross”; both had been published previously in periodicals, the latter under the title “Letter from a Region in My Mind.” Baldwin wrote “My Dungeon Shook” as a letter to his nephew on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation. He implores his nephew to look behind white people’s definitions and see that all the obstacles in the way of his thriving were placed there, intentionally, to convince him of his inferiority. He impresses his nephew with the burden that freedom requires: the necessity of loving himself *and* loving white people. And finally, he encourages him with the bit of verse that gave him his title: “The very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook, and my chains fell off.”

“Down at the Cross” begins with something of a spiritual biography by means of which Baldwin explains both why he escaped into church and why he left church. He then meditates on the seductiveness of the Nation of Islam and describes an encounter with Elijah Muhammad in Chicago. His commentary on the Nation of Islam forwards two central themes: self-worth and love. While the Nation had successfully restored a sense of self-worth to the black believer, it had also sacrificed the principle of love for the creation of unity, unity based on the “delusion of race” which mirrors the “European error.” The essay concludes with a focus on this question: “How can the American Negro past be used?” Baldwin hopes for a “transcendence of the realities of race, of nations, and of altars,” a revolution of radical love and sacrifice.

Coates begins and ends *Between the World and Me* by describing his son’s response the night Michael Brown’s murderers were not indicted by the grand jury. Samori’s despair is the catalyst for Coates to, like Baldwin before him, write an account of his country, of American history, and of white people to explain as best he can the world Samori is entering.

Coates’s associative memoir centers on “the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream.” Specifically, he asks “how do I live *free* in this black body?” By way of an answer, Coates investigates American myths and lies, offering honesty beyond politeness because one way to be free is to know the truth plainly and make sure others do, too. And so he tells Samori that American history is the history of the destruction of the black body; that this destruction was not incidental and the perpetrators not innocent; that the Dream of backyard BBQs in the suburbs is a fantasy life constructed on denial. Coates explores the dynamics of police violence; the alchemy that turns a sense of bodily endangerment into a street theater of mastery and intimidation; and, finally, the addiction to plunder that threatens the body of our very earth. Crucially, Coates also initiates his son into the beauty of blackness, the vibrant Mecca of the Yard at Howard university, and the meaningfulness of a life engaged in the struggle.

Genre, Language, and Structure

Both *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me* are somewhat unique publications in that they are concise beyond what publishers typically bring out in the non-fiction genre. Each can be read in a sitting or a day. *The Fire* consists of one short letter-essay and a longer memoir-essay; *Between* consists of one longform essay —

not so different in length from some of Coates's articles for *The Atlantic* — divided into three sections.

The genre and form of these two books serve their purpose. They are pieces of communication to be digested and reformed as action. As Baldwin reminds us, it is a fact that every life ends a tragedy. But the living of it does not have to be. The travesty of democracy both books hold in the light might be changed through the right kind of pedagogy; essential to America's liberation are accessible, pocketbook guides to the facts that make up reality and the lies that hide it.

Accessibility is not about the simplification of ideas for either of these writers; rather, it involves presenting complex and challenging ideas in language that gets right to the point. To this end, both Baldwin and Coates arrive at a style that is both plain and poetic, and in this suggest that the beauty of the world is in seeing it clearly. Confronted with a reality steeped in so much pain, there is yet the opportunity for an eloquent sentence.

There are, in Coates's book, two specific language choices that deserve comment. The first is the focus on the body. W.E.B. DuBois famously wrote about *The Souls of Black Folk*; Coates writes about "the black body" to emphasize how visceral racism is and to be faithful to his atheism. He also uses the metaphor of "the Dream" to describe a socio-psychological form of black-white segregation; those who believe in the American myths (of innocence, progress, etc.) live in "the Dream," and those who do not, live in reality.

Themes

One of the effects of "the problem of the color line" is that discussions about race and racism in America are heard differently depending on where you are standing in relationship to that line. So it seems appropriate to reveal that the author of this commentary is white. I am white, and what these books reveal to me cannot be separated from that aspect of my identity. I recall recommending *Between the World and Me* to a young black friend of mine, the boyfriend of a former student. I told him he had to read it. He graciously told me that all his elders were telling him the same thing. Nonetheless, I walked away from that interaction wondering what I thought I was doing! Between him and me lay a world of unshared experiences and perspectives. I cannot know what Coates or Baldwin would mean to him, and I should not assume. I have to stick to what I know, which is that these men have changed my life by showing me what I do not know and why I do not know it.

