



The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons and an Unlikely Road to Manhood

Ta-Nehisi Coates

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An exceptional father-son story about the reality that tests us, the myths that sustain us, and the love that saves us.

Paul Coates was an enigmatic god to his sons: a Vietnam vet who rolled with the Black Panthers, an old-school disciplinarian and new-age believer in free love, an autodidact who launched a publishing company in his basement dedicated to telling the true history of African civilization. Most of all, he was a wily tactician whose mission was to carry his sons across the shoals of inner-city adolescence and through the collapsing civilization of Baltimore in the Age of Crack, and into the safe arms of Howard University, where he worked so his children could attend for free. Among his brood of seven, his main challenges were Ta-Nehisi, spacey and sensitive and almost comically miscalibrated for his environment, and Big Bill, charismatic and all-too-ready for the challenges of the streets.

The Beautiful Struggle follows their divergent paths through this turbulent period, and their father's steadfast efforts assisted by mothers, teachers, and a body of myths, histories, and rituals conjured from the past to meet the needs of a troubled present to keep them whole in a world that seemed bent on their destruction. With a remarkable ability to reimagine both the lost world of his fathers generation and the terrors and wonders of his own youth, Coates offers readers a small and beautiful epic about boys trying to become men in black America and beyond.

The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons and an Unlikely Road to Manhood Details

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From Reader Review *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* for online ebook

Darwin8u says

"But all of us need myths. And here out West, where we all had lost religion, and had taken to barbarian law, what would deb our magic? What would be sacred words?"

— Ta-Nehisi Coates

Beautiful. Haunting. Rythmic. Pulsing with life, love, and the development of consciousness. This is a memoir of a peer. Ta-Nehisi Coates is one year younger than me. We grew up watching the same things through different lenses. Watching the same play from vastly different seats. His was a lens of black America in West Baltimore. I was born a military brat, the son of a veterinarian and officer. My father was born to parents who hadn't graduated from high school, but through grit and determination, and the help of the military, put himself through college and UC Davis veterinary school. I was born into the privilege carved out of my father's grit.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' Quotes (#1): **"I was a black boy at the height of the crack era, which meant that my instructors pitched education as the border between those who would prosper in America, and those who would be fed to the great hydra of prison, teenage pregnancy and murder."**

— "School as Wonder, or Way Out," New York Times Magazine

But even with my father's boot-strap story, it is hard to look at my life as anything other than a collection of privilege. There were times when I was teased, perhaps, because of my ears. There were parents who were wary of their kids hanging out with a Mormon. But all of those slights and scars of youth seem insignificant and trivial compared to Coates and his peers of black youth (and their nervous mothers) raised in West Baltimore in the 80s. What I took for wind, in my life, was a breeze. What I thought was a mountain, in my path, was only a hill.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' Quotes (#2): **""The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from hosts and myths."**

— "Letter To My Son," The Atlantic"

But the fantastic thing about good memoirs and Coates' memoir in particular is that you never feel outside the story. His journey -- despite the distance of space, AND because of the proximity of time, and the universality of fathers and sons -- is infinitely relatable. I understand his father, because I know my own father. I understand his insecurities, his vulnerabilities and his fears, his transformation between oblivion and consciousness, because I have walked that path. Not HIS path, but one that is etched through the same years. So, despite the severe differences between a black boy in Baltimore and a white boy in Orem, Coates is able to paint a bridge of words that gives me access. That allows me safe passage to another's core, a place to better understand him, but also better understand myself.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' Quotes (#3): **"I would always be a false move away. I would always have the dagger at my throat."**

Winter Sophia Rose says

Engaging, Deep, Soulful & Insightful! A Unique & Wonderful Read! I Loved It!

Meghan says

It's not Between the World and Me, but it's fucking gorgeous nonetheless.

I grew up a pastor's/missionaries' kid in:

- a logging town
- the former Soviet Union
- a potato and asparagus farming town

in that order. In other words, I'm white AF y'all. So I had to google a lot of Coates' references to get the full context. It was super educational. But the writing!! The writing is as usual perfect and brilliant. Coates is one of my favorite living authors.

