The Beautiful Struggle Study Guide

The Beautiful Struggle by Ta-Nehisi Coates

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

As young school boys Ta-Nehisi and his older brother Big Bill knew to adhere to the strict ways of their father, Paul Coates, and they didn't agree with his driving determination that his son would rise above the means streets of West Baltimore. Big Bill was more vulnerable than Ta-Nehisi to the lure of the dark side that awaited them beyond the threshold of the family home. Big Bill eventually dabbled in drugs, got a young girl pregnant, was a terrible student, hung with gang members and procured means of protection in the form of a firearm.

Ta-Nehisi was happy to stay away from the streets and play video games to his heart's desire. As he matured, hip-hop music was a phenomenon that was emerging across the nation and for once was a movement that originated in the streets of impoverished black neighborhoods. He began to relate to the angst that he picked up in the lyrical phrases that pointed to the struggles of the black people against racism and the challenge of living in a white world. Ta-Nehisi's mother and father recognized early on that he was a gifted child and had a great trajectory to the future if he would just take it.

Paul Coates did not have an easy life. He was beaten and mistreated by an alcoholic father and suffered from the lack of self-esteem that results from the child of a dysfunctional family. His father fathered so many children that he lost count of how many children he had. Some of his children were the result of his raping his own daughters. Paul had sisters and brothers who were also his cousins.

Paul was a Vietnam veteran and a former member of the Black Panthers, joining up in early days of the militant organization. Many years later when he had parted ways with the Panthers and was a grown made with seven children, he still held on to some of the anger and bitterness that was part of the Panther mantra. Although he dropped out of school as a youngster, he later pursued a higher education so that he could earn a decent living for his family. He pursued employment at Howard University so that his children could attend tuition-free.

Neither Ta-Nehisi nor Big Bill did well in school and both exhibited behavioral problems, but their parents stayed on them to do better and wouldn't give up on them. Even after being accepted into a gifted program at an advanced high school, Ta-Nehisi found it hard to focus on his studies. Both boys ultimately were accepted at Howard University fulfilling Paul's dream. When Ta-Nehisi started his college career, Big Bill was in his last year. It occurred to Ta-Nehisi that they had both survived West Baltimore and had emerged as young men with bright futures.

Chapter 1

Summary

Ta-Nehisi Coates begins his memoir describing his brush with a dangerous gang. Murphy Homes was the most feared and violent person in Baltimore. Ta-Nehisi and his brother Bill were confronted by gang members at a professional wrestling match. After being ambushed by the gang, the boys both ran. Ta-Nehisi called his father to pick him up.

Ta-Nehisi's favorite wrestling star was the American Dream. Coates describes how he and Bill would watch as the Dream was tied to the ropes and beaten until his blond hair was bloody red.

Coates writes that the boys wanted to see the Dream in person but Paul, Ta-Nehisi's father, would have to approve. Although Paul worked seven days a week, his presence always loomed in the form of the strict rules for behavior that he laid out along with a long list of chores. The boys were finally given two tickets to see the wrestling live. Coates recalls that they were high in the cheap seats with white people all around them. He wanted to see the Dream but when Murphy Homes attacked his brother, it was all over.

While the rest of the world was obsessed with the Challenger disaster and the S&L scandal, Ta-Nehisi's family's focus was on the dire statistics that found 1 in 21 black boys in their neighbor were killed by another 1 in 21 black boys who were in jail. Jawanza Kunjufu's book, Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black, was often referenced in the community. Black boys knew their time was short.

Coates writes that his family lived in a small row house on Tioga Parkway in West Baltimore. The house was in disrepair. Big Bill was the oldest son and was seldom ever scared. Chuckie was the neighborhood bully who eventually killed his father and was sent off to juvenile detention.

Coates describes his father, Paul, as "Conscious Man." He was tall and handsome and collected books about Egypt and Africa. His books were by black, self-published authors who had been scorned by universities. The authors sold their books at churches and on the street. Paul set up a publishing operation in the basement to publish the books in order to restore the lost geniuses to their rightful position in important literature. Many of the books advocated militant action for a return to glory. Ta-Nehisi, Bill and their mother helped with book festivals that his father held. On the block the boys would pass their summers hunting for girls. Teen pregnancy was in fashion; husbands weren't and fathers were ghosts.

Coates explains that Paul had seven kids by four women. Kelly, Kris and Bill were born during his first marriage to Linda. John's mother was Patsy and Malik was born to Sola.

T-Nehisi and Menelik had the same mother: Cheryl. It may have appeared messy to others but to Ta-Nehisi, it was family. Coates writes that Bill and John were born in the same year which was around the same time that Paul joined the Black Panthers. He had lost his job and his family was on welfare. The Panthers lived in a commune where sex was free. When he showed up at the hospital on the night of Bill's birth, he told Linda that he had another child on the way. He was soon visiting Patsy in the hospital after the birth of John.

Coates provides some background on his father. Paul hurt a lot of people in his pursuit of women. Paul's father was an alcoholic with so many children he lost count of them. He impregnated three of his daughters. He forced his children to learn Bible verses and he lectured them about current events. Coates relates that his grandfather had a hair-trigger temper and would toss his kids across the room in anger. The family lived in their truck for time while they were homeless. Paul had followed in his father's footsteps in many ways. The kids all knew their father was deeply flawed and a strict disciplinarian.

Ta-Nehisi's report cards were at best mediocre. The teachers felt he wasn't performing up to his potential.

Bill and John skipped out on their job bussing tables, choosing instead to ride around in a stolen car with their cousin Gary. Coates writes that when Paul was informed that his two sons were in custody at the Baltimore County jail, the boys got a thrashing after Paul brought them home. Conditions were even stricter at home after the incident. Cheryl, Ta-Nehisi's mother, checked their homework and Paul stressed the importance of reading. On the weekends, the boys often sat on the front porch and played their boom box.

Paul left the Panthers in '72 and was awarded the title, "Enemy of the People" around the time he met Ta-Nehisi's mother, Cheryl. He set up a table with his books at Howard University, a university that had a positive impact on the black community. Paul referred to it as the Mecca. Coates writes that the year 1986 saw the onset of the Crack Age. There were deaths in the family and a record 250 Baltimoreans were murdered including Ta-Nehisi's friend, Craig. Coates recalled that Big Bill felt under pressure; he stealthily showed Ta-Nehisi the gun he acquired.

Analysis

In this first chapters, Ta-Nehisi Coates elects to focus on being attacked by one of the most feared and violent gangs in their West Baltimore community. By confronting the reader with the perils that young black boys face outside their door, Coates brings the reader in to the world he knew as a young boy. He expresses his dismay and even bitterness that the nation is concerned with the Challenger disaster, a tragedy that was beyond hope, and the S&L scandal that existed in the white world that involved largely white men making money who weren't in physical peril. Yet the black community in which a large percentage of black boys would be either killed or incarcerated by the age of 21 needed support and helped, yet no one cared.

Paul Coates was enamored with the writings of black “geniuses” whose works “lacked credibility” in the white world. Coates sees the world through the filter of the black community, but by pointing out his father’s obsession with black writing he illustrates that white people see blacks through their own filter.

Coates came to understand his father who he admits hurt a lot of people. He tells of the dysfunctional family that he came from and parallels his father’s philandering with that of his grandfather who fathered children with his own daughters.

Ta-Nehisi Coates focuses on his father because he was such a huge influence on him. At one point he states that his father was his god and his religion. Coates saw his flaws but tried to understand his father because he loved him. He is signaling that he will be defending his father throughout.

Vocabulary

amulet, resplendent, heraldry, netherworld, brandished, sedition, arcane, autodidacts, manifesto, postpartum, ignominious, atrocities, inculcate

Chapter 2

Summary

Coates writes that civilization declined when crack hit Baltimore. In Paul's era crimes were bopping someone over the head or spitting at someone's little sister. There were gangs but they were infrequent as were murders. The world was filled with noble causes like Mandela and the battle against Reagan. Ta-Nehisi writes that he and his friends were interested in sneakers and leather jackets amid the volume of guns that flooded into the community. Paul made sure the boys had music lessons and went to science camp.

When Big Bill was in the tenth grade, the year after the incident after the wrestling match, Paul put him in Upward Bound. According to Coates, Bill saw himself as an athlete or rapper. He didn't value his intellect - but Paul did. At Upward Bound, the kids were exposed to philosophy and physics and took college courses. At the end of the summer, they were given the experience of staying on the Towson campus in dorms for a week. It was Coates' feeling that Bill began to recognize that a higher education may be within his grasp. However, Bill was still focused on sports and video games like most boys his age. He was already ready to join in a fight to help a friend even when he didn't know what the fight was about.

Bill made new friends after he returned from his college experience. The boys were like he and Bill – between the projects and the burbs with mothers who worked hard for them. They all knew to be cautious out on the street. The Knowledge was taught from their beginnings. Even a minor incident could turn bad for them. It was Coates's belief that the thought of being chased by the Murphy Homes gang still burned Bill. He vowed to never be that helpless again. They didn't stray across the train tracks to the Wabash neighborhood. There was always tension in the air – the boys were on alert but didn't know for what. One day someone hollered and rushed at Ta-Nehisi from across the railroad tracks. It was Coates's view that Bill reacted instinctively, pulled his gun and shot. The boys all ran and later whooped it up, congratulating themselves. Coates believed that the gun made Big Bill more of a man and the streets were the teachers for him, his brother, and their friends.

Coates recalls feeling that familiar tension on his first day at Lemmel. He was the epitome of 'unKnowledge'. He noticed the camaraderie of the other kids on his walk to school but didn't feel a part. As much as his mother taught him about slave ships and revolution, the concept of injustice never impacted him to a great degree. Coates explains that Lemmel was divided into three grades and four tracks from special ed to gifted. He was in one of the gifted classes. The kids were from projects, foster care homes and impoverished families that didn't even have lighting. Coates recalls that the kids often heard words like 'confidence', 'motivation' and 'self-help'. He learned later that the Knowledge was what kept one prepared to duck a punch or to start shooting.