The Condition of Whiteness

In both of these works, whiteness emerges as a debilitating condition, not so much a privilege as an obstacle to knowledge, compassion, and sanity. This use of the word "white" does not necessarily encompass all people whose skin would be called white in accordance with the fiction of race. It encompasses those who "want to be white." This distinction does not offer an "easy out" in claims of white supremacy, however. Wanting to be white and being white are the same for most people because



few people engage in the uncomfortable historical re-membering it takes to, first, own one's whiteness so that, second, one can disavow the superiority and systemic advantage it entails.

Whiteness is a kind of material privilege that masks a *spiritual* handicap, and the recognition of this is not only liberatory for blacks who have been forced by systemic racism to feel less than human but also for whites who, reconciled to reality and prepared to act, can liberate themselves.

Much as the goal for both Baldwin and Coates vis-à-vis whiteness is for white people to know the truth, to be unable to claim innocence, and finally to be accountable to history, their manner of achieving this goal sets them apart from one another. Baldwin's tone is one of love and pity, where Coates's tone is more flat and confrontational.

Writing to his nephew on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation, Baldwin attempts to help his young namesake understand why he feels destroyed even though, according to the celebrations, he is free. One imagines young James wondering, *This is freedom? Why don't I feel it? If I am free, why do I feel destroyed? What is wrong with me?*

The encouragement his uncle offers is, essentially, *It's not you. It's them*. To quell his nephew's confusion and self-doubt, Baldwin has to explain white people, and in no uncertain terms because for James — as for all American blacks throughout the centuries — understanding whiteness is a matter of life and death (something white people very often do not understand).

"This innocent country," writes Baldwin "set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish." You feel destroyed, his uncle tells him, because there is no cause for celebration, and yet celebration is all around you because those who "have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives ... do not know it and do not want to know it."

In order to support his nephew through coming-of-age, Baldwin reveals the paradox of whiteness, an identity defined simultaneously by dehumanizing cruelty and amnesiac ignorance. Galling as this is, the "really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. Because these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men." The danger in believing any different, Baldwin concludes, is nothing less than "the loss of their identity."

Overcome as his nephew feels with the weight of his own destruction, Baldwin attempts to lift him with the gift of knowledge, of seeing clearly the forces set against him. He gifts his nephew a new definition of what it means to be white, one that exists in complete tension with the register of inferior-superior. Whites are ignorant, drunk with the myth of innocence, benighted by a history so full of their own crimes that they cannot face it — and because they cannot face it, they, too, are trapped by it. Whiteness is a condition in which one has built a sense of security on the watery sand of isolation, segregation, white supremacy. The condition of whiteness is the belief in lies.

Baldwin offers these candid thoughts to liberate his nephew from feelings of inferiority. He offers them not to reify or invert the inferior-superior hierarchy that leads to hate but to replace it with a compassionate understanding that leads to love. He assures James that “these men are your brothers — your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.”

The “love offensive” and use of family metaphors run throughout *The Fire Next Time*, balancing the tough truths presented for his white and his black audience. The principle of love as a form of reconciliation is, in fact, at the heart of his critique of the Nation of Islam, which repeats what he refers to as “the European error”: to assume superiority, to hate, based on the fact that one’s ways are different from someone else’s.

The love in Baldwin’s approach does not limit honesty: “it could almost be said, in fact, that they (negroes) know about white Americans what parents — or, anyway, mothers — know about their children, and they very often regard white Americans that way. And perhaps this attitude, held despite what they know and have endured, helps to explain why Negroes, on the whole, and until lately, have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred. The tendency has really been, insofar as this was possible, to dismiss white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.” If there is a hierarchy of inferior-superior here, ironically, it is white folks’ privilege that gives blacks the upper hand: Those who choose ignorance will lose a game of wits every time against a people never given the luxury of that choice.