Carol Storm says

This is the most incredible memoir I've ever read. It's as great as GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN by James Baldwin or MAKES ME WANNA HOLLER by Nate McCall!

What makes this book so compelling, and impossible to put down, is not what Coates has to say about race in the abstract. It's how honest he is about the specifics of his own life. You can't help identifying with him, no matter what color you are, because he writes about how children feel about their parents in ways that are timeless and true. He writes the best father son conflicts ever, and he makes the fear so real that when he describes parental discipline being meted out it's like a white-knuckle suspense thriller. He's absolutely honest about how much he hated and feared his father's discipline through most of his childhood, without ever losing sight of the obstacles his father had faced or the heroic effort his father was making just to raise sons who could survive in a racist society.

Given the excellence of the writing, I can't give this book any less than five stars. But there were a lot of things that really grated on my nerves. I've listened to plenty of hardcore rap, and anti-white posturing is nothing new to me. But it's irritating to have a guy insist over and over that all white Americans are racist pigs, and then have the same guy turn around and with a straight face start telling you how awesome STAR WARS is. Or LORD OF THE RINGS. There were so many inane shout outs to stuff like Orcs and Jedi light sabers and Storm Troopers. What was it supposed to prove? At times I almost got the feeling Coates was pulling my leg, pretending to only know the dumbest side of mainstream white culture. But it's not that funny after a while. Because a film maker like George Lucas is as much a symbol of racism as Ronald Reagan or McDonald's.

The same thing applies to the historical revisionism in the name of black pride. All through the book Coates

keeps referring to Howard University as "Mecca." Never once does he call it by name. He just calls it "Mecca." Is this supposed to be cute? Howard University was founded by a white Union Army General named Otis O. Howard. He lost an arm in the Civil War fighting to save the Union and free the slaves (not necessarily in that order.) After the war he joined the Freedmen's Bureau and helped found the first modern university for black Americans. Now maybe Coates thinks he's just another white devil. If so, he should make the case. But just calling Howard University "Mecca" is a cop out. It's like in World War One when the white super patriots wanted to call Dachshunds "Liberty Pups" and sauerkraut "Liberty Cabbage" because they hated Kaiser Bill so much. I get the fact that to Coates General O. O. Howard is just another Kaiser Bill. But what does that make George Lucas? Or J.R.R. Tolkien? This was a brilliant book, but in the end it left me frustrated and wanting to know more about how the author really thinks. And maybe that was the point.

Aubrey says

4.5/5

He went back to Baldwin, who posed the great paradox that would haunt him to the end: Who among us would integrate into a burning house?

Where I come from, the white public has an extraordinary penchant for stealing the movement, language, all the etc's of a people you could ever imagine, from the black public. A word will come into a circle of white friends to use and lose and abuse, a segment of communication dehumanized as "slang" that will never be whole so long as it is spoken by those who aren't black. White pop stars want the dreadlocks and the body type and the lips and voice and skin, but god forbid they risk said orange'd up skin in the ongoing political mutilation that is misogynoir. This book's going on a decade old and filled to the brim with what Buzzfeed and co. like to take and bleach and present to the majority white audience as brand spanking new, never before seen cool and hip and catchy except, of course, in the communities you're stealing it from. The communities you pressure cook just enough to hold them tight and suck up what squeezes out.

She knew that I had no idea how close I was, would always be, to the edge, how easily boys like me were erased in absurd, impractical ways."

Where I come from, it took me two decades and counting to recognize the mainstream as poison and the law as propaganda. The simple fact of the matter is, when you're not target practice from day one, it's a lot easier to devote your learning curve to the exigencies of upper middle class ideologies and render social justice a hobby. A fad. You take the deadbeat black fathers in stride without looking at the deadbeat white fathers who keep killing them. You don't contest the concept of the angry black woman or the sizeable presence of white supremacists in US first wave feminism. When you have that as a possible existence, your values will be different, your instincts will be different, hell, you'll have an easier time understanding the emotive motivations of dead people from across the ocean than those of the living right next door.