Ms. Nichols was Ta-Nehisi's homeroom teacher. She had come from hard times and cussed like a sailor but was a true philosopher. She taught the class about apartheid, sex, Reagan and the origins of God. Coates recalls Paul's mini-lectures; on the weekends Paul would tell him about the black folks' slide to ruin. He'd assign Ta-Nehisi books from his huge collection in the basement and expected a report. Coates enjoyed his math teacher, Ms. Chance who was gentle and loved her students. Ta-Nehisi did not study much; things came easily to him. Similar to his time in the lower grades, he presented the teachers with behavior problems.

Coates recalls how one day he had become separated from the other kids while walking home from school. He was approached by a group of bullies but was saved from a beating when his friends returned to find him. There were a number of gangs at Lemmel who were grouped by neighborhoods and classes and converged on the streets everywhere. One gang was the Marshall Team made up of six gifted classes named after Thurgood Marshall. Ta-Nehisi was a member of the Marshall Team. Looking back on that era, Coates saw blacks of having been freed from slavery and Jim Crowe but not from the confines of their world; they had no concept of what was beyond. Deep down they knew they were powerless. Lots of the kids were violent, but Ta-Nehisi had remained a non-combatant. For others, they believed they had no talent and were nothing; their fists were the great equalizers. Coates described how kids formed gangs and isolated themselves from others. Coates describes himself as a natural peacemaker who was able to stay above the fray. He wound up becoming friends with Kwesi Smith who slapped Ta-Nehisi the first time he met him. Ta-Nehisi got the reputation of being a weakling afterwards.

Coates describes his old neighborhood, Mondawmin, as better than the projects. It was located near Druid Hill Park and comprised of small brick homes. There were no recreation centers or basketball courts for the kids. Athletes like Jordan, Tyson and LT were the boys' heroes. Ta-Nehisi and Bill and their friends fashioned their own basketball court in the alley. When not playing round ball, Coates writes that he would lose himself in Marvel comic books. Bill wanted Ta-Nehisi to prove his manhood with the young girls around the neighborhood. He found the girls attractive but he was too shy to pursue them. Bill had a parental attitude toward Ta-Nehisi and took on the responsibility of looking out for him.

Coates writes that Paul did not follow in the path of many other fathers in the family who squandered the family's money on vices. He was haunted by his books and the history they told him. When Paul was 30, he and his wife bought a house. He went away to Atlanta University for grad school in library science. He was hired by Howard University to sort histories for the library. Coates explains that Howard University was also commonly referred to as Mecca by his family. The children of Howard employees could attend the university tuition-free. Ta-Nehisi's mother always told him to be gentle with girls. Ironically, Coates adds, she was also known to beat him and his siblings. He missed more than one of her flying shoes. Bill didn't get along with Cheryl who was his stepmother. Ta-Nehisi didn't get upset when Bill would rage about Cheryl and call her names; he understood -- she wasn't his real mother. Coates emphasized that Big Bill had been his idol and could do no wrong.

Coates recalls how his friend Fruitie was the frequent target of other boys and the gangs but he always fought back. Even though he rarely prevailed, he won the respect of the Marshall Team. The boys of Mondawmin were just like boys everywhere – they dreamed of model trains, superheroes and chemistry kits. But, Coates points out, what was different for them were the dangers that lurked outside their doors. They were attacked by other boys when they were together one day. Ta-Nehisi got away; Fruitie had to fight by himself. Ta-Nehisi felt shame for abandoning him but Fruitie didn't hold it against him.

Analysis

The trajectory of the story goes from bad to worse, from violence to the emergence of a crack epidemic that took over the heavily black-populated West Baltimore. Ta-Nehisi creates an image of he and his buddies focused on sneakers and leather jackets while outside the door crack was looming. The black community had been punched in the stomach. It had been making progress by getting outside of itself and becoming concerned with issues bigger than itself – like the noble causes of Mandela and waging a successful campaign against Reaganomics. Then, crack entered the picture.

Big Bill was buying into the unKnowledge. He was obsessed with being an athlete or a rapper because the white world told him that was all he could do. Ta-Nehisi was younger and his obsession with shoes was more innocent than Big Bill's conviction that if he didn't measure up as an athlete or rapper then he was nothing. He would be fodder for murder or incarceration and ultimately would be living the black cliché.

The stark differences between the brothers are exemplified in their reaction to being chased by the Murphy Homes gang. Ta-Nehisi was just glad to get away; Big Bill's ego had been burned. He ran from them and his manhood had been challenged. There was revenge in his heart. It led him to procuring a gun from one of his friends. Ta-Nehisi knew he had the gun and it scared him. He was smart enough to know that his brother was heading down a dark path.

Ta-Nehisi had anger within him but the mood swings of his domineering father had taught him to repress his emotions. He was the leader of the Marshall Team at school. It was an innocent grouping that was nothing like a gang. Even though some of the kids on his team had violent tendencies, Ta-Nehisi was a non-combatant and a peacemaker… for then. But he saw how his brother had changed and other boys in the neighborhood. The stress of living in perils and facing an unknown future was a part of his every waking hour.

Vocabulary

bevy, onslaught, certitude, engendered, squalor, omnipresent, neurology, compendium, treatises, debilitated

Chapter 3

Summary

Coates stresses that Paul wasn't a violent man. He had an old relic of a gun from his Panther days. He grew a small vegetable garden in the backyard. He had elitist ways, such as his love of foreign films. Coates recalls that Paul wanted him to get the higher grades so he could realize his potential. He also wanted Ta-Nehisi to leave school with Knowledge and Consciousness and the sense to use both appropriately. Coates recalls how he was the kind of kid who sleepwalked through childhood – losing everything and paying attention to little. Coates writes that when a kid threw his house keys in the trash, Paul lost it. He tried to impress upon his son, with a beating, that his careless behavior could cost him his life one day.

Coates writes that Paul had a tough childhood, too. He had a paradoxical quality: he wasn't a tough kid but had a violent streak. He knew how to stay cool but knew how to bring on the heat – he'd been caught stealing and throwing bottles at white boys. He dropped out of school but haunted libraries. He'd run his hand across tall buildings that he was sure he would one day own. He admired JFK and fantasized about being a soldier. There were no college grads among the boys in the neighborhood from which he rarely strayed. Coates writes that Paul joined the Army and was shipped off to Vietnam and was the only black man in his unit. He at first detested the Bob Dylan songs that the white boys played, but he eventually grew obsessed with deciphering Dylan's poetry. His favorite books were Manchild in the Promised Land and Another Country by Richard Wright.

Malcolm X was assassinated when Paul was in Vietnam. Coates describes how his father and a few other black soldiers were on R&R when he heard the news. They barely paused before going on with their plans. Later, Paul couldn't read enough about Malcolm X to whom he related. He emerged from his reading, which he gave deep thought to, feeling that the black people bore the invisible yoke of slavery. Coates writes that Paul became attracted to the brothers and sisters in faraway places like Oakland who advocated self-defense.

After being discharged in 1967, Paul married Linda. Their relationship was rocky and marked with frequent arguments. By the time their second child was born, Paul was a red cap at the airport. When clearing out planes, Paul would gather newspapers from around the world and devour their stories. He learned about the Black Panthers from West Coast newspapers. Coates writes that when he joined the Panthers, he was instructed to attend a weekly political class and was designated as a community worker. He devoted his days to the Panthers and his nights to his airport job.

Coates writes that Paul lost his job at the airport when he was accused of using his jobs to smuggle guns. Linda was very upset with the loss of income. Paul began working for the Panthers full time. He rose in the ranks and became the head of the Baltimore

branch. His focus was to help the poor blacks in Baltimore with groceries, rent and electricity. Coates writes that Paul gathered the soldiers who came from all walks of life for guerilla war. He had to contend with the increased focus by police and the FBI on the Panthers. Eddie Conway had been indicted for the murder of a policeman. Panther leaders on the West Coast sent word that Conway was to boycott his trial to expose the flaws of the judicial system. Coates writes that the leaders had promised big time defense lawyers for Conway but they failed to do so. Conway was convicted to a life sentence which haunted Paul forever.

Coates explains that there were internal conflicts and power plays that split the Panthers apart. By 1972, the only guerilla wars that were going on were those in which Panthers were killing Panthers. The regional Panther organizations like Baltimore were basically abandoned by leadership. Paul was left with other “Conways” – men abandoned in jail for crimes committed for the cause. Coates writes that Paul was ultimately considered a noncompliant by the Panthers and split with them. He stil believed in revolution but was now also an intellectual man who could make do with the world the way it was. He believed in the old adage that the pen was mightier than the sword and the parable of Kim II Sung’s One Hero. It was around this time, that Paul decided to publish the writing he loved and organized a propaganda machine with some of his former Panther brothers calling it the George Jackson Movement. They acquired a storefront and held festivals to further their message.

Coates writes that his mother, Cheryl, had graduated from college and become a teacher. She was on her way to a middle-class life. She had a typical childhood in a poor black neighborhood in Baltimore. She didn’t do well in elementary school but later blossomed. White people were completely absent in her world. In college she began protesting and had a Panthers poster in her dorm room. Coates describes that she met her future husband – Paul – when she donated clothing to the Panthers. She ran into him the second time at the Panther’s bookstore where his five little kids roamed the aisles. By then Linda had thrown him out. He was a high school dropout but later helped Cheryl earn an A on her senior thesis. She had been involved with an ex-con and was pregnant with his baby. Paul gave her money for an abortion.

Coates describes his parents’ somewhat rocky beginning. Cheryl insisted on having children but Paul pointed out that he had five he could barely take care of. He relented, of course, and Ta-Nehisi was born in the winter of ’74. Paul enrolled in Antioch College on the GI bill. By the time Ta-Nehisi was three, his father had earned his undergraduate degree and it was then that he become engrossed in the works of little known black writers and set up his publishing system in the basement of their row house. Coates describes the family’s move to a nice, large house when Ta-Nehisi was six. He and his three-year-old brother, Malik, were close and very much alike in disposition. Paul tried innovative ways to make enough money for his family – jewelry making and beekeeping among them. Coates recalls how he loved the weekends when his older siblings would visit.

