

Discussion Questions for Letter to My Son (excerpts) by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Text available on line at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

This excerpt from Coates' longer work, Between the World and Me, is written a letter to his son Samori, in which he discusses being a black man in America.

Excerpt 1 ("That was the week you learned" to "it has freed me from ghosts and myths"—3 paragraphs)

What is Coates' response to his son's disappointment over the Michael Brown verdict, and how does he explain his response as a parent?

What does Coates mean when he says police who have killed young black Americans are "merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy"? To what extent is he, or is he not, releasing them from individual responsibility?

What problem does Coates see in the language people use to describe race relations in America, and why does he see it as a problem?

What question does Coates find both "unanswerable" and "futile," and how can it be both?

Excerpt 2 ("To be black in the Baltimore of my youth" to "and achieve the velocity of escape"—3 paragraphs)

What contrast does Coates draw between the law's protections for men of color as opposed to others in America?

What understandings and attitudes does Coates reveal in his depiction of the "crew of older boys" outside the convenience store?

What does Coates learn through television, and what does he feel about that knowledge?

Excerpt 3 ("Here is what I would like for you to know" to "husk of corn"—1 paragraph)

What does Coates argue are "tradition" and "heritage" in America?

How does he develop the relationship between the body and soul in this section?

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Excerpt 4 (“But still you must struggle” to “into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold”—4 paragraphs)

What part of the struggle does Coates suggest is within his control?

What is the effect of focusing on a particular slave woman in this section?

What is the “common urge” that Coates urges his son to resist? What is his reasoning, and how does he support his position?

What responsibilities does Coates assign to his son?

Excerpt 5 (“Perhaps you remember” to “this terrible and beautiful world”—8 paragraphs)

Describe Coates’ reactions to the white woman pushing his son, and explain his interpretation of what happened as a result.

In what ways does Coates feel he both defended and endangered his son in the incident?

Why does Coates include the paragraph starting “But you are human”?

What is the “essential fact” that Coates is glad his son will not grow up “living in ignorance” of?

Overall:

Coates ends his essay with the wish for his son to be a “conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.” In what ways can *The Hate U Give* be read as the story of Starr becoming such a citizen?