Baldwin insists that blacks approach the deconstruction of whiteness with love, not out of a narrow concern for white people. Quite the contrary. The depraved condition of whiteness is a warning to do unto others as you would have them do unto you: “I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom here in the United States. But I am also concerned for their dignity, for the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt the Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them. I think I know — we see it around us every day — the spiritual wasteland to which that road leads. It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *Whoever debases others is debasing himself*. That is not a mystical statement but a realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama Sheriff — and I would not like to see Negroes ever arrive at so wretched a condition.”

Before exploring what Coates adds to Baldwin’s conception of whiteness, it is worth mentioning here that, especially when the topic is race, white people tend to be quite sensitive to *tone*. Would Malcolm X’s ideas have been more acceptable if his tone towards whites had been different? Would Martin Luther King’s ideas have been less acceptable if his tone towards whites had been different? Probably, but tone does not change the message; it just makes it easier or harder to hear.

Key to the refreshing way Coates expresses the condition of whiteness is the fact that, when writing *Between the World and Me*, he did not imagine a white readership. He has said many times that the white liberal embrace of the memoir was unexpected and a puzzle to him. What this means, though, for the white reader, is a chance to eavesdrop on a candid conversation. This might be creepy, except that in this case, one is eavesdropping on a conversation in which one does not come off very well.

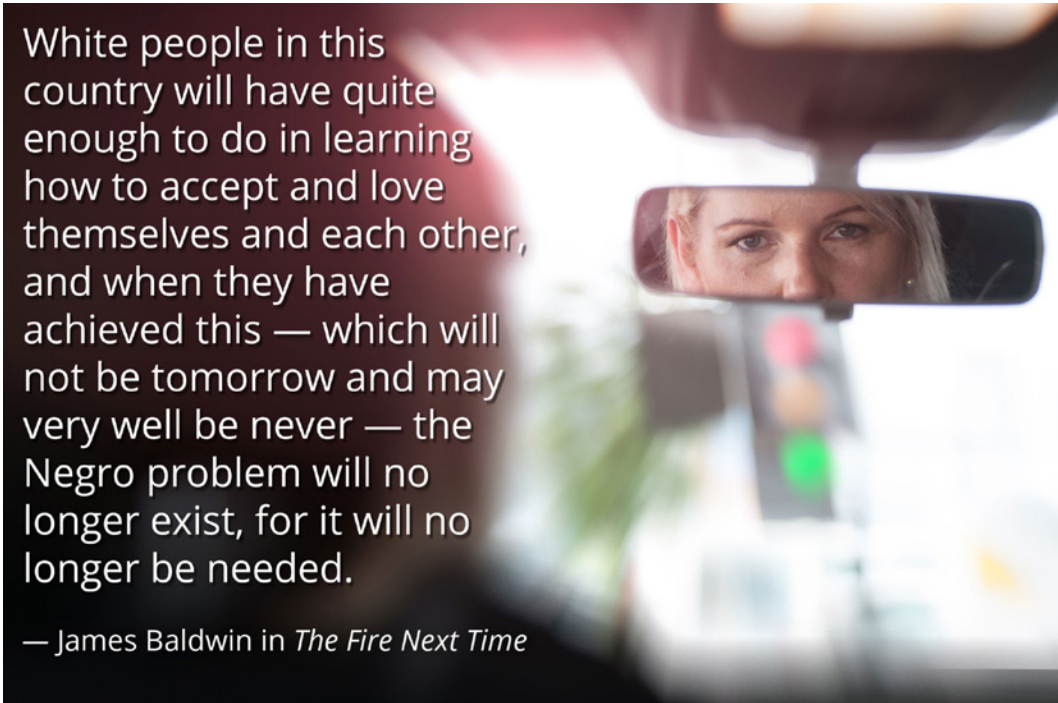
Whiteness cannot be understood apart from what Coates calls “the Dream.” The concept of a dream conjures the innocence of a sleeping child, an escape from reality, a state one would prefer to stay in if one had the luxury. And if you are white, you do. “I have seen that dream all my life,” Coates writes, reflecting on his interview with the news host and, afterwards, the white families enjoying the boulevard with their bundled infants. “It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is tree houses and the Cub Scouts. The dream smells like peppermint tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the dream persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you (Samori).”