All of Ta-Nehisi’s classmates were gifted and talented. Coates describes how his teacher challenged them to think and imagine beyond the ordinary. They formed a team

for the Olympics of the Mind. He was removed from the gifted program at the request of his parents because he wasn't keeping his grades up. The family moved to Tioga in 1984 where Ta-Nehisi played Little League football and taught himself BASIC programming. Coates explains that there was a feeling that loomed in the neighborhood that their world was on the verge of big change. Ta-Nehisi read everything he could get his hands on. He was paid for helping his father in his publishing venture which Paul had dubbed the Black Classic Press. The publishing business ran at a loss. Coates recalls how he tried to think of ways to escape having to read all the books that Paul was so aggressive about him reading. He thought of everything from book burning to running away.

Coates describes how Big Bill and his friends forced Ta-Nehisi to have his first drink. There was a cultish feeling in Baltimore and its music throbbed on the street and in the house. The lyrics often focused on the struggle for civil rights. Coates recalls how he sensed fear in the music and lyrics - something that he related to.

Analysis

Coats makes the declarative statement that Paul wasn't a violent man, yet Coats also wrote that Paul beat his kids with his big black belt. Coats ultimately presents Paul's demeanor as an unnerving presence in his (Ta-Nehisi's) childhood. Ta-Nehisi repressed his opinions and emotions because he was unsure whether they would be met with a beating or a meeting because sometimes Paul would just sit down and talk with his son. His father's duality was confusing for Ta-Nehisi. Coats characterizes himself as a kind of bumbling, awkward kid who "sleepwalked" through childhood. Perhaps it was a self-induced sleepwalk so he could put distance between himself and reality.

As Coats did in the first chapter, he defends his father and provides another description of his father's tough childhood. To Coats, his father was a paradox – Paul was loving yet violent; he was cool but had a hot temper; he was a drop-out who lived at the library. Undoubtedly, Paul had an awful childhood and it is more common than not that the abuse a child experiences comes out in more violence when the child becomes an adult and particularly a parent.

Coats describes Paul losing his job because of his association with the Panthers, but further details shared reveal that it wasn't Paul's membership in the Panthers that caused him to lose his job - it was his gun smuggling for the Panthers. It was a poor choice which he became bitter over and subsequently amped up his association with the Panthers. Life is a series of choices; in Paul's case up to that point, it was a series of bad choices.

It is becoming obvious that Ta-Nehisi is defending his father so that the reader understands and forgives him – but the real goal may be for Ta-Nehisi to find that understanding so that he will be able to forgive his father.

Vocabulary

acolyte, penchant, bourgeois, rhetorical, dichotomies, doctrinaire, mundane, manifestations

Chapter 4

Summary

Coates narrates that Big Bill joined a rap group with Bill as the rapper. They made demo albums which Bill would listen to over and over and rap along with himself. Ta-Nehisi and his brothers and friends would play grating music with drums and whistles. They became accustomed to the sound, even addicted to it. Coates described that Rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy had emerged as a favorite among his set. Ta-Nehisi and his friends caught phrases like “government of suckers” and “they see me, fear me.” From the banishing of Bull Conner, the music took them closer to the mountaintop than they’d ever been.

They also hit a void of anger and confusion, however. Ta-Nehisi and the others became aware of Reaganomics and its impact on the black community. Coates writes how he met who was known as the “great lion” of the Panthers, Afeni Shakur. She was an old comrade of Paul’s in the early days. Ta-Nehisi and Big Bill spent time with her and her family. Coates recalls how he and his brother noticed Chuck D mention “Chesimard” in one of his raps. It was the slave name of Afeni’s sister. Paul had a book about her which explained that she had assumed the name Assata Shakur. Ta-Nehisi felt a pride reading about the early Panthers. He wondered how he could measure up to these idols of the past.

Coates explains how the black community felt about some of the biggest black stars. So many entertainers, like Whitney and Richard Pryor, were corporate creations. They didn’t know that the rest of the black people existed. Ta-Nehisi tried his hand at writing lyrics but felt he fell short. Nonetheless, he persevered and felt bigger for the effort. He understood why so many brothers wrote and talked big. Coates writes that hip-hop and rap made the brothers feel they weren’t alone. Ta-Nehisi got ideas from old Black Panther newspapers that his father had and from his father’s books which had become more important to him as he matured. He finally understood his name. His father had told him his name was a nation, Ta-Nehisi, was the ancient Egyptian name for the Nubians. His name wasn’t ordinary; it was important. Coates remembered feeling that the music of the day transformed him from boy to man.

Coates recalls finding himself alone quite often. Bill was doing better at school and often stayed at his mother’s. Ta-Nehisi's littlest brother was only four and the two brothers just younger than Ta-Nehisi were in their last year of high school. For the first time in his life, Ta-Nehisi felt alone and on his own. He spent his time playing basketball and focusing on his music. He got a new cut at the barbershop and got in with the local clique. They took the buses to the movies and caught the subway to go downtown. Coates remembers how the loneliness returned to him because none of the boys he’d been hanging with that summer were gifted or talented.

Ta-Nehisi wanted to attend Baltimore Polytech for high school because he loved the study of science. In the last year of school, he was named the head of his squad in gym because he was the tallest. Coates related the time he and his squad got into a fight with another group of boys. It was his first real scrap and for once he felt anger. Big Bill returned to Tioga and was into girls, rapping and a need to be loved. Bill got a girl pregnant. He promised to pay half if she promised not to involve their parents, but he ultimately chose to ignore the situation and wouldn't answer her calls. Coates recalls that when Paul and Linda got involved, Bill had to agree to pay for half of the abortion and to go with the girl to make sure it was done. He was 17. Paul told Bill that when he was 18 he'd have to move on.

On weekends, Ta-Nehisi did school projects and wrote poetry. He was drawn to books about the Panthers. He saw nothing nefarious about the Panthers; they were like Superheroes. Coates writes that he looked forwarded to attending Polytech. His sister, Kris, had attended its twin school, Western. The Poly/Western complex had once been attended by only white males in school uniforms. But as the whites moved out of the neighborhood, the school transitioned as well into a black coed school but continued in its grand tradition. Coates explains that everyone who attended Poly or Western went on to college. He jumped up and down in joy when the letter confirming his admission arrived. With his high school determined, Ta-Nehisi eased the rest of his way through eighth grade which ended with a field trip to Patapsco State Park.

Analysis

Buying into the unKnowledge and the black cliché, Bill formed a rap group and became the MC. Another phenomenon had emerged in West Baltimore. The nation had been overtaken by rap music in the form of heroes like MC Chuck D of Public Enemy. Even the name of the group, "Public Enemy" speaks volumes because of the group's lyrics that portend violence, anarchy and rebellion. Ta-Nehisi is drawn to the music. He caught the phrases that reek of racism and anger, lyrics that had never been uttered before in popular music. Ta-Nehisi at first didn't understand the relevance of some of the lyrics but as they blend together, he viewed them as a kind of abridged history of the black people. He interpreted the words as being "closer to the mountaintop." However, he also admits that the words of hatred reach a void of anger and confusion within him. That anger was a product of his neighborhood but was also the result of the abuse and threat of abuse that he lived with at home.

The lyrics of rappers like Chuck D helped the kids see the truth, gain the Knowledge and attain Consciousness. He saw celebrities like Whitney Houston and Richard Pryor as products of white corporate America. These stars were acceptable to whites while rappers like Chuck D were not. Ta-Nehisi wanted more evidence that his people had been repressed and were being oppressed. He began to read the radical notions of the Black Panthers in old newspapers that Paul had kept. He was gaining the Knowledge he needed to rebel. It was the music that had opened his eyes and it was the vitriol of the Black Panthers that confirmed the rapper's lyrics.

Ta-Nehisi was gaining the better understanding of his father that he had been seeking. He understood why his father was a Panther. From reading the works of the lost black writers that his father was trying to recover he learned that the white community had been distorting the truth about blacks. Ta-Nehisi learned that his heritage was directly from the Egyptians, something that the white publishing world was trying to hide by refusing to publish the works of the black writers.

Vocabulary

cacophony, esoteric, metaphors, braggadocio, profligate, trajectory, pantheon

Chapter 5

Summary

Coates recalls being excited but apprehensive about his first day at Polytech. He boarded the subway for the long ride that would require connecting with a bus to take him all the way. He had lived in a dorm for a month at the University of Maryland over the summer to prepare him for Polytech. After arriving at the campus, he headed to the homeroom number that had been sent to him in the mail. Coates writes that Big Bill was being indoctrinated into life at Mecca, otherwise known as Howard University. Bill wasn't into school; he was moved by the laws of survival. Coates recalls that Bill initially found the eggheads off-putting but began to get into the school and its African-American history and found a group he belonged in. Bill became the connection on campus for marijuana. He partied and avoided close calls with both authorities and violent encounters.

At home, Paul and Cheryl both still commuted to Washington, D.C. to work and ran the printing press at night and on weekends. Their publishing business was flourishing; they sold books all over the country. Cheryl's friend Jovett had a son named Kier who was a friend of Ta-Nehisi's. Coates recalls how the women both entered the sons in a SAT practice program. Ta-Nehisi's appetite for reading was expanding. He read The Iceman Inheritance and toyed with the concept of black supremacy. Coates recalled that Paul was thrilled with his son's love of reading but taught him to have respect for the books themselves and not damage them.

Coates writes that he quickly returned to old ways at Polytech finding it difficult to focus and exhibiting behavioral problems. He knew he could be an honor student; his inheritance came from the great minds of Ancient Egypt after all, but he was failing three classes. To get his son's behavior under control, Paul began surprising Ta-Nehisi with unexpected visits to his classroom where'd he sit in to observe. Coates recalls that his focus didn't improve much in his second year other than when he focused on girls in tight jeans. One day when Ta-Nehisi was particularly out of control, he was taken to the office by the school police. He was suspended on the spot with the warning that they might decide to expel him permanently. He cried himself to sleep after Paul gave him a vicious beating.

