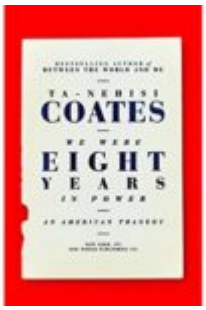
America's Virgil



At this point, just about everyone has at least heard of Ta-Nehisi Coates. His second book, *Between the World and Me,* won the 2015 National Book Award. Written as a letter to his teen-aged son, *BTWAM* has sold 1.5 million copies in 19 languages. He won a MacArthur "genius" award. His writing drew comparison to James Baldwin from no less a voice on high than Toni Morrison. He was anointed with dreadful millstone descriptions like "voice of a generation" or, even worse, "the conscience of his race".

Now comes the follow-up, and it's shaping up to be quite the media event. The reviews have been almost embrassingly laudatory and hagiographic profiles of Coates are popping up everywhere. The man himself has been making the rounds of all the high-profile venues. Just last night he sat down with Colbert.

So the burning question. Is *We Were Eight Years in Power* worthy of the fuss?

Yeah, you better believe it is.

It would have been easy to just package a bunch of his *Atlantic* essays, slap an introduction up front, and call it a day. It likely would have been every bit as commercially successful as the more considered volume that hits the store shelves today will be. *We Were Eight Years in Power* collects those essays – one from each of the past 8 years – but instead of one big retrospective introduction, Coates has written an

introduction to each essay, a sort of mini-essay on where he stood professionally and philosophically at the time. Running in parallel to the uber-phenomenon of the first black presidency is the micro-story of a college dropout from Baltimore coming to grips with his voice, his thinking, his place in the world, and eventually, his blazing rocket ascension into his role "as one of the most influential black intellectuals of his generation", as the NY Times recently put it. And then, to cap it all off, Coates offers a new meditation on the rise of the inexcusable Trump, "The First White President", that kicks the hornet's nest anew.

Here's how I'd put it: Coates is shaping up to be America's Virgil, the man of letters who will serve as our guide through the circles of hell built on the foundation of white supremacy, theft, murder, rape, and lying.

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate. So let's take a walk, shall we?

The essays alone, arranged chronologically and ranging from his look at the stern moralizing of a pre-disgrace Bill Cosby to the nightmare rise of a dim-witted game show host to the Oval Office, give the reader a tour through a young man's mind as he comes to better know himself, his craft, and the world around. But even better: the new essays give us a matured writer in conversation with his younger self, chastising the flaws and failures and giving us a glimpse of struggles that should resonate with any writer.

One of the great pleasures in this volume lies in witnessing Coates' gradual, and then sudden, development.<fn>2015 alone saw the publication of BTWAM and his Polk award winning essay "The Black Family in the Age of Incarceration", included here. Talk about mic-dropping.</fn> It's as though he gains confidence both in his voice and his thinking in tandem. I wish he had included some examples of his early-years blogging at *The Atlantic* to paint an even fuller picture of how far he

traveled in a ten year span. The blog is where I first stumbled to Coates, and I followed him regularly. He writes about that period, describing it as something of a finishing school, a place where he was able to try out ideas and voices, a place where the give and take of argumentation and citations of previously-unknown writers led him into modes of thought and investigation that were fresh and generative. It was clear that this was a guy with chops, and I remember wondering why he didn't have a two-a-week gig on the NYT op-ed. Even raw, he was that good.

Coates backs up his provocative positions with solid evidence, but nobody turns to Coates for a recitation of statistics. He is one of the finest prose stylists alive. Every page brings at least one passage – a phrase, a sentence, an entire paragraph – that demands multiple re-readings.

At one point early in his ascent, he describes attending a dinner party where someone mentioned the Continental Divide, something he had never heard of at the time.