Coates is, of course, not saying that white people do not actually live in this cul-de-sac world. He is saying that this world is unsustainable, built on false premises and dangerous, even murderous habits. One of these is the belief in one’s own innocence and the innocence (beyond interrogation) of America. During slavery, “The bodies were pulverized into stock and marked with insurance. And the bodies were an aspiration, lucrative as Indian Land, a veranda, a beautiful wife, or a summer home in the mountains. ... [T]he right to break the black body as the meaning of their sacred quality ... has always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below. ... That was true in 1776. It is true today. There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism. But because they believe themselves to be white, they would rather countenance a man choked to death on film under their laws.”

Believing oneself to be white is believing oneself incapable of doing the things that are in fact the record of American history. Far easier than claiming innocence against a claim of culpability, of course, is simply forgetting, the other fundamental ingredient in the elixir that brings on the Dream. The false belief in progress keeps the Dreamers looking forward (except on July 4th) and stigmatizes remembering. Forgetting is the thing: forgetting all the past and present crimes that had to be committed to secure this segregated world and distance the reality of those “below.” Reflecting on the aftermath of Prince Jones’s murder, Coates recalls that his mother, Mabel, “could not lean on her country for help. When it came to her son, Doctor Jones’s country did what it does best — it forgot him. The forgetting is habit, it is yet another necessary component of the dream. They have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us, down here in the world. I am convinced that the Dreamers, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than live free. ... To awaken them is to reveal that they are an empire of humans and, like all empires of humans, are built

on the destruction of the body. It is to stain their nobility, to make them vulnerable, fallible, breakable humans.”

Unlike Baldwin, Coates does not lay out a strategy for resolving white supremacy. He offers only this book so that his son will understand the forces arrayed against him. Coates has said in interviews that he is a writer, not an activist, that he writes so that people cannot say they did not know. As Baldwin notes in *The Fire Next Time*, people often do not act on what they know. The key to change comes not from the writer’s rhetoric but the reader’s heart.

A photograph of a woman's face in a car's rearview mirror. The image is slightly blurred, focusing on the woman's eyes. Overlaid on the left side of the image is white text.

White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this — which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never — the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.

— James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*

THINK

1. Consider this passage from “Down at the Cross”: “And I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy — on the contrary, indeed — and are involved only symbolically with color. These tensions are rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder. The white man’s unadmitted — and apparently, to him, unspeakable — private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro. The only way he can be released from the Negro’s tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself” What do you suppose Baldwin intends when he suggests that the white man, to be free, must take on blackness?

REFLECT

2. Inventory your reactions to Coates’s comments on whiteness. What emotions did you experience? What ideas were new to you? What descriptions did you find particularly apt, and what descriptions did you find difficult to accept? What stuck with you whether you agreed with it or not? Why did it stick?

3. In Coates's thinking, the vastness of segregation makes America not just a country but a *galaxy*; the Dreamers live on the other side of the galaxy from him. Segregation, though, is something we can all do something about. Set an intention this week to connect with someone whose life is very different from your own because of race, culture, religion, or economics. As you listen, set aside your own thoughts, experiences, and assumptions so that you can, imaginatively, enter as fully as possible this person's frame of reference.

The Condition of Blackness

The ignorance that marks people as white is no abstract concept for Baldwin and Coates; it has an object: they are ignoring the conditions of blackness, ignoring their black countrymen. *They don't know you exist*, Uncle James tells his nephew. "They don't know your grandmother exists, either, though she has been working for them all their lives." To know only the service someone provides, to alienate this labor from their person so fully that the person disappears, is an extreme form of dehumanization. It describes slavery, and when slavery according to law went underground, the habits that made it possible did not.

And so when Baldwin published *The Fire Next Time* in 1963 and Coates published *Between the World and Me* in 2015, they described, painstakingly, the same fear: fear of having your body destroyed, the fear that your body can be taken away from you at any moment because someone else, certainly not yourself, has control over it.

Racial profiling and police brutality are merely the most direct, concrete and consequential generators of this fear. Baldwin recalls: "I was 13 and was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street Library, and the cop in the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, 'Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?' When I was ten, and didn't look, certainly, any older, two policemen amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying) speculations concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots." For these policemen, Baldwin's body is worthless, a few cubic feet of flesh to project their self-hatred onto. The violation here is double: his personhood has been denied him, and this has happened at the hands of those whose job it is to protect his personhood. What could allay a fear rooted this deep?