Coates narrates that Paul and Cheryl met with the principal and English teacher to plead with them to let Ta-Nehisi return. He was allowed to return, and a short while later school was out and he was enrolled in summer school at City College. He hung out with the neighborhood boys on the weekends and began drinking. Ta-Nehisi and Kier were sent to camp for a two weeks. The kids couldn't eat junk and had to run a mile every morning. Coates recalled his envy when Kier found a girlfriend. Although Ta-Nehisi was interested in girls, he felt awkward and unsure of himself. Always attracted by music, Ta-Nehisi enjoyed the musical that the kids put on for the parents at the end of camp. He was intrigued by the djembe drum which was an instrument from the west coast of

Africa. Coates remembers having seen the djembe drum many times at book festivals his father organized for his publishing business. He loved how the djembe players got lost in the beat. Ta-Nehisi felt the drum was a connection to the Motherland.

Analysis

The brothers were both in good schools – Ta-Nehisi in Polytech High School which was considered the best school in Baltimore and Big Bill was at Howard University in Washington, D.C. While their education was soaring, the boys were experiencing other problems with Big Bill taking the darker route. Even though he had a great opportunity at a prestigious university, a school that his father had sacrificed and struggled for over the years, he turned to drugs. He was selling them and became a top campus contact for marijuana and perhaps other drugs. Although he was bright enough to be accepted by the school and had a bright future, perhaps he had bought the lies, the black cliché that black boys can't amount to much. He wasn't a star athlete or a greater rapper but he was good a selling drugs. Big Bill was not shy like Ta-Nehisi; he put on a confident front but underneath he was lacking in self-worth.

Ta-Nehisi draws the comparison between himself and his brother not to make himself look better but rather to underscore how living under stress can impact people in the same family differently. They were both young black boys who lived in a deteriorating neighborhood where birds of prey circled above. They were both at risk. Ta-Nehisi chose to hide in the shadows and keep his opinions to himself and - even worse - not allow himself to have opinions. On his first day at Polytech that old feeling of not fitting in came back to him. While Big Bill was more overt about his pain and almost dared to world to stop him, Ta-Nehisi buried himself in books. Was he reading to find out about the black man or to find himself? It was a little bit of both.

Although Ta-Nehisi had dreamed of going to Polytech after being admitted into the gifted program there, he returned to his old ways – not focusing and doing poorly in school. It could have been a cry for attention or love that caused this continued behavior. He was not bold like his brother who confronted trouble, even went looking for it. Ta-Nehisi exhibited poor behavior in school and failed several classes his first year. It was his way of standing out and taking risk – his way of "selling drugs."

Vocabulary

festooned, torpor, burgeoning, cosmopolis, arcane, lynchpin, melanin, incipient, archival, akimbo

Chapter 6

Summary

Coates explains that Paul involved him in NationHouse – an organization that Paul felt was pivotal for a boy to attain manhood. One last rite of NationHouse that transitioned Ta-Nehisi and his buddies to manhood was being dropped off in Washington, D.C. and having to figure their own way back. Every Saturday for six months, Ta-Nehisi and Kier were brought to NationHouse for a lecture about the future that awaited them. Coates writes that self-defense and calisthenics were the first order of the day. There was instruction on firearms but Ta-Nehisi never felt right about it. Finally, there was installment in the House of Ankobia, NationHouse's fraternal order where the rituals of ancient kingdoms were mimicked. Coates explains that since he was the senior in his group, he was, therefore, the leader. During the final test, they stayed in the home of one of the elders. Late at night, the boys were taken blindfolded in a van. Coates described how he van would stop every 20 minutes when more boys would be picked up. Baba Yao, one of Ankobia elders, removed the blindfolds and told the boys to get out and make their way back to NationHouse by dawn.

Coates recalls that when they ran up the street, they spotted another van stop at the curb ahead of them. Ta-Nehisi and his group, fearless, ran right at them. The older boys toyed with them for a bit then got back in the van and sped off. They just beat sun-up when they returned to NationHouse. There was a ritual the next day celebrating them as newly minted men. Coates writes that a middle school cafeteria was rented out for the final ceremony where family and friends gathered and applauded the boys. Ta-Nehisi enjoyed hearing the djembes when they started up. Coates believed that the experience was a good one for him because of the stability he felt at NationHouse as well as the connection to the ancients. Ta-Nehisi had become a man and in two years he would be leaving his parents.

Coates recalls that one night Paul surprised the boys by driving them to the family's new six-bedroom house in a nicer neighborhood. It was bittersweet for Ta-Nehisi; he had made Tioga and all its flaws his home. He talked to his father about it. It was a form of desertion, giving up on principles and risking ideals to move away from the struggle. Coates writes that he had always enjoyed raising his hand when someone said is West Baltimore in the house. He understood when his father said he had paid his dues – 44 years in the struggle – and never had a backyard.

Ta-Nehisi got a djembe drum and took lessons in D.C. on Saturdays. Coates remembers keeping up the schedule for six months practicing at home whenever he could. He joined the Sankofa Dance Theater to play in African ballets. His parents were thrilled that Ta-Nehisi was embracing his culture. Coates writes that the director of the dance studio was Mama Kabibi, who was the mother of his friend, Salim. Ta-Nehisi had seen his father some time before and was hale and hearty, but he died of HIV AIDS which was running rampant in Baltimore. Ta-Nehisi played the djembe drum in his

funeral procession. Coates recalls feeling at home with the dance troupe and became a regular there.

Coates writes that Big Bill was more focused on his stash than on his studies. He had gathered together a group of brothers who reflected the fundamentals of West Baltimore ethos – loyalty and fists. These were the voices that let the world know that the struggle was still being fought. Coates recalls that Bill drank most of the weekends away with his New York friends. One Saturday after having a few too many, they got in a fight with another guy on the phone over a girl and tore over to the Howard Plaza Tower dorms to confront him. They found the individual who was much bigger and stronger than they pictured. Coates recalls Bill telling him that they got into a physical fight and phone calls to the police were made by those in surrounding rooms. Bill took out his gun and fired a shot in the air then held it on the guy. Coates writes that security showed up and tried to talk Bill into putting the gun down. He put his gun on the ground, distracted the guards and took off running. Bill was shook up over the incident – he didn't even like the girl in question yet things could have turned very dark.

Coates writes that he continued to experience problems with focus. He returned to school that fall still struggling with his inability to concentrate longer than a few minutes. He failed three classes that year. His father didn't react with violence but with silent disappointment which was almost worse. He knew his stuff and even taught other kids about the universe and foreign places. But when it came to putting a grade on what he knew, he was turned off. Coates recalls how that his mother wasn't happy that she had to pay for summer school again so he could catch up. He was almost expelled but his mother begged with the new principal who gave him another chance.

Coates writes that he came back that year determined to perform well and acknowledged that he had been given an outstanding opportunity at Polytech. He only failed one class that semester – his best performance since he started attending. Paul left his job at Howard University. He had decided to make publishing, which he loved, his sole means of income. Coates remembers Paul sitting him down and telling him that he was quitting his job at Mecca and that he would not have free tuition. He'd be on his own. He gave Paul the go ahead to leave. He felt that his true self was waiting to emerge.

Coates recalls a run-in he had with the shop teacher. He had accidentally run into the shop teacher but the teacher thought it was intentional. Paul was called to school but wasn't angry with his son. He was growing into a big man, Paul told him, and he'd have to be careful with the way he carried himself especially because he was black. Coates writes that he began to feel a lessening of the power of his parents over him.

Coates writes that he was doing much better in school actually applying himself. He began to sense that a distance was growing between his parents. In his last year, he got into a physical fight with another boy at school. Coates recalls that he felt rage welling up inside as he pummeled the boy who was laid out on a cafeteria table. Now days Coates sees young black boys shot and bleeding on the streets. He writes that his people are on the lowest rung of society and all that stands between them and the

animals is the zoo. Coates writes that it was common for young black men to be prophetic, aware that they would not live long. Ta-Nehisi was pulled off the boy and felt blood run down his own face. He was furious and tried to break away and go after the boy again. He was a bloody mess and was sent to the hospital. Paul came to get him there. He returned to school with several stitches in his head. Coates recalls that the other boy was expelled from school. Paul told Ta-Nehisi that he had disgraced his family. Coates recalls feeling like a failure – and no black boy ever wanted to fail. He suspected that Paul and Jovett were romantically involved.

Analysis

Paul Coates was always looking for ways to elevate his sons' chances in life. He focused on education but knowing the terrain that they had to deal with, he wanted them to be men. Ta-Nehisi describes his last night at a club in a ritual that was supposed to bestow manhood on him and his friends. Paul was drawn to the program because the ritual was based on African ritual. They were blindfolded, placed in a van, dropped off in D.C. and told to find their own way home.

Once the boys found their way back, their parents and friends were waiting for them at a celebratory dinner. It was Paul's belief that boys were men at 18 and that they should leave the fold either by going to college or getting a job and their own place. Ta-Nehisi wrote that it was good for him because it gave him stability and connection to his people. He was already developing a relationship with his people through his reading but it was obvious that Paul wanted Ta-Nehisi to have a more physical connection to his past.

When Paul drove the family to show them their large new house in the burbs, Ta-Nehisi had mixed emotions. By leaving, he in a sense was abandoning his old neighborhood and his old friends. Ta-Nehisi was also leaving failure behind, things that he could not go back and fix. He would not have another chance to do better in school, be more sociable or be a better son. Although Ta-Nehisi could not easily express himself, he wrote about playing the djembe drum, an African instrument, and being able to experience guilt-free abandon. He is telling the readers who may relate to his reserved qualities and hate them like he did that by beating a drum or losing oneself some other way can be liberating.

Vocabulary

vanguard, slothful, minions, amorphous, accolades, mercenaries, bourgeoisie, fervent, syllabus, hedonism, progeny, vehemence, flagrant

Chapter 7

Summary

Coates recalls that the first girl he had a crush on was Brenda Neil who he'd wait for after school so he could try to walk home with her. Brenda flirted with him but he still couldn't break out of his shell. Another girl, Teyanda, whispered in his ear one day that she had a crush on him. He was immobilized and by the end of the week, she whispered that she didn't have a crush on him. Coates writes that there was great tension in the air and many threats: HIV was in the air and cops seeking to make a name for themselves at the expense of black boys that no one cared about were trigger-happy. In his senior year, every class he attended had girls who were already mothers or were expecting. Coates believed that girls became cynical because they had so much more to lose. He had been banished from Poly and was in a county high school called Woodlawn. He had disgraced his parents and they had given up on him. Coates relates that his father gave him the same talk he had given Big Bill a few years ago. When Ta-Nehisi was 18, he'd have to move out perhaps join the army.