> *I did not know what the Continental Divide was, and I did not ask. Later I felt bad about this. I knew, even then, that whenever I nodded along in ignorance, I lost an opportunity, betrayed the wonder in me by privileging the appearance of knowing over the work of finding out.*

Raise your hand if you ever pretended to know when you didn't.<fn>You there, in back, with your hand down. You're pretending. That's it. Raise that hand.</fn>

Coates writes at length about the influences that made him the writer he has become. He speaks frequently of his love of graphic novels<fn>Post-BTWAM, Coates became the writer for the Black Panther comic series, telling the NYT that it "satisfies the kid in me" and is "the place where I can go to do something that sort of feels private again."</fn> and how he spent hours playing and replaying certain hip-hop tracks so he

could decipher the lyrics, certain that there was a structure and rhythm that he might be able to unlock.

> *That was how I wanted to write — with weight and clarity, without sanctimony and homily. I could not even articulate why. I guess if forced I would have mumbled something about "truth."*

It's easy to forget that just ten years ago, Coates was struggling to get his words out, struggling (and often failing) to provide for himself and his family. Struggling to find a voice. And grappling with the question of what, exactly, he needed to be writing about, when along comes a skinny guy mixed-race guy with a beautiful family and a very black name to upend the apple cart of assumptions about race. Coates was in the right place at the right time. And he had prepared for the moment, even if it would take a few years of hindsight to realize how fortune had smiled.

It's not fair to say that Coates would not have "made it" absent the phenomenon of Obama. He is simply too talented and curious not to have arrived in some fashion. But just as the fact of Obama created the ground that enabled the ascendancy of Trump, so too did it provide a framework for Coates to both blossom and achieve success beyond his wildest imaginings. In "Notes from the Second Year", which introduces his 2009 profile of Michelle Obama, he acknowledges this turn of fate.

> *Their very existence opened a market. It is important to say this, to say it in this ugly, inelegant way. It is important to remember the inconsequence of one's talent and hard work and the incredible and unmatched sway of luck and fate.*

Revisiting Coates' work over the *Eight Years* in this volume reminds me of how much his work influences my own approach, and how surprisingly<fn>Though it shouldn't be a surprise.</fn> similar we are to one another. Bookish nerds

with a fierce love of music, backed by a certainty that these arts could change the world. Civil War geeks. Devoted family guys who, often, are tormented by a seeming inability to measure up to standards of toxic masculinity as regards our success as providers. And the tie that binds all of us who lash ourselves to pen and paper: the curiosity and fear and drive and futility of trying to transform thoughts into words that sing and dance off the page.

But even with the pleasures provided by Coates' writing, this collection is unlikely to make you feel especially chipper. Beginning with the audacious hope that the Obama era confers, the story closes with Coates pondering the specter of America's "first white president", a man who has achieved the highest office in the land based solely on his appeal to whiteness. In electing Trump, he suggests, "the white tribe united in demonstration to say, "If a black man can be president, then any white man – no matter how fallen – can be president."

> *The American tragedy now being wrought is larger than most imagine and will not end with Trump. In recent times, whiteness as an overt political tactic has been restrained by a kind of cordiality that held that its overt invocation would scare off "moderate" whites. This has proved to be only half-true at best. Trump's legacy will be exposing the patina of decency for what it is and revealing just how much a demagogue can get away with. It does not take much to imagine another politician, wise in the ways of Washington, schooled in the methodology of governance, now liberated from the pretense of anti-racist civility, doing a much more effective job than Trump.*

In recent interviews, Coates has taken something of an absolutist stance: the myth of race and the horrific reality of racism is the one key factor, "the only thing" that explains everything, as he said to Chris Hayes. I swing

between believing this to be a rhetorical gambit – a means of framing the debate on his terms, almost like a negotiating stance – and believing him to be quite sincere in this belief.

I'm not much for grand theories of everything, but he has a point. He poses compelling arguments that the United States, and everything about its financial strength and global power, is predicated on the violent appropriation of black peoples' labor, under slavery and under both the original and new Jim Crow. He is at his most forceful when he challenges America to face its original sin, to acknowledge the "bloody heirloom". And he is at his most resigned when he avers that a snowball stands a better chance in hell.

It's not that Coates does not offer or hold out hope for our future. In essence, the hope lies in his demand that we acknowledge our true history, unadorned by myths of exceptionalism and bootstrappy pluck and all the other fairy tales the nation has told itself over the years.