Among the Conscious, a man is only worth his latest reading. Each page pulled you farther out of slumber, and among the most enlightened it was not uncommon to hear an entire conversation composed of footnotes.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a reader. It shows as much in the books he references as the diction he spools, one word in ten of minimal familiarity yet intriguing engagement, the breed of mix usually evoked by aged literature or contemporary in translation. The Hobbit style map of Old Baltimore is a good indication of what is to come: a daydreamer fed on bloodshed both fantastical and not, where honor could very well be the talk of

Tybalt and Mercutio had both come from a background that reeks of systematic enslavement and more than a little genocide. This is not a life that takes anything for granted: not Christian morals, not familial structure, not members of a community that have survived to the age of eighteen and beyond. This is not an education that'll get you that A or that pass or that four point oh, which makes the achievement of such standardized bullshit of credentials that much more profound.

All the truly living, at least once, are born again.

I still don't feel the need to pick up *Between the World and Me* anytime soon, but that's alright. Coates is good, but I already got his less modern kind in *Native Son*, and a 21st century account of anti-blackness in the US that doesn't touch on black women issues or black LGBT issues or black mental illness issues to a serious extent can only go so far. The public's reception of him still gives me hope, though. Memoirs outside the white straight and narrow are always a gift.

Gladia says

How not to love Ta-Nehisi Coates? Of course I got to know him through his blog on The Atlantic and that's kind of hard to stop reading it after you start. Not too dissimilar from a drug. It is really no secret that Coates most attractive characteristic—at least for me—is being this soft, sweet underdog who, despite it all, made it. Take this conversation between father and son:

'I am not raising nothing niggers. Where is your head? What are you thinking, boy?

I am thinking of Sunday waffles and Morning Star. I am grieving for Lynn Min-mei, apatosaurs, Tom Landry, and Cowboy blue. I am staring three desks over and dreaming of Brenda Neil, dancing in a pink and white gown.'

Coates has a voice. That's all that matters, no need for a story. I would read him regardless of what he's talking about. I guess that took over almost too much in this case. I really should have gone around Baltimore a bit more when I had the chance. I found myself a few times lost. For someone who grew up in Europe in the late 80s, some of the things Coates talks about are just plain unknown. But that doesn't matter because someone who describes himself in the following way you can just love.

'My cheeks were fat. I talked a lot, laughed in such a way that I gave the hardest kids around me permission to laugh.'

Reading this memoir was refreshing. Coates made me feel like it's ok to be human more than most of other authors I've read so far.

'I was still a dreamer, if now repressed, was still cupcakes and comic books at the core.'

Crease says

Admittedly, I'm beginning to experience a sort of sedition of my critical faculties when I read Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Coates' writing—journalistic and literary—isn't meant to be palliative in the least. But that's exactly the effect that this slim work engendered for me.

A Bildungsroman that's not exactly lyrical but poetic, *The Beautiful Struggle* has 90's urban-America's

fingerprints all over it; it took me back to a time that was both simpler and treacherous:

"In those days Baltimore was factional, segmented into crews who took their names from their local civic associations. Walbrook Junction ran everything, until they met North and Pulaski, who, craven and honorless, would punk you right in front of your girl."

It was incredible for me to peruse just how much life in West Baltimore mirrored life on the west side of Chicago, where I grew up. The names of friends and streets change, but the desperate urgency to escape, a recurring theme of the book, was omnipresent. Some gave up...As the years have passed and I've heard, from afar for quite some time now, the exploits, often criminal, often tragic, of childhood friends...it's been a while since I'd thought about how blessed I was to have the support system I did.