In 2015, that fear, coming from the same double-violation, led Coates to write a long letter to his son, to speak words through the closed door of heartache and into the blank confusion of black adolescence. The terrifying reality Samori is initiated into that night is that to be black is to live on a tightrope where any move at all could lead to your fall. And just like that rope tightened across two points, there is more abyss than safety, such that it is the falling, not the survival that they are counting on. Samori's father tells him that "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 — with Eric Garner's anger, with Trayvon Martin's mythical words ("You are going to die tonight"), with Sean Bell's

mistake of running with the wrong crowd, with me standing too close to the small-eyed boy pulling out.”

While we might hope that the publication of memoirs like these can speak some measure of comfort into the fear — even if it is only the comfort of company — both writers make it clear that this fear enters the mind of the black child before language emerges. Coates wrote his book and Baldwin wrote “My Dungeon Shook” to try to come between their loved ones and the full-blown fear that will control their vision of the world. And both lay out in clear terms how that fear grows and what forms it takes.

Baldwin’s escape into the church was a response to the fear of what would otherwise happen to his body. Coming of age that summer and becoming aware of the racism that narrowed his choices, “Crime became real, for example — for the first time — not as a possibility but as the possibility. ... One needed a handle, a lever, a means of inspiring fear. It was absolutely clear that the police would whip you and take you in as long as they could get away with it, and that everyone else — housewives, taxi-drivers, elevator boys, dishwashers, bartenders, lawyers, judges, doctors, and grocers — would never, by the operation of any generous human feeling, cease to use you as an outlet for his frustrations and hostilities. Neither civilized reason nor Christian love would cause any of those people to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated; only the fear of your power to retaliate would cause them to do that, or to seem to do it, which was (and is) good enough.” The morality preached in black Harlem but clearly not practiced by the white population had no credibility, no standing. What does crime mean when the real plunderers plead innocence and get away free and clear just because they are white?

Obviously, fear that your very body is always in danger must have its response, and this response must also be an embodied one. Coates is particularly precise on this point, that what many Americans simply dismiss as “crime” is *secondary* to fear. Street intimidation, gang activity— these are results, not causes. Coates is particularly good at calling attention to the effects of fear, to what gets built up around the vulnerability to protect one’s body: “The crews, young men who transmuted their fear into rage, were the greatest danger. The crews walked the blocks of their neighborhood, loud and rude, because it was only through their loud rudeness that they might feel any sense of security and power. They would break your jaw, stomp your face, and shoot you down to feel that power, to revel in the might of their own bodies.” The superficial analysis of such behavior as *criminal* allows it to be cited as evidence of a deficient “culture,” the inability of blacks to take advantage of their freedom. The analysis of the tip and not the iceberg relieves whites of the label “racist,” all the while folding “black criminality” back into the old American racist narrative.

One of the astounding achievements of *Between the World and Me* is Coates’s nuanced description of how it feels, day by day, to live in a plunderable body. His imagery has the power to place the reader into the sensations of the black body: “When I was about your age,” he writes Samori, “each day, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, who or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not — all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body.”

The strict, fearful regulation of the body continued into Coates's adulthood: "I would come out of the house, turn onto Flatbush Avenue, and my face would tighten like a Mexican wrestler's mask, my eyes would dart from corner to corner, my arms loose, limber, and ready. This need to be always on guard was an unmeasured expenditure of energy, the slow siphoning of the essence. It contributed to the fast break down of our bodies. So I feared not just the violence of this world but the rules designed to protect you from it, the rules that would have you contort your body to address the block, and contort again to be taken seriously by colleagues, and contort again so as not to give the police a reason."

The fear that comes with the condition of blackness in America soaks into the skin. It affects the operation of every muscle, nerve, sinew, and synapse, and it works them hard. Coates uses his imagery to illuminate an economy: that one-third of his brain "should have been concerned with more beautiful things," but it wasn't. It was concerned with getting to school in one piece. The "essence" siphoned off to be spilled in drops should have been used to strengthen his body; instead it was used up in postures of self-protection.

Coates concludes, ultimately, that it is this economy of plundered time that most defines blackness: "It struck me that perhaps the defining feature of being drafted into the black race was the inescapable robbery of time, because the moments we spent readying the mask, or readying ourselves to accept half as much, could not be recovered."