Like Baldwin (and so many others before and since), he despairs that he will ever see such a turn of fate. Yet he manages a quiet note of hope. He quotes Baldwin:

> *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.*

The "race problem" lies in America's enthusiastic embrace of the falsity and myths of exceptionalism and of "authentic" (read: White) American working men and women raising themselves through dint of their own merit and pluck. That this formulation rests on a false notion of Whiteness that can only exist in juxtaposition to a fabricated myth of Blackness is the unspoken dirty secret that keeps us all on blindly flailing on side-by-side treadmills, hurtling toward an

illusory destination while making scant progress and never noticing that the rats in the cage next to us are really more like us than we have been led to believe.

For Coates, white supremacy is so foundational to the entire American enterprise that he sees little chance of White America writ large rejecting the premise. It's hard to argue with him, even as it leaves one in despair. In his sit-down with Colbert, he was asked to offer hope for a better tomorrow. Coates was having none of it.

> *COLBERT: I'm not asking you to make shit up. I'm asking if you personally see any evidence for change in America.*
>
> *COATES: But I would have to make shit up to actually answer that question in a satisfying way.*

So don't look to *We Were Eight Years in Power* for a pleasing bedtime tale. Coates offers analysis, not bromides. Or as he puts it in what his perhaps the most Baldwin-esque passage in the book:

> *Art was not an after-school special. Art was not motivational speaking. Art was not sentimental. It had no responsibility to be hopeful or optimistic or make anyone feel better about the world. It must reflect the world in all it brutality and beauty, not in hopes of changing it but in the mean and selfish desire to not be enrolled in its lies, to not be coopted by the television dreams, to not ignore the great crimes all around us.*

Welcome Tallahassee Democrat Readers



Maybe you're here because you just read that fine article by Doug Blackburn in the October 18 Tallahassee Democrat. Welcome to the humble blog!

If you're here to make a donation, thank you. Please click the Donate button at the top of the right column (or down at the bottom on portable devices). The non-profit Domi Education Fund is acting as fiscal agent for this project, so your contribution will be fully tax deductible.

I have a longer post in the works looking at various issues around sub-Saharan African social issues – specifically famine and the treatment of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM). But I wanted to quickly share these photos that appear in the online version of the article and give them some added context.

This is Dominique and Clarisse with their mom in a photo taken in 2010 in Rwanda where Mana Nutrition was providing assistance.



Dominique and Clarisse – Day 1 of treatment for SAM

A few weeks later, after daily treatments with Mana, a Ready to Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF), this is how these same kids looked.



Dominique on Day 21 of treatment



Clarisse on Day 21 of treatment

Not to put too fine a point on it, but these kids would more than likely have been dead by Day 21 if they had not had the treatment. If there's such a thing as a miracle, this has to be it.

So my part in this? To get on the ground in Uganda, to meet with relief organizations and government factotums, to understand first-hand what is going on there. Is this treatment really working? What happens after treatment? What happens to the people who need this treatment, but do not get it? Why don't they get it?

How can we help?

By the way, that little girl at the very top, in the orange blanket. She was literally days from dying. Here's what happened instead.



In some ways, I wish I did not know about RUTF, and the suffering, and the ridiculously simple solution to one key aspect of the suffering. But now I do, and I cannot turn my back.

So this is a fund-raiser, an attempt to send me, Your Narrator, to a place he never dreamed of going so he can bring a story home. With any luck, one that will make a difference.

So thanks for dropping by the bloggy vineyard. Please browse around (after you donate!) and see what kind of mischief I can stir up with words.

Zero K



Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

We've been on a roll here in the vineyard. So far this year, the Writer has read 18 books<fn>Perhaps explaining the paucity of postings here!</fn>, many of them worthy of considered comment. But you're stuck with me. Alas. Here's the first of a series of chin-strokers inspired by the readings.