While "Between the World and Me" overlaps with this work, this is much more focused on Ta-Nehisi's family, and largely on his relationship with his father. I was struck by the sort of cognitive dissonance Coates felt for his father. Though never explained in quite this way, implicitly, his father was flawed but consistent. A man pragmatic to a fault; like Malcolm, he at times he found Ghandi and non-violence absurd. Determined that his family would not live "mentally enslaved," he denied Ta-Nehisi and his clan enjoyments both mundane and congenial; they didn't eat meat, never celebrated birthdays or holidays and bathed in consciousness from a very young age. Though early on he could not understand his father's deliberateness, I laughed out loud at the ways in which Ta-Nehisi idolized him:

"When I was young, my father was heroic to me, was all I knew of religion...We'd hop out of the car, and I'd try to shut the doors in unison with him, like on detective shows when they meant business."

Taking stock of his world frustrated him greatly. "He was an intellectual, born as it was among people who could not see a college campus as an outcome." Though exasperated, Paul Coates fought tooth and nail for his children to have an education. For years, he placed his own dreams on hold and worked in the library at Howard University so that his children could attend for free.

Though the two books couldn't be more different in many ways, I believe that those who enjoyed "The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" will like this one. I loved it.

Craig Werner says

Extremely interesting material that never quite coalesces into either a clear statement or a good read. One of seven children of a black nationalist father, Coates grew up in West Baltimore where he was consistently on the verge of washing out of the educational system entirely. Although he ultimately makes it--on one level this is a variation on the "narrative of ascent" in which a black protagonist acquires "literacy" and a limited degree of freedom--Coates doesn't provide a clear picture of which parts of his story are of potential use to those seeking to address the broader problems facing "at-risk" youth. The structure of the book is episodic, jumping from moment to moment without finding a strong narrative rhythm.

Despite the problems, there's much of value here. Coates' portrayal of the emergence and evolution of hip-hop culture (and some other aspects of 80s and early 90s popular culture) sparks a lot of memories. Similarly, he provides a densely detailed, if not thoroughly processed, snapshot of the sort of black nationalist/Afrocentric thought that elevates J.A. Rogers and Marcus Garvey to heroic status.

I wasn't clear on where Coates is located today, where his journey has taken him. Quite possibly, that's a second book, but at least a bit of indication--if only on the book jacket--would have been useful.

Will says

I've been lucky enough to hear Ta-Nehisi Coates speak twice, and both times I've left the auditorium reflective and inspired. Coates often speaks and writes about structural racism, especially black criminality, where he explains that American society tends to create "boxes" of criminality around black people more readily than those of other races, and that black people are more often in violation of the law because the laws were written to specifically target them. Having lived in, covered, and experienced Baltimore over the past year and a half, I've heard a lot of talk on race relations, racism, and the black experience. But I've never had it explained so clearly and viscerally as when Coates explains it, either verbally or in writing. Reading about his youth gave me a new perspective through which to see his work.

Coates grew up in a black conscious family, where his father was dominant and where Africa and its culture were idealized. None of his friends had fathers, and that's a significant factor that Coates takes into account when analyzing his childhood. However, he was drawn to the real world around him, the street culture of the Baltimore of the late 80s and early 90s, right after the height of the crack epidemic that destroyed the city. He wanted to fit in with his neighborhood friends and rivals; he wanted to dominate, get the girls, and have a powerful reputation. Coates cites the impact that his father had on his childhood, from forcing him to read countless reams on black empowerment and unity to making sure he went in the right direction with a heavy hand, as a primary reason why he didn't succumb to the alluring violence that gripped the streets of Baltimore and which continues to dominate those same street corners. Over 300 people have been killed in a city of just over 600,000 this year.

Coates writes about how lucky he was that people gave him endless chances because, as he so candidly admits, he screwed up too many times to count. He got into Poly, a magnet school in Baltimore, and then got kicked out after outbursts in class. His father would beat him mercilessly because he did not want his son to turn out like other boys Coates' age, either in prison or too embroiled in the gang lifestyle to ever leave it. Coates writes about his experiences, his mistakes, and his opportunities: his African drum family, the network of support he had as a child, the story of his older brother, who was part of a gang from a young age. But this book has its flaws. He often passes over the role that black women play in Baltimore, as matriarchs and community leaders, but he does make it very clear that the story is about a black *boy* growing up, not a black girl. He writes repetitively much of the time, relating every time that he squandered an opportunity that was presented to him. While I'm glad he recognized the importance of these opportunities that are not afforded to every black boy in Baltimore, it was a lot of the same.

