

Coates the Charlatan

Review of 'The Message' by Ta-
Nehisi Coates

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by Mike Côté

Ta-Nehisi Coates, the author and thinker who has served as the avatar of the progressive racial movement since he began blogging at the Atlantic during the Obama administration, has reemerged after a hiatus spent writing comic books. His new work of nonfiction, *The Message*, harkens back to his 2015 bestseller, *Between the World and Me*, as both books discuss social politics and history through a highly personal lens. Coates's earlier work earned him a MacArthur "genius grant," literary accolades, and rare standing as a celebrity intellectual. As such, he has largely been immune from criticism by the liberal media establishment.

This protective cover has been put to the test by Coates's return to the spotlight.

The Message, like much of Coates's work, is a Rorschach test: If one is already primed to agree with him, the book likely seems a staggering work of genius. But for those who are skeptical or neutral, it is clearly lacking as a persuasive or even accurate portrayal of the issues it discusses. The book is set up like a travelogue, collecting Coates's political, historical, and cultural takeaways from trips to Senegal, South Carolina, and, finally, Israel. The last section, which takes up more than half of the book, has received the most attention, but The Message is shaped throughout by an approach and vision characterized by narcissism, parochialism, factual errors, deliberate decontextualization, incuriosity, and deep-seated bias. Any one of these flaws would deal a severe blow to any claim for The Message, but combined, they should be fatal to Coates's reputation.

The Message begins with a wonderful bit of irony that presages the rest of the book. "A belief in genius is a large part of what plagues us," Coates

writes, “and I have found that people widely praised for the power of their intellect are as likely to illuminate as they are to confound.” This sentence applies perfectly well to Coates himself, as a belief in his MacArthur-certified “genius” is what has made his career possible.

The book continues with Coates detailing his trip to connect to his African roots and using it to interrogate his own beliefs about history. He lays out the evils of the Atlantic slave trade, blaming European oppressors for creating, in his telling, the worst form of enslavement the world has ever seen. He conveniently fails to mention that those same societies later sacrificed immense blood and treasure to put a stop to this horrific, but unfortunately universal, practice. Thus, in his telling, the Confederacy’s aims in the Civil War were and are more meaningful than the Union’s victory. The most memorable takeaway from this section is Coates’s repeated insistence, contrary to all historic and genetic evidence, that ancient Egyptians were dark-skinned sub-Saharan Africans—memorable in the sense that it indicates the level of deep unseriousness that permeates this book.

After his sojourn to Senegal, Coates spends the

second segment of *The Message* far closer to home, in South Carolina. The trip revolves around a local school board's decision to remove Coates's work from curricula, something he refers to as a "book ban" and whose supporters he likens to segregationists. He lionizes the teacher who assigned his work in an AP English class, calling her brave and lauding her for making taxpayers buy his book. As he does so, Coates derides America for its focus on individual liberties and presents the fundamental rights to commerce, self-defense, and personal choice as akin to wanting "an arsenal of infinite AR-15s" and the "biggest and greenest of lawns." He promotes instead a youth-focused, progressive ideological project aimed at understanding our history as being steeped in oppression. "We have lived under a class of people who ruled American culture with a flaming cross for so long that we regularly cease to notice the import of being ruled at all," he writes. This is the core of what he believes and seeks to transfer to a new generation: that our country is, root and branch, evil.

America is not the only target of *The Message*, for

Israel bears the brunt of Coates's broadside in the book's second half. Coates walks the reader through his realization that Israel is an oppressive apartheid state that treats Palestinians just as America treated blacks in the Jim Crow South. He writes confidently on the topic, despite having spent only 10 days in the country and having read only a few books recommended by former PLO spokesman and current Columbia University professor Rashid Khalidi. He self-righteously declares Israeli policy to be "patently immoral" after speaking with a variety of Palestinian activists and Israeli leftists.

Coates compares the situation in the Levant to our own past, even going so far as to claim that Zionism used America as a model. This is not the only odd contention in this part of the book. He also argues that the world wars were race wars with "deep roots in America," that Ottoman-era Arab cities were more developed than their European counterparts, and that "Palestinians owned 90% of all land in Mandatory Palestine." None of these pronouncements is supported with any evidence, as they are insupportable. The reader is simply expected to take the word of Ta-Nehisi Coates as authoritative on the matter. And that word is

bolstered by his personal experience traveling in, as he calls it, Palestine. He relates stories of unexplained 45-minute waits at the entrance to the Temple Mount and direct, aggressive questioning by a security guard at his ritzy Jerusalem hotel, identifying these encounters as exemplars of the arbitrary and capricious Israeli security state.