Let's start with the last one first. Don DeLillo's 16th novel hit the stores yesterday, but diligent groveling put a copy in my hands on Friday. This makes me almost as timely and important as Kakutani.<fn>No. But I am more trustworthy.</fn>

Opinion: This is the best DeLillo since *Underworld* in 1997. It ranks right up there with *White Noise* from 1985. At the age of 79, DeLillo continues to produce some of our most vital fiction.

He's always had a penchant for pondering mortality – and notions of immortality – and with *Zero K* he pretty much goes all in. Our hero, Jeffrey, is the semi-aimless son of a billionaire father who abandoned him at age 10 in the middle of a math homework problem. More or less reconciled as adults, Jeffrey steadfastly avoids any life choices that might fix him

as “like” his father, who he only calls by his first name, Ross. The relationship is not without a certain level of affection and admiration – and approbation.

Ross has invested billions into creating a cryogenic preservation facility in the vast wilds of the mid-Asian desert, a place where the very rich can go to suspend themselves in hopes of being revived in a world where there is a cure for their ailment, which really mostly comes down to reversing the aging process. And where a select few choose to go to suspend themselves while still perfectly healthy with the idea that they will be revived in a world that is better, more rational, more complete.

The compound is claustrophobic and hallucinatory and really smacks of certain culti-ish mind control techniques. (The Heaven’s Gate crew comes to mind.) It also doubles as an all-encompassing art installation, with every detail carefully programmed by the Stenmark twins, who I visualized as Kraftwerk-ish euro hipsters, very thin, translucent, and dressed in all-black skin tights. Even when their clothing is described otherwise, they always look like Dieter to me.



Welcome to Sprockets

There are multitudes of semi-lifelike mannequins stationed throughout. Days can pass without seeing another human. Video screens appear from nowhere with images of global devastation, poverty, war, plagues; the Earth, it seems, is no longer fit

for living; better to suspend and come back at a happier moment.

Food, a bland gruel designed, it seems, to relieve one's affection for life's simple pleasures, is generally taken in isolation, though occasionally another person appears at Jeffrey's mealtime, presumably at the behest of those running the show. Jeffrey's conversations with various residents and staff resemble the kinds of exchange you might endure with someone handing out Jack Chick cartoons or Scientology pamphlets. The lights are on, but it's unclear whether there is anybody home.

And then there are the endless hallways of doors leading – perhaps – to nowhere. Jeffrey decides to test the theory by knocking.

> *I did this six times and told myself one more door and this time the door opened and a man stood there in suit, tie and turban. I looked at him considering what I might say.*
>
> *"I must have the wrong door," I said.*
>
> *He gave me a hard look.*
>
> *"They're all the wrong door," he said.*

Much of this material reminded me of David Foster Wallace crossed with Philip K. Dick: funny, somewhat terrifying, with construction of language that somehow manages to evoke both feelings at once. Nobody builds a sentence with as much style and impact as DeLillo; in some of his books, the sheer scale of the language makes it seem as if "plot" is purely incidental. But not here.

Jeffrey is called to this secret compound to witness the suspension of his step-mother, who is dying. As the moment approaches, perfectly healthy father Ross decides he can't go on without her, declaring, "I'm going with her." What follows

is examination of conceptions of life and death, what it means to be a human being, what our responsibilities are to ourselves, our loved ones, to others. And as we wait to discover whether Ross goes gently into that dark night, Jeffrey finds ample time to examine himself, his choices and non-choices, his affable passivity, all of which adds up to "…the soporifics of normalcy, my days in middling drift."

Jeffrey suspects that his refusal to commit to, well, anything really, is his reaction against the standards of his father. He's perfectly "happy" with his drift, yet too smart to accept that contentment at face value. Maybe he should be doing something more. Maybe he is squandering…something.

> *"The long soft life is what I feel I'm settling into and the only question is how deadly it will turn out to be.*
>
> *"But do I believe this or am I searching for effect, a way to balance the ease of my everydayness?"*

And yet, he is fierce in his opposition to his healthy Father choosing to suspend himself while he still has much life to live. The idea that one could just choose to check out for a while repels him.

