

Book Notes - Rabbi Steven Rubenstein

***Between The World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

Reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between The World and Me* is a humbling experience. This book-length letter from Coates to his teenage son reflects on the African American experience as Coates experienced it growing up in Baltimore. He talks about his neighborhood, his friends, school, church (in Coates' case, his alienation from the institution), and about family. He writes extensively about Howard University and the importance both the learning and the community at Howard has had on his life.

As a writer for The Atlantic, Ta-Nehisi Coates has made his mark in the world of journalism over the past few years. In particular, his articles about housing policies which discriminated against African-Americans during the mid-20th century and the impact of mass incarceration on the African-American community have helped me understand these issues in new ways.

The difference between Coates' journalistic articles and his book *Between The World and Me* is striking. While I find Coates' journalism full of colorful detail and easy to read, his book is gripping because it is so personal. The personal voice that Coates brings to this book (after all, it is framed as a letter to his son) allows the reader to feel like you are truly witnessing a person sharing his heart. That is why I use the word humbling at the outset of this article. The hope and pain and beauty within Coates' story are the kinds of things that it would be hard to share with anyone; but Coates is sharing it with me (and you.) Of course, in this case the personal is also deeply political. It isn't political in the sense that it proposes specific changes in society or in government. Coates is 'simply' telling you how he feels about his childhood, his education, and his relationships with white America. The issue of violence (both implicit and explicit) in his life is a critical one throughout the book. We see the degree to which white power exercised by government, by the police, and by random white strangers has shaped Coates. It is Coates' perspective. I suppose it is possible to extrapolate from his experience and then argue against it. But not for me. For me, I feel fortunate to have heard Coates' story, one so different from my own, but a story which might help more white Americans understand the African-American experience.