

## **Between the World and Me** **Ta-Nehisi Coates**

*Between the World and Me*, by journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates, is written to Coates's 15 year-old son as both an apology and a warning. Coates's aim— to explain the reality of life for blacks in America, and to give advice on how to survive.

The book is stirring and poetic, vacillating between rich detail of Coates's own life experiences, and profound insights into the struggle of blacks in modern America. Memories of Coates's childhood, youth, and university life are displayed in shocking contrast to what he calls "the Dream", or the identity of being white. While Dreamers live in a land of opportunity and freedom, Coates reveals a world of pain, danger, fear, and death. He asserts that the Dream, although a false sense of identity and power for white Americans, has become reality for blacks, turning their entire existence into a game of survival.

The book has been subject to mixed review, with some calling Coates's approach unhelpful and pessimistic, as black youth seek resources and hopeful examples. Others remark that Coates is not pessimistic, but conservative and realistic in his view of accepting gradual progress instead of demanding immediate change for such a deeply ingrained societal issue. Although perhaps devoid of concrete solutions, Coates's unforgiving descriptions of his reality and experience serve as a poignant demonstration of a world of struggle, one which white Americans cannot begin to understand. If only to provide exposure for those seeking to comprehend and empathize with the plight of black Americans, *Between the World and Me* is a valuable and beautifully written contribution and resource.

## **How to Be an Anti-Racist** **Ibram X. Kendi**

*How to Be an Anti-Racist*, although explicitly instructive in its title, is anything but formulaic. Ibram X. Kendi, author of *Stamped from the Beginning*, crafts a reflective memoir of his own reckoning with antiracism, infused with history, science, and policy.

Kendi is the director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, and provides a wealth of knowledge and resources on the topic, along with powerful snapshots into his own life. Racism, as defined by Kendi, is a structure that creates and reinforces false hierarchies of human value based on race, ethnicity, skin color, and culture. The premise of Kendi's work lies in the fact that there is no race-neutral behavior or idea— there is simply racist or antiracist. In his words, "One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist."

Although Kendi uses personal examples and anecdotal evidence to back up his claims, the power of his remarks lies in his emphasis on political and societal change. His invitation to the reader is to view any perceived racial issues as an effect of policy, instead of the result of

individual or inherent characteristics. This paradigm shift introduces a world of complexity and nuance that can only be navigated by understanding the roots of racism in America, coupled with rigorous self-reflection. The problem is two-fold and iterative, with racist beliefs influencing racist policies, and vice versa. Kendi's call to action is to become educated on racism in America, make personal changes accordingly, and focus our attention on recreating racially equitable policy. For anyone seeking to engage in antiracist work, *How to Be an Antiracist* provides a front row seat to individual and eventual societal change.

### **White Fragility** **Robin DiAngelo**

Through decades of professional work in diversity and cultural training, educator Robin DiAngelo has discovered patterns of assumptions and reactions that she now terms "white fragility." The idea stems from years of observing consistent discomfort, anger, guilt, and lack of engagement on the part of white people when confronted with conversations about racism. Her commentary on these defensive behaviors is directed to white people, from a position of whiteness, with the end goal of breaking down the barriers that prevent actual problem-solving.

While DiAngelo's primary objective is to create an environment where all voices can be heard, she takes care to point out that this does not mean just being nice. "Niceness", she points out, is what holds racism in place. The incapability of white people to feel uncomfortable and make change accordingly is precisely what enables and perpetuates racist behavior. To illustrate this, DiAngelo masterfully deconstructs the dark side of values such as individualism, solidarity, objectivity, and lack of bias, revealing white fragility as the obstacle to progress. In addition, she astutely acknowledges that "white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color. To the degree that white progressives think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived." This supposed enlightenment on the part of white progressives, or the idea that they "get it", distracts from real change.

Despite the insightful look into the communication patterns of whites reacting to race, many have accused DiAngelo of creating a rigid doctrine of do's and don'ts that actually infantilize black Americans instead of empowering them. The authoritative tone certainly positions readers to either join or fight against an apparently proved truth, instead of describing racism as a spectrum, process, and structure, not a dichotomy. Even so, DiAngelo's willingness to identify barriers to improving race relations make *White Fragility* a seminal resource in examining racism.

### **Call Me American** **Abdi Nor Iftin**

Abdi Nor Iftin has become a hero of sorts in the United States by virtue of his undying optimism and love of American culture. His work is both a memoir of his childhood in war-torn Somalia and a window into his journey as an African immigrant.

The majority of *Call Me American* is a shocking and compelling view of Iftin's family at the outbreak of the decade-long Somalian civil war. Graphic images of parents being torn from their families, children starving in the streets, and civilians being killed by warlords fill the early pages of his story. Throughout it all, Abdi finds solace in watching American films, learning English, and connecting with foreigners who come to support Somalia. His view of America is idealized and almost magical, as he views a world so different from his own. The political dynamics become even more insidious and intriguing as Islamic radicalists take over the country, forcing Abdi to decide between a life of religious domination, or renouncing his family and traditions for a new future. He eventually decides to take the route of living as a refugee in Kenya before applying for the U.S. green card lottery.

Today, Iftin lives in Maine as a translator, having escaped from his previous life, but now facing a new set of challenges. His generous sponsors and benefactors enabled him to leave Somalia and create a new life in America, one that was interrupted by the election of 2016. Iftin includes an epilogue to his once-optimistic and triumphant escape, adding that he now senses "the same vague fear that things beyond my control were conspiring to destroy my American dream." *Call Me American*, although focused on the struggle of one Somalian man, is an inspiring and harrowing insight into the perceptions and realities of the American dream.

### **The New Jim Crow** **Michelle Alexander**

Generations have passed since repealing Jim Crow laws, but Michelle Alexander, prominent legal scholar, tells us we are nowhere near finished. *The New Jim Crow* presents astounding research on the percentage of African American community that remains disabled by racist legal patterns. This work asks and answers the question of whether the U.S. criminal justice system is designed to subjugate or empower communities of color.

In theory, a criminal justice system would apply consistently and equally, regardless of race, rendering "colorblind" a useful term. In reality, Alexander asserts, modern mass incarceration proves otherwise. Since the 1970s, America has seen a dramatic rise in its prison population, especially and specifically among communities of color. The majority of these convictions originated in the "war on drugs" during the Reagan administration, resulting in "a stunningly comprehensive and well-designed system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow." Thus, mass incarceration perpetuates societal issues for black communities in the same way racist laws did generations ago. Alexander provides shocking statistics, and even more concerning motives, for why this is true.

One of Alexander's most salient points is that the new version of Jim Crow is perhaps more insidious than ever before given that upwardly mobile and visibly successful blacks veil the reality of the black community as a whole. Alexander argues that if we understood black exceptionalism, "the existence of black police chiefs would be no more encouraging today than the presence of black slave drivers...hundreds of years ago." Despite the disturbing reality of the situation, Alexander cites examples of how the justice system is slowly changing in small ways

to become more just. Her informed urgency incites the reader to engage in a glaring and necessary change.