Ta-Nehisi ended high school with a 1.8 GPA – not an entry card into the finest universities. Luckily, his SAT scores stood out. Coates writes that the teachers at Woodlawn gave up on him, too. They let him sleep through class if he chose to. He had no idea what the future held for him. Coates writes that he was attracted to a girl in one of his classes named Ebony. He watched her in the halls and she stood out as classier than the other girls. She was the president of the cultural enrichment club, a black union. Ta-Nehisi began attending meetings which made them closer. Coates stresses that he still played his djembe drum whenever he could, because in doing so he found comfort and found himself. He even created his own drums out of dried goat skins which made him open up his eyes.

Coates recalls responding inappropriately to Ebony and some of her girlfriends when asked what kind of girls he liked. He made a faux pas by telling them that he liked light-skinned girls. His mother was upset with him. She reminded him that the little black girls were somebody's daughter and somebody's sister.

Ta-Nehisi received an offer from Mecca. Kelly had graduated from Howard and Kris and Bill were still there. His PSAT scores had impressed them; he and his parents were invited to a dinner for potential new students. Thinking his low GPA would ultimately disqualify him, Coates pretended he didn't care if he got in or not. His apathy angered Paul who scolded him about not taking advantage of the opportunity to impress the school board members at the dinner. Bill, who was barely holding on, had found a way in with his dreadful record. Bill wanted to stay on not because of academics; he liked the party and the drugs. Coates writes that Bill, who no longer had his parents to save him, started attending classes and enjoyed the debates that went on. He earned a C plus grade point.

In November, Ta-Nehisi took his last SAT. Kier had turned to the drug trade but Ta-Nehisi had no interest – he'd seen what crack had done to the people of his community. Coates writes that he became closer to Ebony and spent many hours with her. She even got into a debate with Paul calling for him to defend being a former revolutionary who became a suburbanite. Coates had Ebony to thank for his becoming more social from the many hours spent with her. He saw through her confidence and happiness to the pain that resided within her. Ta-Nehisi's grades improved inspired by Ebony who was an overachiever with honor grades. Coates recalls that she made attempts to turn their friendship into more but Ta-Nehisi didn't know how to field them. Coates recalls becoming more and more convinced that he would not be admitted into Howard or any other elite school.

Coates writes that his English teacher was the first person to recognize that he had a gift for writing. His guidance counselor wrote a glowing recommendation for him. He applied to four schools in the area including Howard. The last half of his senior year felt stress-free. It was the first time since childhood that he took a rest from hip-hop. Coates recalls that at the time many of the true rap heroes were fading and the new voices were corporate productions in studios. Ta-Nehisi didn't know where he was heading but it would include the end of the mental slavery of fulfilling the wishes of his elders.

Coates writes that he was accepted at Morgan State and figured it was the school of his destiny. His mother always told him that he could fly but at that point he didn't see how. Taking after his father who detested ceremony, Ta-Nehisi did not attend his high school graduation. Due to his inaction, he had let Ebony slip away to another guy. Coates recalls that after graduation, Paul told him that he was in love with Jovett and had a romantic relationship with her. When his father asked him if he had anything to say, Ta-Nehisi had plenty to say but remained silent.

Analysis

Ta-Nehisi describes how his shyness kept him from developing any relationships with girls even though he was very attracted to some of them. He did not inherit his father's way with women or emulate his brother's. He describes his shy character so that the reader can understand Ta-Nehisi's lack of confidence which he has focused on in several chapters. By baring his soul in this way, he convinces the reader of his honesty and his need to discuss his flaws. Perhaps other young black boys and boys of any color will relate to his angst and know that they are not alone.

Just as the crack epidemic and violence had hit the nation and were especially debilitating to black neighborhoods, the AIDS virus was another looming threat. The increase in the shooting of black boys by police was becoming more frequent. Ta-Nehisi was building the case of the risk that black neighborhoods - and young black boys in particular - face. He portrays the young girls of his neighborhood as victims – every class he had in his senior year either had young mothers or expecting mothers. It probably came to mind that his older brother Big Bill had gotten a young woman pregnant and, at the urging of his parents, helped pay for an abortion. There was

undoubtedly another group of young women in his classes that opted to end their pregnancies.

Ta-Nehisi describes his relationship with a young girl named Ebony. He was attracted to her but it did not develop into a romantic relationship. He included Ebony in his memoir because it was in important relationship in that it was a pivotal moment in his maturation. He made progress in his social skills because a strong friendship developed between the two. He got over his nerves and was able to view her as another human not just another girl.

Vocabulary

quagmire, inane, ubiquity, paladin, indomitable

Chapter 8

Summary

When Ta-Nehisi was young, his father was his hero and his religion. He wanted to be just like him. Coates writes that his first beating with a very thick black belt was at age six. The beating was the result of a call from school about his behavior. As he matured, how he felt about his father would change from day to day. Coates recalls that on the days he had to work in the publishing business he sometimes wished his father would disappear.

After Ta-Nehisi graduated from high school and was, in the eyes of his parents, a man, he saw his father anew. Coates viewed Paul as self-righteous and still a Panther who ascribed to the tenet of free love. He lived his life obsessed with the world he wanted not the world that was. The family had been pushed into isolation by its rejection of holiday celebrations and refusal to salute the flag. There was part of Ta-Nehisi who felt robbed of a childhood. Though different from Paul in many ways, Cheryl was a dissident at heart with her wise cracks and cynicism. Coates felt that Paul stripped away many of the traditions that Cheryl's family had held for generations which created distance between Cheryl and her family. Paul refused to allow the family to stay for a huge reunion dinner because the professional photographer the family hired was white. Coates recalls Paul being angry because there were numerous black photographers who could have been hired. Besides, the white photographer was late – a show of disrespect for his family and for blacks. Coates recalls being disappointed. He had wished that Paul had let go of anger just that one night so he could enjoy his large family.

Ta-Nehisi's mother, Cheryl, was walled off from so much – her family and choices about her current life. She was ashamed but she kept it inside. Her's had been a fatherless childhood and to have a father in her children's life was important to her. Coates had learned to expect anything. His father's confession about his affair did not shock him.

Coates writes that he continued to work on his drum skills. He looked forward to each practice and the Sankofa spring recital. He was called out to do a drum solo at the recital. The only practice he missed was when he had a schedule conflict with his driver's ed class. Driving down the street with music blaring had too long been a dream of his to miss it. Coates writes that he missed a whole week of drum practice but found it hard to stop thinking about drumming to concentrate on stop signs, right of way and distances from curbs.

It was a good summer for Ta-Nehisi. Coates writes that the troupe was invited to perform at community centers, wedding and other functions. Everyone enjoyed the beat of the djembe drum. Ta-Nehisi would even catch his father with eyes closes, bopping his head to the beat. At that time, Ta-Nehisi could have drummed his way through life. He didn't need anything else. But deep down Coates knew his talent was second tier. He

saw Ebony over the summer. Coates writes that had matured enough to apologize for his reluctance to move their relationship forward, blaming it on his own weakness.

Cheryl stayed after Howard University with frequent visits inquiring about the status of Ta-Nehisi's application. She would not give up the idea of his attending Mecca. Ta-Nehisi recognized that she was more thrilled than he was when he received his acceptance package. The thought of leaving the new life he made with his drum playing and the dance troupe saddened him. He told his parents he would opt to go to Morgan which was closer to home and where he'd already been accepted. Coates recalls he learned very quickly that he was very naïve to think that he could win against the will of his mother. Paul told him it was his choice but didn't really mean it. Finally, Paul revealed his true feelings. Coates recalls his father telling him that going to Morgan would be like going to thirteenth grade. It was settled, he would go to Howard.

Coates recalls that he thought back to the boys in Tioga who were living out the black cliché. He had escaped from that destiny. He played a final set with the Sankofa company and said goodbye to Ebony and the few good friends he had. Coates writes that he drove with his father down I95 to the university where they spotted Big Bill hanging with some friends in front of the Towers dorm which would be Ta-Nehisi's home. Coates writes that he thought of his younger brothers still at home; they had a much different childhood than he and Big Bill did. It occurred to him that he and Big Bill had emerged as men despite their struggles.

Analysis

Ta-Nehisi turned 18 and, as Paul told him, he was on his own one way or the other. He writes that his father had been his god and his religion. It was his father, his god, who sent Ta-Nehisi on his way. He describes the conflicted relationship and mixed emotions that he had about his father and his volatile nature that created so much stress in the family. He now sees his father not as a god but as a human. His father struggled and fought to have the world that he wanted not the world that really was.

Ta-Nehisi focuses on his mother, Cheryl, who had been in the background much of his life. She always believed in him but she deferred to the demands of her domineering husband who had obsessive and radical ideas about life and raising children. Ta-Nehisi describes Cheryl as stronger than Paul in the last chapter. When the chips were down, she came through with strength and tenacity. Ta-Nehisi's grades were so poor that he was sure he wouldn't be accepted at Howard University like his siblings had and which Paul had planned for all his life. He had disappointed his father who was surprisingly philosophical about it.

Cheryl, on the other hand, wasn't philosophical; she always knew that Ta-Nehisi could soar. Despite his low grade point average she haunted the Howard University office for updates on his application. She was determined that he would be admitted. She used his high SAT scores to convince them. He presents the behavior in a balanced way in

this final chapter to demonstrate that he had both parents to thank for his education and ultimate success. They had just gone about it in different ways.

Vocabulary

mundane, dissident, détente, covenants, subterfuge, parables

Important People

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ta-Nehisi Coates is the author of The Beautiful Struggle, a memoir about his formative years during elementary school and high school. The memoir ends when Ta-Nehisi was accepted to the prestigious Howard University and arrived for his first day. Ta-Nehisi is the sixth of Paul Coates's seven children. Paul had seven children by four women but the kids didn't make any distinctions. They were all sisters and brothers and enjoyed each other's company when they were together which was usually on the weekends at the family home in the rough section of the city known as West Baltimore.