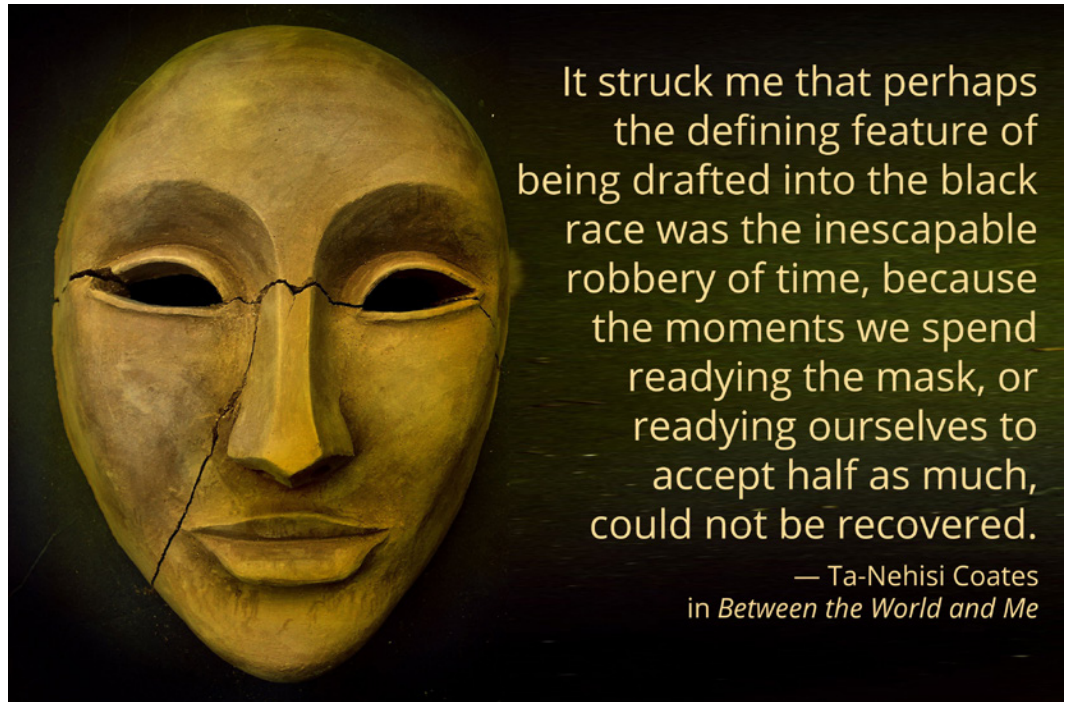
To feel tense and watched on gentrified streets where happy white folks push babies in strollers and let their toddlers ride crisscross across the sidewalk; to feel threatened, terrified even, in the presence of police as they protect and serve your white neighbors—there is a special kind of absurdity here, a rather unsupportable one at that, that marks black experience. But the absurdity must be supported, upheld as absurd, otherwise it has the potential "to make you believe what white people say about you." The absurdity of black captivity in a free country is a fact. It cannot be reduced to "black criminality" or "black inferiority" without participating in the lie.

And this absurdity that pricks the black experience is as old as America. In the nineteenth century, when white men paraded their enslaved black laborers on the auction block, the laborers, dressed up and groomed, were expected to smile, dance, and sing. There is a foundational trauma in this scene. There is the primary trauma as the enslaved person is forced to participate in the ritual of his own objectification; there is also the secondary trauma of having to deny your own discomfort, your own experience, enacting a performance that erases your pain and the white world's complicity.

Something of that slave-market experience is present, Baldwin fears, for his young, impressionable nephew on the 100th anniversary of The Emancipation. There must have been much celebrating, soaring rhetoric about freedom and progress and the American Dream. And yet young James feels destroyed and, now, confused: *This is freedom? Why don't I feel it? If I am free, why do I feel destroyed? What is wrong with me?*

Coates steps into this breach for his son as Baldwin had for his nephew. The occasions are not even that different: the celebration of American democracy, American justice, bought, once again, at the expense of the black body. Samori had not expected it,

and in that moment when the unsupportable absurdity might have crumbled into a self-hating lie, Coates writes *Between the World and Me*, assuring his son as best he can: that the absurdity is the reality, and the simplification of it a lie.