Jeffrey is fairly obsessed with language, with naming, with defining. "Cherish the language," he says. It is his shield:

> *This is what I do to defend myself against some spectacle of nature. Think of a word.*

The question of who, or what, will revive in the distant future is unclear. Will consciousness maintain itself? Will the suspended brain experience thought, loneliness? If there is a soul, and it ascends to heaven, what happens when the body is revived? Who are we?

> *Am I someone or is it just the words that make me think I'm*

someone?

And so: the plot has its grip on you. Will he or won't he whatever? But the heart of this is the way the two protagonists draw you into their point of view, leading the reader to wonder about his own beliefs and fears. What is this life for? Am I giving it all I can? What is success and failure? Is there an absolute standard for either, a simple test that can tell us whether we are living up to our potential, or casting it away by "suspending" ourselves or settling into the long, soft life?

We witness Jeffrey's struggle with these questions through his constant interrogation of meaning and definition. And even though he sometimes uses that way of thinking to avoid grappling with his emotions, in the end his obsessions circle back on him to force him to examine the uncomfortable.

Why was I doing this to myself?
Because the mind keeps working, uncontrollably.

The unceasing drive of mind, and what happens in the mind after going (gently or not) into the good night, creates one of the most awe-ful scenes in the book.

There's plenty here to make the reader uncomfortable, and plenty of very funny moments. The plot moves you along with more pace than most DeLillo novels.

But my favorite moment is the ending, which takes place on a crosstown bus in Manhattan. I held my breath for the last several paragraphs and sat motionless for several minutes after.<fn>Same thing happened to me at the climax of *Underworld.*</fn> There is no neatly wrapped payoff here, no tied-in-a-bow resolution. But the ending is glorious, the simplest pleasure expressed nearly incoherently, but with meaning crystal clear to anyone paying attention. Sunlight

does not shine in any underworld. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Validation is Not Just a River in Egypt



Validation. Some people crave it. Some could care less. Most of us probably fall in the muddy middle, swinging willy nilly between craving and caring less.

Sometimes, Your Narrator is reasonably content – yea, even fully satisfied – to do something well and enjoy the doing for its own sake. A well-written post. A nicely turned phrase. A lyrical, melodic line on the guitar. Mastering a new tune. That sort of thing.

Sometimes, YN is r/c – yea, even f/s – with a household chore done well. A clean toilet. A well trimmed hedge. Freshly cut grass. And so on.

Doing something well truly offers its own rewards. Really. No, really.

Usually.

Other times, invisibility seems to have taken over. The good post, the nicely turned melody, the simple chore…if a positive act falls alone in the forest, has it really happened? And even if it has….so the fuck what? Somebody pay attention!

So knowing well that the doing should be sufficient, what swings me to the opposite pole of neediness, of craving the validation? Is this a fundamental weakness? Or is a core need to be *seen* – and dog forbid, maybe even appreciated – a natural part of the human condition, something as inevitable as hunger or thirst or lust or a desire to lay on the sofa and watch old movies with bags of chips and such?

Whichever is true, the need for validation combined with an ongoing absence of validation is one of my triggers, that set of conditions that puts you off your game, in a funk, down the hole, around the bend, {your preposition here} the {wherever}. And then it gets dark.



It's been a rough year. The remnants of that damned tick have at last receded into the memory mist, but employment remains elusive. (The news stories we've heard about how tough it is for someone over 50 to get work are not fairy tales. It just plain sucks out there.) Some plans and hoped-for outcomes fell to the ground. Other plans and h/f/o hang like undropped shoes. Hope began to feel banal and futile; at best, hopelessly naive. Pessimism became its own reinforcement.

The prescribed remedy – go ahead and do the work anyway – is easier said than done. Some people always seem to be able to muster the energy to persevere. (Or perhaps it only seems that way?) I'm not one of them. Sometimes, despair wraps its bony fingers around my neck and stops me in my tracks.

But.