When I heard Coates speak for the second time, less than a day after winning the National Book Award for Nonfiction, I had a new perspective on how he became such a fine journalist and inspiring man. We cannot trivialize race in America, and reading Coates' memoir reinforced that fact.

Book Riot Community says

One of our foremost intellectuals takes a look back at his Baltimore childhood, his complicated relationship with his father, and his circuitous journey toward self-awareness. Coates's is a dynamic voice that I look to

for perspective and clarity on just about any issue of importance, and given recent events in Baltimore, it's fascinating to watch him trace the origins of that voice. His next book, *Between the World and Me*, doesn't come out until September, so those who can't wait should get their hands on this first-rate bildungsroman. — Minh Le

from The Best Books We Read In May: <http://bookriot.com/2015/06/02/riot-r...>

Vanessa says

Oh man, I just love him. This is totally different from his blog/twitter postings, but equally awesome along a totally different dimension. I think the writing *occasionally* goes off the rails with some of the flowery, figurative language, but he's also trying to capture the essence of something that is hard to explain. I really appreciate this as a meditation on black masculinity and the experience of trying to grow into a man in the world where Coates grew up. Loved the super complicated relationships with brothers and fathers and classmates and girls. Also found the historical stuff fascinating. This is super personal but also really thoughtful about the broader implications of his own experiences. I could use more of this kind of thing.

"Nowadays, I put on the tube and see the dumbfounded looks, when over some minor violation of name and respect, a black boy is found leaking on the street. The anchors shake their heads. The activists give their stupid speeches, praising mythical days when all disputes were handled down at Ray's Gym. Politicians step up to the mic, claim the young have gone mad, their brains infected, and turned superpredator. Fuck you all who've ever spoken so foolishly, who've opened your mouths like we don't know what this is. We have read the books you own, the scorecards you keep--done the math and emerged prophetic. We know how we will die--with cousins in double murder suicides, in wars that are mere theory to you, convalescing in hospitals, slowly choked out by angina and cholesterol. We are the walking lowest rung, and all that stands between us and beast, between us and the local zoo, is respect, the respect you take as natural as sugar and shit. We know what we are, that we walk like we are not long for this world, that this world has never longed for us."

Damn.

Really, really good. Recommend.

Scott says

I just started reading this today, but in the first chapter alone, here are a couple gems:

"About that time my Converse turned to cleats and I bolted, leaving dents and divots in the concrete. The streetlights flickered, waved as I broke ankles, blew by, and when the bandits reached to check me, **I left only imagination and air.**"

"They elevated bar fights to a martial art, would rush the ring, all juiced on jeers and applause, white music blaring, Van Halen hair waving in the wind, and **raise their chins until their egos were eye level with God.**"

I heard an interview Terry Gross did with the author on Fresh Air on NPR. This man, Ta-Nehisi Coates, is such an engaging speaker that I knew I needed to track down a copy of this book. No one in town had it in stock, which is an absolute shame because that means few will happen upon it unless they heard the interview or read one of the scarce reviews of the book that popped up in Omaha.

Elliot Ratzman says

“We are the walking lowest rung, and all that stands between us and beast,” Ta-Nehisi Coates claims, “is respect.” Respect? Silly machismo. I’m of two minds about this memoir: can’t decide if it’s poetic profundity or puerile posturing. I enjoy Coates’ insightful pieces in Time, Atlantic and New Yorker. The memoir of his pre-college (Howard) years is at turns hip-hop cartoonish, beautifully evocative and eye-rolling frustrating. A few chpts are stellar. In short, he’s raised by a sharp but bitter (and philandering) black nationalist father in Baltimore. Violence and trauma are everywhere in the 80s at-risky neighborhood from the creeping drug epidemic to street bullying to drive-by shootings. Risk averted, yet even with a librarian father, responsible mother and Black Nationalist pride culture Coates’ HS grades are terrible, barely making it to college. With his politicized and supportive family, good reading habits and desire to write, there’s no excuse for his early underachievement.

