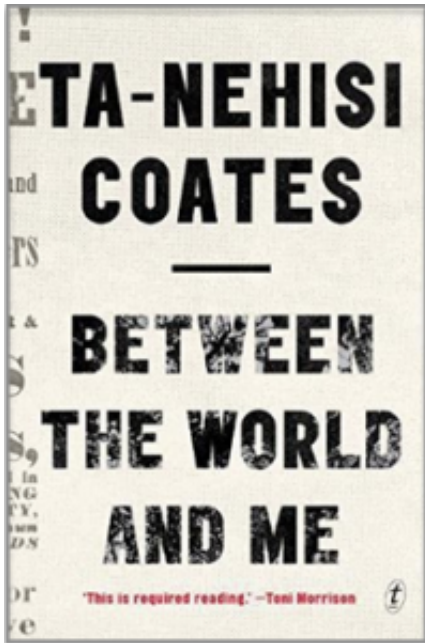


Book Review: 'Between the World and Me' by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Review of *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, (Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2015).



Ta-Nehisi Coates is a self-proclaimed atheist who rejects the Christian God, and yet his book, *Between the World and Me*, is what happens when God draws the curtains to unveil the evil of racism that prevails across the world. This book is a critical social commentary on life in the United States that should inform every conversation concerned with mission in places that live with racial and economic oppression.

The book is written in the form of a letter from Coates to his adolescent son, Samori, to help him understand the complexities of growing up *black* in the US. Within the space of one year, when Samori was fifteen, he saw the deaths of several African Americans at the hands of the police and the acquittal of another young African American's killer. As a fifteen-year old black boy in America, Samori was affected by these tragic stories, and Coates found it necessary to talk to him about the dangers of living in a black body in the US. This conversation — often referred to as 'The Talk' — has become a normal part of life in African American families when young males are told how to behave when confronted by the police and how to engage with a world that will treat them differently because of their black bodies. Coates' book is an extended talk from father to son, exploring many struggles that young black boys negotiate as they grow up in a country where, as one African American leader put it, 'it is always hunting season for black people, especially young black males.' Coates is convinced that the black body is always in danger; the police who are oath-bound to protect his son are also endowed with the authority to destroy his body — with impunity (9). He later warns, 'In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*' (103). This is the problem. For him, those Americans who *believe they are white* also believe they are superior to others — that they are the people, the owners of

the Dream, and consequently oppress those who are not white. This racism has shaped the US since its inception. There was no US before slavery. Coates returns to this issue at every possible turn in the book, exploring probable reasons behind the failure of education and justice systems and the inevitable peril of young black people in America. Being born black in the United States today, Coates adds, 'you have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels' (107).

Coates provokes many theological thoughts, questions, and conversations. For instance, his argument is entirely grounded in the value of the body — the black body, in particular — in a world where white people have built a great deal of their wealth and civilisation by destroying black bodies. Does God love all bodies alike? If God does actually love all people alike, why are some bodies prone to oppression and destruction? And, of course, how, then, does the mission of God get embodied in a context where religion fails to challenge racism? Context, when it comes to mission, is king — and this racially-charged, white-dominated world is where God has called us for now. Our participating in the mission of God must be shaped by the context in which we seek to serve God; every missional leader must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other — one ear tuned in to heaven and the other to the neighbour. Our mission field is tainted by racism. Coates has given us a profound, loud and clear, social commentary on life in the United States — a systemic oppression of black people continues four hundred years after the first enslaved Africans were brought to work on the farms, and Christians are complicit in this evil. The mission of God shows us that evangelism and racial oppression cannot happen simultaneously. We cannot talk about mission without talking about the *problem* of race. Herein lies one of the major weaknesses of many of the missional conversations — they do not seem to recognise the presence (and therefore, personhood) of non-white people in their midst. The struggles of the ethnic minorities do not register in most missional discourses.

Between the World and Me will not be found in the religion, Christianity, or mission sections of any bookshop, but Coates' voice must be heard by everyone trying to engage in God's mission in Europe, North America, or any other place where racism, tribalism, classism, and a myriad other vices like these exist. It should be required reading for all students of mission in Europe and North America.