THINK

1. In what way did the church, which was supposed to be Baldwin's refuge, ultimately disappoint him?

REFLECT

2. Recall encounters you have had with police and compare them with the experiences that Baldwin and Coates describe in their books. Who initiated your encounters? What happened during and as a result of the encounters? What emotions marked them? What emotions lingered after them—comfort, fear, happiness, frustration?

PRACTICE

3. One of the ironic side-effects of the end of legal segregation was the loss of black businesses. As a small, concrete step of anti-racist action, set an intention to patronize a black-owned business in your area. You can also find black-owned businesses online, such as The Black Bea Apothecary; consulting an online source like webuyblack.com will yield other options. Post about your experience with the product or service on social media.

Creation and Destruction

Baldwin and Coates both, eventually, turn their attention towards a manifestation more dangerous than (though not unrelated to) white supremacy. The habits of mind that define a belief in racial superiority (hierarchizing difference, dehumanization, blindness to consequence) also give rise to the creation of bombs destructive enough to end human life (Baldwin's concern) and a hunger for oil destructive enough to kill the planet. It is darkly fascinating to note that, in 2019, Baldwin's reference to the atomic bomb — "we humans now have the power to exterminate ourselves" — seems almost quaint; we still have this power, and the thought of nuclear war would still be preoccupying if not for the greater threat: that the earth itself is going to collapse with or without another world war.

Coates ties this more dangerous manifestation back to his central figure, the Dream. In an operatic climax at the end of *Between the World and Me*, he concludes that the habit of plunder is truly an addiction, with all that word implies: obsessive use despite negative consequences. "Once," he writes, "the Dream's parameters were caged by technology and by the limits of horsepower and wind. But the Dreamers have improved themselves, and the damming of seas for voltage, the extraction of coal, the transmuting of oil into food, have enabled an expansion in plunder with no known precedent. And this revolution has freed the dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself. ... And its vengeance is not the fire in the cities but the fire in the sky. Something more fierce than Marcus Garvey is riding on the whirlwind. Something more awful than all our African ancestors is rising with the seas. The two phenomena are known to each other. It was the cotton that passed through our chained hands that inaugurated this age. It is the flight from us that sent them sprawling into the subdivided woods. And the methods of transport through these new subdivisions, across the sprawl, is the automobile, the noose around the neck of the earth, and ultimately, the Dreamers themselves."

Baldwin ends his book with a similarly apocalyptic tone, "If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*"

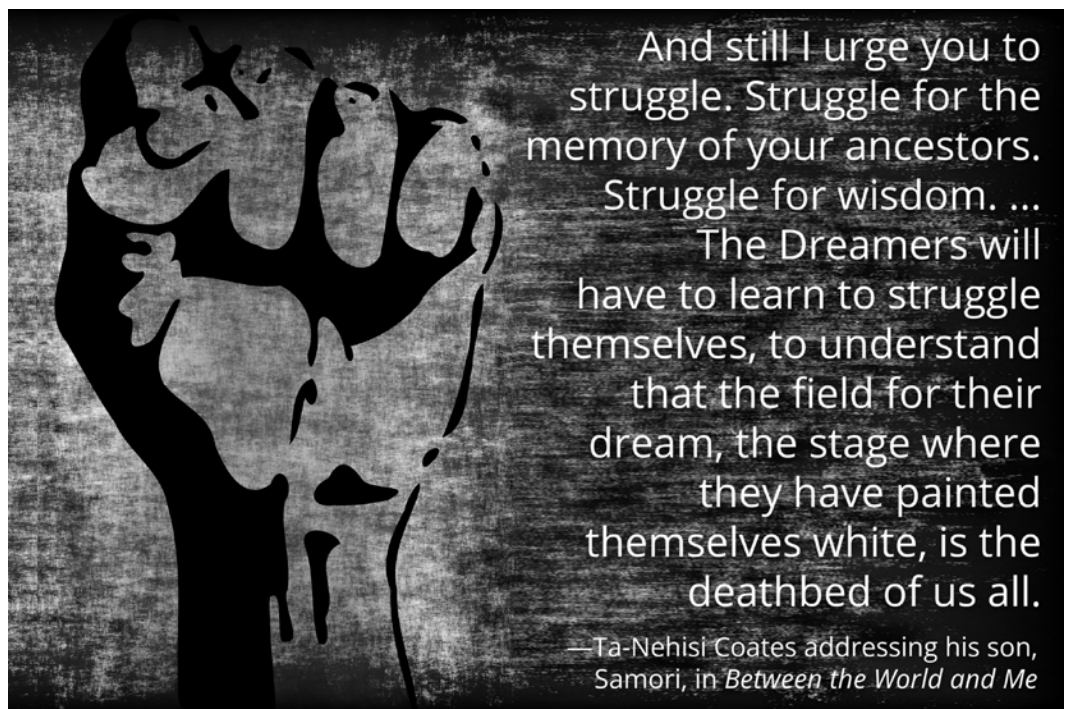
Baldwin's "if" provides some hope; it creates a conditional prophecy. Things could get better. How? Creativity and coalition, a group of conscious whites and conscious blacks working together to raise the consciousness of everyone else and "end the racial nightmare."