Sheila says

Ta’Nehisi Coates tells of his life in Baltimore growing up with his family in the ghetto. His father had been a member of the Black Panthers and raised his children to get knowledge by reading what most people did not know existed. I did not always understand what Ta’Nehisi was saying but I understood what his father was teaching him and his siblings. I also liked the history that we do not get in school. An interesting read.

Jamie Nesbitt says

Coates' gift for wordplay is indisputable. Moving, lyrical memoir.

Kam says

The story is especially gripping because of the tails about places and events that I grew up around. Great coming of age story for a Black Baltimore boy.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Everyone knows Ta-Nehisi Coates from his more recent *Between the World and Me*. When I knew I'd be going to Baltimore for the first time, I went looking for books that were more than just crime novels (there are a lot of them set in Baltimore, thanks, *The Wire*.) This story of growing up in West Baltimore was a great choice.

Ta-Nehisi was born in 1975 and spent his childhood in West Baltimore. His father was an integral part in his upbringing, although not always present (Ta-Nehisi has six siblings with four different mothers!.) His father was involved in the Black Panther Party, and later would become a publisher of texts supporting that party and other topics surrounding black liberation (referred to throughout this text as Knowledge with a capital K.) Coates often writes about his brother "Big Bill" as somewhat of a contrast to his own path and decisions, since Bill dipped closer into more dangerous situations.

"The greater world was obsessed over challenger... But we were another country, fraying at the seams."

Most of Coates' challenges were navigating the violence of his neighborhood while also being smarter than his schooling (he would often get bored and simply not do the work.) He is three years older than me but he describes competing in the Olympics of the Mind, so I like to think of us on opposite sides of the country, practicing for those games. *Between the World and Me* talks about his Howard University ("Mecca") years, but this book shows how amazing it is that he even got in.

The story is interesting, of course. But the thing that makes this a five-star read for me is the writing. Coates writes so that every word counts. Every shift in topic is vibrant in the language he uses to describe it, and several scenes are still clearly in my mind. He is so talented and I will probably buy this to reread.

I'll read an excerpt on an upcoming episode of Reading Envy, but in the meantime there is a decent excerpt on NPR.

Maya Smart says

I love Ta-Nehisi Coates's unflinching essays on race. They exemplify journalism's highest calling as a discipline of verification. He consistently eviscerates uniquely American delusions with deep reporting, impregnable facts and powerful prose.

Witness this brilliant story in which he lets confederates themselves declare the battle flag's meaning, quoting long passages of their defense of slavery and white supremacy. Only the willfully ignorant or comprehension impaired can read it and credibly assert that the rebel flag is not a symbol of hate. His writing wakes us from our collective slumber.

His first memoir, "The Beautiful Struggle" (published in 2008), is also about awakening, but in it Coates as well as his readers get schooled. The book introduces us to young Ta-Nehisi, the sixth of his father's seven children, as he navigates the perils of adolescence set against a backdrop of Baltimore street brawls, guns and crack. The captivating story reveals how his parents, teachers and the streets gave him an education in life or death matters of black consciousness.

In particular, I loved his depiction of his reading-fueled maturation, informed by the revolutionary (Dessalines and Toussaint) children's books his mother imparted and his father's massive collection of out-of-print texts, obscure lectures and self-published monographs of black writers. The books and the love with which they were dispensed fortified him against the hostility of the world in substantial ways.

"I plunged into my father's books of Consciousness that he'd shelved in nearly every room in the house," Coates writes. "That was how I found myself, how I learned my name."