Far more important than what Coates includes in his pat narrative is what he deliberately omits. Nowhere in *The Message* do the words “Iran,” “ Hamas,” “Hezbollah,” or “October 7” appear, despite the majority of the writing and editing having occurred after that fateful date. Coates speaks only to those who ratify his preconceived narratives about school curricula, race, and Israel. He never once mentions the long history of Palestinian rejectionism, anti-Semitic terrorism, or the various peace offers that Israel has unilaterally made. He harps on settler violence but fails to note the well-established “pay for slay” program of the Palestinian Authority. He conflates Palestinians living under home rule in Gaza and the West Bank with Arab Israelis, arguing that Arab Muslims essentially have no rights in Israel proper. That is patently untrue, as anyone who has paid attention over the past year could have seen in the exposure of the complete integration of Arab

Israelis in the country's medical system while it has been working overtime after the attacks and during the war. Coates reverses the causality of the various Arab wars of extermination against Israel, blaming the victim and whitewashing the genocidal ideology that undergirded the Palestinian cause. He claims that the 1948 war was driven by Israeli hunger for land and desire to ethnically cleanse their territory, whereas history documents the opposite; Israel wanted partition, and it was the Arabs who rejected it. His treatment of the second intifada lays culpability wholly on Israel, and Coates uses the passive voice whenever describing Palestinian-driven escalation.

He downplays the historic Jewish connection to the land, pooh-poohing the archaeological significance of the various digs in Jerusalem and dismissing the historical verity of the Jewish temples built on the Temple Mount. Indeed, he refers to the entirety of Israel as "Palestine," from the river to the sea. A particularly galling example is his describing Yad Vashem as being in Palestine, totally oblivious to the fact that a Holocaust memorial would be anathema to a Palestinian state. He spends pages detailing the horrific Hebron massacre carried out by the terrorist Baruch Goldstein in 1994 but spills

nary a drop of ink on the 1929 pogrom that eliminated that city's historic Jewish population. Coates's description of the so-called Nakba—the displacement of Palestinian Arabs during the 1948 war—analagizes it to the worst atrocities of human history. He relays the foundational mythos of the Palestinian cause like a well-versed expert, despite having never heard the term “nakba” before his Levantine mission-cum-vacation. What he omits from his story is the even larger exile of Jews from Arab nations, the historical context of widespread forced population movements after the Second World War, and the invading Arab armies' role in the Palestinian flight.

Coates's predetermined ideology leaps off the pages of *The Message*, especially when it comes to his attempts to gain background knowledge on the subjects he writes about with such forceful overconfidence. Tellingly, his poor excuse for a bibliographical essay is not actually included in the book itself but resides on Coates's personal website. It is in those source notes that Coates describes those whom he trusts to inform him on the Israel–Palestinian conflict: the aforementioned Khalidi, Hamas defenders in scholarly garb such as Noura Erakat, and anti-Israel human-rights

organizations, including those under the UN umbrella. These sources include almost no perspectives other than virulent anti-Zionism. Coates levels some of his most inflammatory claims in this glorified postscript, including that Palestinians face “a campaign of industrialized extermination” —a modern-day blood libel against the Jewish state.

Most interesting is how Coates refuses to ask “why” when faced with any Israeli decision. This is perhaps best represented by the personal anecdotes described above, in which he claims to have seen Israeli racism and bigotry up close. Coates has no interest in inquiring as to the purpose of those security measures and is more than happy to attribute them to evil motives. The 10 days he spent in Israel came at the end of May 2023, in the middle of a monthslong wave of Palestinian terrorism that claimed 13 lives and included more than 100 attacks in Jerusalem and its environs. This is clearly why security measures had been ramped up at major tourist sites and fancy hotels—prime targets for terrorists. Yet the man who describes his writing as “a kind of scientific process that, when

correctly applied, must necessarily reveal the truth” had no interest in testing his hypothesis.

Ta-Nehisi Coates has been courting controversy for years with his progressive polemics, but he is not in the least controversial where it counts—in the rarefied world in which he travels. Ever since the essay he wrote for the Atlantic demanding that reparations for slavery be paid to people like him 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, his every word has been awaited with bated breath, his every publication has been heralded as a major event. The Message was treated as a Moses moment, with Coates coming down from the mountaintop, albeit with tablets he had written. But the book reveals Coates not as prophet or lawgiver, but as charlatan.

Ignorance is his stock in trade, camouflaged by purple prose, inane fluff, and (un)righteous indignation. The Message has proven that conclusively. His lack of self-awareness, simple errors of fact, parochial worldview, incuriosity about history or context, entrenched bias, and failure to ask basic follow-up questions make this book a searing indictment of its author and the cult that has grown up around him.

Ironically enough, Coates dedicates *The Message* to students in his journalism class. Throughout the book, he tries to inspire them in pursuit of his chosen quest. But that quest isn't journalism, fact-finding, or working to reveal the truth, whatever it ends up being. It is instead to lambaste the United States, Western civilization, and the world's lone Jewish state, all to the vapid applause of liberal elites. *The Message* is not a work of investigation or education about useful principles and ideas. But Coates is not in the business of edification. He is in the business of proselytization. And among the political elite, business is booming.

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