The energy of destruction must be turned towards creativity, and those marginalized by the destruction must be recognized as the new center. Without this repositioning, there is no hope for America. Baldwin proposes that "What it comes to is that if we, who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of ourselves as one, we condemn ourselves, with the truly white nations, to sterility and decay, whereas if we could accept ourselves *as we are*, we might bring new life to the Western achievements, and transform them. The price of this transformation is the unconditional freedom of the Negro; it is not too much to say that he, who has been so long rejected, must now be embraced, and at no matter what psychic or social risk. He is the *key* figure in his country, and the American future is precisely as bright or as dark as his."

In a way, this new life for America depends on its willingness to make the Yard at Howard University (The Mecca) a central expression of American values. Who could read Coates's encomium on the yard and not wish for an America with this kind of energy, creativity, diversity, and freedom?

The new life for America also depends on increasing the rolls of those dedicated to the struggle. The struggle is what Coates offers to his son by way of meaning in life. It is the answer to the question at the heart of *Between the World and Me*. The pursuit of the unanswerable question "[H]ow do I live free in this black body" is its own reward, is the struggle. He tells Samori, "your vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe oneself white divides them from it." "The color line" continues to define, in large part, who is living the struggle and who is not. If we take Baldwin and Coates seriously at all (and we should), this fact should outrage us and, plainly, scare us.

Putting together Coates's formulation of a meaningful life, in tandem with Baldwin's hopes for a coalition of conscious whites and blacks, the question that lingers is this: How do we turn people from destruction to creation before it is too late, before another Michael Brown or Prince Jones, before more fish dine on plastic, before New Orleans is part of the Gulf of Mexico?



THINK

1. Coates links racism and climate change because both are caused by the Dreamers' addiction to plunder. However, there is a more concrete association as well. Do some research on the term *environmental racism*, and share your findings with your book group, your church or volunteer community, or on social media.

Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

Selected Poems of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou

Tenth of December by George Saunders

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

Puddnhead Wilson by Mark Twain

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin and

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

The Partly-Cloudy Patriot by Sarah Vowell

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

Download Reading Guides at [SpiritualityandPractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub)



The **We the People Book Club** is a year-long program contemplating America's past and possibilities as presented by classic and contemporary literary voices. It is a part of The Practicing Democracy Project, a collaboration between **The Center for Spirituality & Practice** and the **Fetzer Institute**.

The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

All commentaries, reading guide questions, and practice suggestions for the We the People Book Club are copyright 2018 by Spirituality & Practice (**[SpiritualityandPractice.com](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com)**), a multifaith website presenting resources for people on spiritual journeys. Julia Davis, a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project, wrote this Book Club Reading Guide.

The Fire Next Time book cover art direction by Susan Mitchell, design by Marc J. Cohen, photography by Burt Glinn/Magnum Photos. Courtesy of Vintage International (**[PenguinRandomHouse.com/series/VIT/vintage-international](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/series/VIT/vintage-international)**).

Between the World and Me jacket design by Greg Mollica; poster background by Bridgeman Images (**[RandomHouseBooks.com](https://www.randomhousebooks.com)**).