Ta-Nehisi was a shy young boy who preferred to stay indoors and play video games. His older brother, Big Bill, enjoyed the lure of the street more which at times got him into trouble. Ta-Nehisi wanted no part of trouble. Acting up in the classroom was as far as his bad behavior went.

Ta-Nehisi's father was a strict disciplinarian and was determined that his boys would succeed in school and have a better life than he did. Paul Coates ran a small publishing operation in the basement which Ta-Nehisi was required to help with. Paul also assigned Ta-Nehisi reading assignments from his vast collection of works by unknown black writers whose accounts provided the history of the black man from his beginning in Egypt to the pain and tragedy of slavery and the current struggles of blacks living in a white world. At first Ta-Nehisi resented having to read the books but as he got into them, he couldn't find enough to read.

From a young age, it was obvious that Ta-Nehisi was a gifted child but he didn't like school and showed a behavior problem. Even being placed in the gifted program at Polytech, the high school he dreamed of, didn't improve his performance. Although Ta-Nehisi wound up his high school days with a very low GPA, his SATs were way above average and he was accepted at the prestigious Howard University. His father had worked there for years so that his kids could attend tuition-free. Upon arriving on his first day, Ta-Nehisi felt he had emerged from West Baltimore as a man.

Paul Coates

Coates writes that his father, Paul Coates had a storied history that included membership in the Panthers, a tour of Vietnam and a near-obsession with the untold history of his people. He set-up a small publishing company run out of his basement so that he could print and disseminate important works by black authors that the white publishing world deemed lacked credibility.

Paul had seven children among several wives. According to Coates, the two oldest were Kelly and Kris who were compliant daughters that wanted to better themselves and both attended Howard University, the celebrated black university, where Paul worked so his

kids could have free tuition. Coates notes that Paul was a serious somewhat bitter man who knew the score and was determined that his children would have better lives than he'd had. Coming from an abusive and dysfunctional childhood, violence had rubbed off on him. When his sons disappointed him, he was waiting for them with his big thick belt.

According to Coates, Paul's main focus was on his sons, particularly Ta-Nehisi and Big Bill, who he feared would succumb to the allure of the drug and rap scene that was coming of age in West Baltimore. He was determined that his sons who were both bright would not wind up as crack addicts who were in and out of jail. Coates writes that his father was strict and required them to read the many books by heretofore unknown black authors who told the story of his people. Paul wanted his sons to be in touch with their heritage but learn the survival skills that would allow them to succeed in a white world.

Bill Coates

Big Bill Coates was Ta-Nehisi's older brother by a few years. According to Coates, Bill was the wild child of the two in that he was much more tempted by the streets than was Ta-Nehisi. He did not do well at school, had a young eye for girls and was drawn into drugs at an early age. But, Coates writes, his father didn't give up on him and after struggling through high school, Paul got Bill accepted at Howard University.

Big Bill sold marijuana on campus and became one of the top drug traffickers on campus. Coates writes that Big Bill was on the verge of expulsion several times but his father wouldn't let him say uncle. In his last year, he finally began to recognize the importance of his heritage and the fight his father waged to propel him to a better life. He emerged through the smoke and chaos to become a man.

Cheryl Coates

Cheryl Coates was Ta-Nehisi's mother. According to Coates, she believed in her son and always insisted that he would fly one day. After Ta-Nehisi was accepted into the gifted class at Polytech she soldiered on when he was near suspension and even expulsion because of his poor grades and behavioral issues. Coates writes that she'd talk the school into letting him stay on and paid for summer school for several consecutive summers so he could catch up. She never gave up on him and was the first to recognize that he was a gifted writer.

Coates writes that she was in an unhappy marriage in which both partners had outside relationships. She had spent many years under the militant domination of Paul Coates whose demands put distance between her and her family and her traditions. It was Coates's belief that his mother had lost part of herself but she wouldn't let her son get lost in the mix. When Ta-Nehisi was willing to take the easy route and attend Morgan University instead of Howard, he hadn't bargained for her determination that he would have the benefit of the elite school that the family called their Mecca.

Kier Solomon

Kier Solomon was one of Ta-Nehisi's best friends during his youth. Coates writes that the Solomons had bought the Coates family home, the only house that Ta-Nehisi had lived in. Kier was a year younger than Ta-Nehisi but the two boys did everything together. According to Coates, years later when Ta-Nehisi was on a trajectory to escape the black cliché, he learned that Kier had succumbed to the lure of the streets.

Jovett Solomon

Coates writes that Jovett and Wellis Solomon bought the Coates family home on Barrington Road, the only home that Ta-Nehisi had known. Jovett and Cheryl Coates, Ta-Nehisi's mother, became close friends as did their sons, Ta-Nehisi and Kier.

Coates writes that after he graduated from high school, his father revealed to him that though he loved Ta-Nehisi's mother, he was in a romantic relationship with Jovett and loved her, too. Paul allowed him to ask him questions about the relationship. Ta-Nehisi had plenty to say but remained silent.

Kelly Coates and Kris Coates

Coates writes that Kelly Coates and Kris Coates were Paul Coates's only daughters and his oldest children. Linda, Paul's first wife, was their mother as well as the mother of Big Bill. The girls both attended Howard University and by the time Ta-Nehisi arrived, Kelly had already graduated and Kris was in her last year. Coates recalls how his older siblings visited the family home on weekends but lived either with their mother or in dorms at school. Paul did not focus as much on his daughters as he did on his sons.

John, Malik and Menelik Coates

Coates provides the names of the women who mothered his brothers, John, Malik and Menelik. John was born to a woman named Patsy and Malik to Sola. John was born within a day of Big Bill. Ta-Nehisi and Menelik were born to Cheryl. The children lived together off and on. Ta-Nehisi enjoyed the weekend when most of the kids came to visit.

Chuck D

Coates writes how he idolized Chuck D who was the rapper MC with the group Public Enemy. He was one of the first rappers to garner a huge following. Ta-Nehisi and his friends idolized him. Coates recalls that his lyrics were meaningful to kids like him for understanding black history and the black experience. Coats recalls lyrics like a "government of suckers" and "they see me, fear me," which not so subtly hints at rebellion, anarchy and violence. The kids felt like Chuck D was one of them. Coates

writes that Chuck D emerged as a force in 1988 when blacks began to express their dismay about Reaganomics and black on black crime. In a sense, rappers like Chuck D were expressing a call to arms to the black youth.

Ebony Kelly

Coates describes Ebony Kelly as the first girl who seemed to want a relationship with the young Ta-Nehisi. However, he was awkward and shy at the time and didn't know how to handle her flirtation and hints that she wanted to take their friendship further. When she finally gave up and had another boyfriend, he looked upon that experience with regret. Later, he matured enough to tell her of those regrets.

Objects/Places

West Baltimore

When the story unfolds, the Coates family is living on Tioga Parkway in West Baltimore. Coates comments that the house was not in good condition but matched the declining neighborhood. There were dangers in the neighborhood especially for boys – crack had emerged as the drug of the day. Gangs that were everywhere presented the greatest danger – they either recruited the young black boys of the neighborhood or preyed upon them.

The Black Panther Party

According to Coates, Paul was a Vietnam veteran, married to Linda with two children when he decided to join the Black Panther Party, a movement that appealed to him for its bold, militant stand on civil rights and its revolutionary talk. He became the leader of the local chapter in Baltimore leading him to lose a union job at the airport. Coates writes that the Panthers lived in communes where free sex was the order of the day. They stood for the unmaking of society, the fall of the family, the government and the economy. He eventually disassociated with the Panthers when violence turned inward and Panthers were killing each other. He was condemned by the Black Panther Party for leaving them.

Upward Bound

Coates writes that Paul enrolled Big Bill into Upward Bound which was a local community program geared toward helping kids in the neighborhood explore new material and concepts to elevate themselves and gain confidence for a brighter future. According to Coates, many of the classes were college level and focused on the ideology of Pythagoras, the writing of Fitzgerald and the science of Newton. Following these classes, the kids spent a week staying in a dorm at Townson college to experience what campus life was like.

Howard University

Howard University was known in the Coates family as the “Mecca.” The elite black university was to Paul and Cheryl Coates the ultimate education that their children to get. According to Coates, Paul Coates pursued employment at the university so that his children could attend tuition-free. Coates writes that his older sisters Kelly and Kris attended Howard University and Big Bill was also admitted although he held on by his fingernails to avoid suspension. When it came to Ta-Nehisi choosing between what Paul referred to as a college that represented “thirteenth” grade and Howard University, his parents guided him to choose the tougher yet prestigious Howard.

Murphy Homes Gang

According to Coates, one of the most notorious and dangerous street gangs that Ta-Nehisi writes about is the Murphy Homes Gang. The gang got its name from the housing project where the gang was first established. The gang memebers were known for their drugging and violence. In the opening pages of his memoir, Ta-Nehisi describes being ambushed by the gang while he and his older brother, Big Bill, were attending a wrestling match. Coates writes that they ran for their lives and were separated. Ta-Nehisi called his parents who rescued him. Big Bill was found huddled in a hiding spot later by his mother, Linda. The Murphy Homes Gang was one of the worst but one of the many gangs that threatened young black boys in West Baltimore.

Public Enemy

Coates writes that Public Enemy was one of the first major rap groups on the scene. Its MC was Chuck D who became a hero to Ta-Nehisi and many young black boys in West Baltimore and every other impoverished black community across the nation. Chuck D had a way with just a few phrases to call for change and to confront inequality.

Black Classic Press

According to Coates, the Black Class Press was the name of Paul Coates's publishing business which he launched in his basement. He had been so taken with the unpublished works of so many great black writers that he decided he would publish these works and disseminate them himself. Coates writes that these works were vital to the story of the black man from his origin in Egypt to his slavery ordeal and to his struggles in a white world. Ta-Nehisi at first resisted reading these books but eventually couldn't get enough of them. He learned so much about himself in their pages.