Things are looking up, it’s always darkest just before the dawn, I can see clearly now, &c. The feelings of dread pass, and of course they always have, so no big surprise there. It’s not as though I’ve been lying on the floor counting ceiling tiles. Life has been pretty busy. There is an article commission – a musicological exposition that has never been made in such detail or with such care – that has occupied most of my writing time. It’s going to be pretty great. I know this because I’ve had two good readers give me the reality check. Validation! I knew (or thought) it was good, but the doubt crept in. The Greek Chorus knew just which tune to call to undermine confidence.

I really sweat blood on this article. A true labor of love, very important to me in so many ways. And now that it’s turned the corner, I’ve got my belief back. I can’t wait for everybody to see it.



Along with that, a couple of other h/f/o have turned my way. And even though none of it amounts to a nickel of income – yet, anyway – there are glimmers of light down the tunnel that might not be an oncoming train. Not gonna get too far out on the optimist limb just yet, but there might be, dare we even whisper it….hope.

Maybe even for the i2b blog. Or maybe not.

My first post at this little bloggy vineyard went up around a year ago. My last post went up about two months ago. Up until that last one, Your Narrator had been doing pretty well, keeping the entertainments rolling and the rants roiling. And then….

And then, the well just seemed to run dry. The Writer could not. Or did not. It's unclear.

One of a thousand cuts: it seemed that there was no real interest in the blog. A handful of visitors here and there, the gears wouldn't catch. Attention must be paid!

Mostly, the blog has been a great experience. My writing improved week to week, and at its (my) best, the knowledge that I had to generate something more or less reasonably kind of readable and interesting triggered me to be more engaged with the world, always on the eagle-eye to spot another cool story.

But dammit, now I needs me some validation.



Who? Lil ol me?

I had to turn off the Comments function on the blog because I was getting 50-60 spam comments on every post. Actual reader comments averaged well below one per post. Not validating!

But strangely enough, the most validating of all comments ever posted here actually came from a spam bot. To wit:

> *What i don't understood is in reality how you are not actually a lot more neatly-appreciated than you may be right now. You are so intelligent. You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl*

> *gaga! Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it up!*

That was from Tanya3756dc from Uzbekistan. God, how I miss her unwavering support.

Eventually, I added a **Donate** button to allow grateful readers to show their love – measured in dollars, naturally. That generated exactly zero responses. Zee. Row. Along with the other rejections and dead ends (real and perceived), it all just felt pointless. I was a young Alvy Singer facing the inevitable outcome of an expanding universe. Homework? What's the point?

But I'm open to reasonable persuasion. This is your chance to ensure that the hard-hitting social commentary and enlightening cultural musings that you've grown accustomed to over the past year keep on coming. After all, as Tanya3756dc reminds us: "At all times care for it up!"

Do you, patient reader, love me the way my T3756dc does?

If you send me an email (rob at jakelegg dot com) – imploring me to, for god's sake, don't stop the blog, the world will be a bitter and barren place without it – I will take your plea under advisement and perhaps send you a commemorative tote bag. (No, I won't.) The more you beg, the more you fawn, the more your vote will count.

If you really want your vote to count, click on that **Donate** button at the top of the right column and drop a few shekls in the tip jar, I will come to your house and recite a blog post written specifically for you while I massage your neck and shoulders with essential oils. (Much as I'd love to, no. Not really.) Remember, the more you give, the more you truly love me.

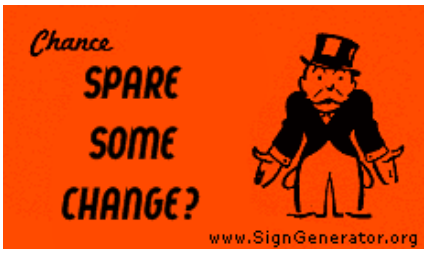
I've done some calculating, and I figure if ten of you donate

about $5000 each – or if 50 of you donate $3246 (that's less than ten dollars a day!) – everything is gonna work out fine, the blog will continue, my dog will get to eat again, and I can get a new coffee mug that does not leak.

Give, or the blog gets it.



Operators are standing by.



Actually, the jangle of coins makes me nervous. Quiet folding money only, please.