He's speaking of the moment when he saw "Ta-Nehisi," the ancient Egyptian name for the mighty Nubian nation, in print. But also of the long journey, home training if you will, that anchored him in his blackness and his promise as he entered adulthood.

All of Coates's writing is a gift, but I especially appreciate this deeply personal survivor's tale, rendered in all its complexity and beauty. It deepened my belief that reading books of substance and conviction helps build children of substance and conviction. I look forward to the next chapter of his memoirs, "Between the World and Me," scheduled for July release.

Chris says

Along with "Dreams from my Father," I want to add this to the Coming of Age / Memoir unit I teach. Ta-Nehisi is a fantastic writing, and the book moves along with a lightness and wit (I finished the book in under 24 hours) that belies the seriousness of his subject.

Stylistically, the book feels as if it were written effortlessly, yet is filled with clever and knowing asides that don't feel forced. That Coates can retain the straight power of street slang while mixing in references to Dungeons and Dragons, then switch into academic prose, all in the same paragraph and make it all feel natural and unforced, is impressive. Yes, it reflects his life and upbringing, but not everyone could make such disparate fragments of identity cohere.

One reason I'd love to add this book into the Coming of Age cannon is that while Coates is now a very successful journalist, he was strictly average growing up. This might not seem like much of a selling point, but my problem with most memoirs is that even if they reflect the sort of world and struggles that my students are faced with, the protagonists themselves are usually extraordinary in some way (as most authors, unsurprisingly are, since writing a book isn't what your Everyman does), and thus somewhat apart from my students. "Street" memoirs tend to hit the two ends of the spectrum: a) genius and/or artist honors student type has to survive the Harsh Realities of the Street and Escape, or b) hard ghetto thug gang-banger has some Enlightening Experience and Changes His Ways. I love Malcolm X's autobiography and push it on all my students, but his is not an easy example to emulate, either in its depths (drug-dealing, gun-toting pimp) or heights (overnight conversion to Islam, national Civil Rights leader).

Coates, on the other hand, is very much an "everyman." He's naturally smart but lazy, wants to save face and look tough but not much of a fighter and essentially a wimp. He prefers comics and role-playing games over gang-banging, and really just wants to fit in. Of course, much of his story is not everyman at all -- his father is a Black Panther running a publishing house devoted to forgotten black authors out of his basement, who fathers seven children with five different women. What you get out of the story isn't a freak show of "look at my crazy life" or "pity my suffering," but just an intelligent, average young black teenager trying to make sense of himself, his family, and America in the late seventies and early eighties, and who is saved by D&D and Chuck D.

Evan Leach says

Coates' first book, written seven years before *Between the World and Me*, is a memoir of Coates' childhood growing up in inner-city Baltimore. *The Beautiful Struggle* revolves around the relationship between Coates,

his father, and his brother “Big Bill.” Coates’ father, a former Black Panther turned independent publisher, is determined to see his children escape the streets and get them into Howard University. Opposing him are the many forces plaguing the inner city and, often, his sons themselves.

Between the World and Me certainly drew heavily from Coates’ life, but it used that as a springboard to explore race relations in 21st century America on a large scale. It was this mix of macro and micro perspectives, along with Coates’ gift for illuminating old, entrenched problems in a new and unique light, that made Coates’ second book such a powerful read for me. *The Beautiful Struggle* is much more of a standard autobiography/memoir, and doesn’t have the same scope. As a result, I didn’t find this book quite as engrossing, although memoirs are far from my favorite genre, so perhaps take this with a grain of salt.

Still, as memoirs go, this is a good to very good one. Coates’ father and Big Bill are fascinating figures, flawed but still eminently likeable. Coates’ descriptions of himself felt honest and real; I especially enjoyed when his childhood interest in *Dungeons and Dragons* and comic books bled into the narrative (which reminded me at times of a nonfiction version of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*). Coates is a gifted writer, and even in his literary debut his talent is indisputable. This is a lyrical, descriptive coming-of-age story, sprinkled with nice moments of humor. **3.5 stars**, recommended.