Polytech

Although Ta-Nehisi was brilliant and a gifted youngster, he admittedly was an awful student. Despite his poor performance he was admitted into the gifted program in the school of his dreams, Polytech, which was considered the best high school in the city. Coates writes that although he was given that opportunity he still did poorly. His grades were below average and his behavior was unacceptable. His mother had to talk the school into not expelling him several times during his years there.

Djembe Drums

Coates writes that although he was initially not particularly interested in his heritage – something his father was obsessed with – he became intrigued by the sound and beat of the djembe drums, a native African instrument, and eventually took lessons to learn

how to play them. Ta-Nehisi got lost in the beat of the djembe drum and began to feel a connection with his people.

Sankofa Dance Theater

Ta-Nehisi's love of playing the djembe drum led him to the Sankofa Dance Theater. Coates writes that he was selected to play music for the dance troupe when they performed West African ballets at various locations. He embraced the combination of his playing, the beat and the dancers as part of a reclaimed culture.

Themes

Tenacity

Throughout the majority of his memoir, Ta-Nehisi Coates presents himself as an awkward kid with interests that chiefly layed in hip-hop music and video games. Bright and gifted as he was, he had no interest in school. So what spurred him on to become one of the most lauded writers of today? The simple answer is: his parents. Coates make the case that it was his parents who recognized his abilities and talents and wouldn't give up on him. They were stern and strict about his performance. In fact, his father was militant about it. Ta-Nehisi was met with his father's black belt more than once when school called about Ta-Nehisi's poor performance. Despite the fact that Ta-Nehisi often got in trouble at school – as gifted children often do – and his grades were often barely passing, his parents would not give up.

Cheryl Coates had always known that her son would fly some day, that he would escape the many traps and expectations that awaited the black boys of West Baltimore. Although Ta-Nehisi was admitted into a gifted program at Polytech and was inspired by the elite opportunity, he soon returned to his old ways – under achievement, lack of focus and unacceptable behavior. His father beat him, but his mother had a better tactic. Coates recalls how his mother would visit the school and plead with them to give her son another chance. She had to make that journey more than once but it paid off. Coats also recalls that she didn't like writing out the check for summer school so that he could keep up but it was necessary for Ta-Nehisi to be able to emerge as the young man she knew he could be.

Coates writes that due to his low grade point average, he became resolved to the reality that he wouldn't be accepted at Howard University and would settle for Morgan where he'd been accepted. His father pretended that it was his choice but it wasn't. Cheryl wouldn't have it. Coates describes how she dogged the admissions office at Howard. When the acceptance package arrived, Ta-Nehisi was surprised and his parents were jubilant.

Music

Music was an important part of Ta-Nehisi's formative years. Coates writes that he was a youngster when rap music came out of the black streets and into main street America. One of his idols was Chuck D who was the rapper with the group Public Enemy. Ta-Nehisi grabbed onto the black history and the black struggle in snatches of lyrics that Chuck D rapped. Coates recalls a lyric about the "g-d Grammys" which indicated that he may have been insulted about being snubbed by the Grammys which was a creation of white music. There were blatant expressions of pain, anger and racism in the lyrics something that was brand new to the music scene that may have only hinted at such serious matters in the past. Coates describes how important rap music was to him

during his entire youth. He depended upon it to take him away and connect with his people, their legacy and their hopes and dreams.

Although Ta-Nehisi initially had no interest in the black story as contained in the books his father collected and published as they related to Africa, he came to love the music of Africa. Coates writes that he was especially drawn to the beat of the djembe drum. He was so enthralled by the sound that he decided to learn how to play the djembe. He had never showed any interest in playing music before but the beat and sound took him to another place – a place of comfort and belonging.

Coates writes that once he learned to play the djembe drum well, he joined a dance troupe as a musician. He loved the troupe and it was the drum and its music and beat that drew the shy reserved kid out and made him more sociable. In the end, he knew that he wasn't an elite musician but, rather, a workman. Coates had been convinced that the music had moved and transformed him in many ways just as rap had in earlier times.

Racism

Racism emerges as one of the themes of A Beautiful Struggle. Although Ta-Nehisi and his family lived in the vast Baltimore metropolitan area, their world was largely restricted to the back neighborhoods of West Baltimore. Coates writes that he and his older brother, Big Bill, loved to watch pro-wrestling on TV. Their hero was the wrestler named The American Dream. He was a hulking white wrestler whose theatrical foe was the Horsemen.

Coates narrates that his father wasn't wild about them wasting time on the faux-sport but finally acquiesced and bought the boys tickets for a match. They were in the nosebleed section of the arena and were startled by all the white people around them. They had never had the feeling of being outnumbered. Coates and his brother were smart young boys and were well aware that their conclave existed in a very white world, it had never been so starkly apparent to them until that night. Ta-Nehisi had been struck by how dirty the white folks looked.

Coates writes that a few years later when hip-hop came into style, the boys were taken with the lyrics that talked of the struggle of being black in a white world. The songs also focused their attention on the brutal reality that an inordinately large percentage of young black men are destined to be murdered or in jail by the time they're 21. Coates recalls how the unfair treatment of black men by the justice system was front and center in their lives. An anger began to burn inside of them about the unfair playing field fate had handed them.

Their father, Paul Coates, knew very well the feeling of being different and discriminated against. He felt it in his tour of duty in Vietnam in a nearly all-white unit. He learned about its complexities and militant plans to change things around by force and violence during his time as a Black Panther. After Coates wrote that although Paul disassociated

himself with the Panthers, he still felt the sting of the unfairness of life. He discovered hundreds of works by heretofore unknown black authors who hadn't been published because they lacked "credibility." Coates writes that as far as Paul was concerned after reading what he considered the works of geniuses, their only lack of credibility was their lack of whiteness. Paul became so obsessed with these writings that he set up a publishing operation in his basement so that he could publish and disseminate these treasures and educate the nation on the history, struggles and legacy of black Americans.

Knowledge and Consciousness

Coates breaks down the black experience into two major groupings: Knowledge and Consciousness. Those who had Knowledge knew the truth; those who had Consciousness sensed it. To Ta-Nehisi his father, Paul Coates, was Conscious Man. He had devoured so many books about the origin of the black man and his history through slavery and in modernity where he basically lived in a white world. Paul was Conscious Man down to the food they ate – wheat bread, veggie burgers and desserts with no added sugar. The adman sells fast-food and malt liquor in the black neighborhoods but Conscious Man is there to stand in the way.

Knowledge could be lies that were really the unKnowledge. Coates writes that it had been used against black people with the creation of false histories about them. The black writers who'd been scorned by the publishing world at large were not defeated. They peddled their logic in self-published books at street fairs, church bazaars and from the trunk of cars. Coates believes that the white man purposely blurred the black man's connection to the Egyptians thus denying them of their rich history.

Coates stresses that knowledge could be repressed but in the end it couldn't be defeated. Knowledge fought lies. Young black boys were lied to by being given the Knowledge that athletes were their kings. Rappers and entertainers were also heroes. For a black boy to succeed he had to be an athlete or a rapper. He didn't have the brains to do anything else. Coates remembers his math teacher as Conscious in a way his father was not. She could spot the difference between the kid who wanted to compete and bring forth his best and a kid in who had blanked out. Ta-Nehisi generally fell into the latter category.

Black History

Coates writes that during his days with the Black Panthers, Paul Coates had been introduced to the writing of black writers whose works had been rejected by the white publishing world because they lacked "credibility". After he began to read the manuscripts and documents, he became convinced that these writers and their works had plenty of credibility. Coates describes Paul's fervor for the black writers many of whom he considered to be genius and that it was the race of the writers - not the content of their books - that had kept them from being published. Books assumed a

long-lasting and important role in Paul's life and subsequently that of his children, especially Ta-Nehisi.

Coates writes that what was most important to Paul was that the books that had not seen the light of day contained the history of the black man. He wanted his sons and all black children to have an even playing field. How could they begin on solid ground if they didn't even know their beginnings and their long history of achievement and struggle? To Paul, the black man himself had been cast aside when these books were.

Coates explains that in order to right what Paul considered the egregious wrong that occurred when these brilliant works were rejected by the white literary world, Paul decided to publish them himself. He set up his own publishing operation in his basement. He amassed a huge collection of the writing of scores of black writers that had been hidden in the shadows and began to publish and distribute them. To draw attention to his books, he would hold book festivals from time to time.

Ta-Nehisi had to help him on weekends which he deeply resented. He recalls his dismay in having to read the books that his father published which were the works of black writers who lacked credibility according to the white publishing world. Paul was determined to right that wrong and publish and distribute the books himself. Ta-Nehisi was aware of his father's obsession with these books that contained the history of the black people back to the Egyptian days and their struggles of current times. Initially, Coates recalls, he resented having to help with the publishing business and hated having to read the books his father forced on him. However, eventually he came to love the books and couldn't get enough of them because they told the story of him and his family.

Styles

Structure

Ta-Nehisi Coates lays out the memoir of his early years in elementary and high school in basically a chronological order. However, there are passages that are stream-of-consciousness that blend different times of his life and of the black experience. He first writes about being a lost boy who had been lied to a reference to the focus of the nation on the Challenger disaster and the S&L failure instead of on the perpetual suffering of the black community. He discusses the real peril that waited outside their door. The perils to which young black boys were most vulnerable included the crack era that hit the impoverished black streets of the U.S. including Ta-Nehisi's West Baltimore community and the menacing gangs that preyed upon boys unaffiliated with gangs. The boys and their parents knew the odds – black boys were at great risk than any other group to be either jailed or incarcerated by the age of 21.

Ta-Nehisi sets up this premise as the backdrop of his education. With all the threats hanging over Ta-Nehisi and older brother Big Bill and all the young black boys in West Baltimore coupled with a father who had a big black belt he was not afraid to use, the boys were expected to perform at an outstanding level in school. He takes the reader through the ups and downs of his school life that included his own inability to focus and his brother's dalliances with the lures of the mean streets.

Through it all his parents were standing at the end of the long trek waving them forward, telling them they could do it and that they would not give up on them. Ta-Nehisi's father drove him to his first day of college at Howard University. As they drove toward the dorm, he saw his brother, still a student, hanging with some of his friends. It struck Ta-Nehisi at that very moment that, despite the odds and how they could have easily failed, they had made it into the light and that they would be the successful young men their father demanded they become.

Perspective

The Beautiful Struggle is a memoir written by Ta-Nehisi Coates. It is a coming-of-age story of two black brothers, Ta-Nehisi and his older brother, Big Bill, who were vulnerable to the allure of the street in their black neighborhood in West Baltimore. Ta-Nehisi writes about his relationship with his parents, Paul and Cheryl Coates, and his six siblings. His father had seven children with four women but to Ta-Nehisi they were all his brothers and sisters.

Ta-Nehisi describes his driven father who was determined that his children would have better opportunities than he had in his life. In this memoir, Ta-Nehisi is particularly focused on his sons who he knew would be most vulnerable to the crack/hip-hop scene that was coming into its own in West Baltimore. Paul Coates was a constant presence

in the lives of his sons whether he was physically there or at one of his many jobs that he worked seven days a week. One of Paul's jobs was at the esteemed Howard University where he had pursued employment so that his children could attend tuition-free.

Ta-Nehisi was greatly influenced by what was a near-obsession with his father. Paul had discovered many unpublished works by what he considered genius black writers that were deemed without credibility by the white publishing world. Paul set up a publishing operation in his basement so that he could publish and disseminate these important works. He at first forced Ta-Nehisi to read them; later Ta-Nehisi couldn't get enough of them either.

Although Paul knew that his sons were bright, he understood the peer pressure and temptation that awaited them outside their door. Ta-Nehisi brings the reader into the world of fear that a black boy's life could turn down the wrong pathway on a dime.

Tone

The presentation of The Beautiful Struggle is largely an even-toned work that is at times charged with the emotion in remembering times gone by and the bitterness and pain that being a member of the black community in America fosters. There are passages of a stream-of-consciousness type of delivery that blend together thoughts from different experience and different times. Glimpses of how Ta-Nehisi felt during the time he is writing about blend feelings that still linger to this day.

Although The Beautiful Struggle is Ta-Nehisi's memoir and penned by him, there are times he presents his story as the observer. He describes himself oftentimes as the feeling of being excluded from his peers which is a commonality among gifted children. In writing this memoir, that trait is still obvious when he seems to remove himself somewhat from the actions of others in the neighborhood and even from his family.

Ta-Nehisi writes with restraint when relating emotional moments like when his father, Paul, tells the 18-year-old Ta-Nehisi that he was in love with another woman, his best friend's mother in fact. His father tells him that he can ask him any question about the affair but Ta-Nehisi remains silent. He also remains silent in the book about how he felt that day although the silence speaks volumes. Since he had a very strict father who was not reluctant to use the belt on his children, it is obvious that Ta-Nehisi learned to repress opinions and feelings and is still impacted by that experience.

Quotes

The statistics were dire and oft recited – 1 in 21 killed by 1 in 21, more of us in jail than college.
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 1 paragraph 26)

Importance: Ta-Nehisi is alluding to the cold facts that young black boys faced in the dangerous, gang-ridden neighborhoods that they lived in. Death or incarceration awaited them outside their doors.

When crack hit Baltimore, civilization fell."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: Crack had emerged as the drug of the day and the devastation and crime that surrounded it made already impoverished, violent neighborhoods to decline further.

She [Ms. Chance] was not Conscious in the way of my father, but in a different way that I couldn't name but could spot from one hundred feet away: the general manner of black people who simply wanted to compete and see the good works of their own brought forth. I was my own greatest foe, she told me. She'd be off on quadratic equations, then catch me in her periphery with my head in the sky."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 2 paragraph 35)

Importance: Ta-Nehisi's math teacher, Ms. Chance, had a knack for sensing the mindset of her students. She knew that Ta-Nehisi was bright and that his lack of focus was making him fail.

Dad wasn't the type to have a bad day at work and come home and start swinging. Equally, there would be days when the teacher called home and you were certain a beating was on the way, and he would sit at the table and talk. But this made it worse, because when we were wrong, we felt trapped in a horror movie. We never knew what was coming, how it was coming, or when."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 3 paragraph 16)

Importance: Paul Coates had come from a violent, dysfunctional childhood. As a result he became a volatile person as an adult who was hard to read. As a child, Ta-Nehisi never knew which Paul would show up when the school called home about his poor performance.

Dad lived with his tangled family on Markoe Street in West Philadelphia. His father had kids by three sisters, so that Aunt Pearl, who Dad loved, defied classification, and his four brothers and sisters were also cousins."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 3 paragraph 20)

Importance: The pain and anger that Paul Coates lived with his entire life and that often

turned to violence is more understandable considering the childhood he was able to survive.

His [Chuck D] style was baffling. I caught disjointed phrases and images, times and places that did not cohere – 'g-d Grammys,' a 'government of suckers,' 'they see me, fear me.' By the tenth session, the sonic blur sharpened into a recovered collective memory. The story began in our glory years with the banishing of Bull Conner and all his backward dragons. Never had the mountain-top seemed so close at hand."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 4 paragraph 4)

Importance: Ta-Nehisi was taken with the rapping and lyrics of Chuck D, the MC of Public Enemy. He was a great influence on Ta-Nehisi in his formative years. The lyrics were alluring and as he indicates when blended together formed a strong message of anarchy, violence and a rejection of the white world.

There were no answers in the broader body, where the best of us went out like Sammy Davis and spoke like there had never been war. I will avoid the cartoons – the hard rocks loved Billy Ocean, Luther was class, and, indeed, I did sit in my seventh period music class eyeing Arletta Holly and humming 'Lost in Emotion.' But you must remember the era. Ns were on MTV in lipstick and curls, extolling their exotic quadroons, big-upping Fred Astaire, and speaking like the rest of us didn't exist."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 4 paragraph 11)

Importance: Ta-Nehisi speaks of the black acceptance of the white world. He refers to the way some blacks adapt white ways and idolize white-approved music, entertainment and style because of pressure from society. This captures what Ta-Nehisi has referred to as unKnowledge – lies from the establishment that blacks accept.

Poly changed with the culture and demography of Baltimore. It was now our time. The pall was slowly coming off, and we were recovering from crack, though still caught in the aftershocks. I worried less about getting jumped. Weathermen talked more sun. Reports of school shootings were replaced with black is back."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 5 paragraph 11)

Importance: When Ta-Nehisi Coates was admitted into a gifted program at Polytech high school, things seemed to magically change for him. The school had once been all-white but the demographics had changed and black students were taking over the prestigious school. Even the weather seemed better there. It was a hopeful moment for Ta-Nehisi who had lived up to low expectations in his prior school.

Dad had turned conservative, but not in the way of the demonologists who sold us out for tenure and crumbs. More like a man who spurns the false talk of revolution for the humbler mission of resurrecting one soul at a time."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 6 paragraph 18)

Importance: Paul Coates had been a revolutionary as evidenced by his long years in the Black Panther Party and as leader of the local Panthers. After he broke with the

Panthers, he recognized that revolution was the impossible dream. Helping to bring change to one person was more important and, of course, more doable.

Teyanda whispers in my ear, Ta-Nehisi, I have a crush on you. I turn and she's running off, only to turn back for a second, unsmiling through her glasses, and say, It's true. I am overcome, but still I demand parted clouds and a booming voice. A glad-to-see-you grin would have helped, and furthermore I am not sure what I am supposed to do next. I could walk her home, but Teyanda lives down near Longwood… I am my own quagmire, and so at the end of the week Teyanda extends her right hand to mush my face and sucks her teeth. Ta-Nehisi, I don't have a crush on you."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 7 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote captures the awkwardness and lack of confidence that Ta-Nehisi struggled with socially. He liked girls but he didn't know how to approach them and when one of them made an overture, as in the case of Teyanda, he didn't know how to deal with them.

When I was young, my father was heroic to me, was all I knew of religion."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: Paul Coates who was at once caring and volatile and violent was everything to Ta-Nehisi when he was young. Unlike his older brother Big Bill, Ta-Nehisi was more reticent and malleable and was easily dominated by his domineering father.

My mother had fallen out of step with the world she once knew and looked sideways at her family's everyday values. Even without my father, she would have been a dissident, cracking wise in the corner at reunions. But Dada could not come to even that sort of detent. And so with each new revelation he laid upon our family – no meat, no Thanksgiving – she grew further apart from her peoples."
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates (chapter 8 paragraph 4)

Importance: Cheryl Coates had some rebellion in her but it didn't hold a candle to the dissidence that her husband Paul ascribed to. His demands had created a schism between Cheryl and her family and traditions. She went along with Paul but suffered from the distance that it created from what she'd always known.

Topics for Discussion

1

What types of works did Paul Coates publish in the publishing operation he set up in his basement? Why did he feel the need to publish and disseminate these books himself?

2

Describe Paul Coates's childhood. How did that experience impact his later life and how he treated and raised his seven children?

3

What are particular traits of a gifted child did Ta-Nehisi display? Since he was bright and gifted why didn't he do well at school and why was he a disciplinary problem?

4

What perils waited at the doorstep of the boys of West Baltimore like Ta-Nehisi and Big Bill? How did the two brothers respond differently to the lure of the street?

5

What were the circumstances that led to Paul joining the Black Panthers? How did his experience there impact the rest of his life?

6

How did Paul and Cheryl meet? What disagreements did they have when they became romantically involved? How did Paul's militant ways impact Cheryl and their relationship?

7

Was Paul sincere when he told Ta-Nehisi that what college he attended was his decision? What role did Cheryl play in ensuring that Ta-Nehisi would attend Howard University? Why did the family refer to the school as Mecca?

8

In what ways did Ebony try to convey her feelings for Ta-Nehisi? Why did he fail to catch on to her advances or take some action in response?

9

Why did Paul enroll his sons in programs like Upward Bound and NationHouse? Describe the final night that Ta-Nehisi spent at NationHouse and its purpose.

10

Why did Ta-Nehisi have mixed feelings when his father moved them to a nice house in the suburbs? What reaction did Ta-Nehisi have to Paul's explanation for making the move?