



WE WERE EIGHT YEARS IN POWER

TA-NEHISI COATES

A Discussion Guide

- 1 What purpose do Coates's notes that preface the essays in the collection serve? How do they contribute to your understanding of the essays in context of what was happening in America at the time the essays were written?
- 2 According to Coates, what is the relationship between white supremacy and black respectability? Why has "good Negro government" not ended white supremacy?
- 3 Why does Coates see both his story and the story of Bill Cosby as "myth[s] of self-generated success"? What does Coates mean when he says Cosby's criticism of African American culture is an example of historical amnesia?
- 4 How does Coates use American history to put contemporary America in context? What does his study and writing about the Civil War expose about modern day America?
- 5 How does Coates's arc as a professional writer match or contrast to the arc of Obama's presidency? How does Coates's writing develop throughout the essays in the book?
- 6 Coates cites a number of books and other writers in *We Were Eight Years in Power*—which authors and works were you familiar with already? Which do you want to read after reading this book? Share with your book group.
- 7 Each essay begins with a note, as way of introduction, but also a reflection of the past eight years for Coates. Did Coates personal notes resonate with you when reading the essay that followed? Did you feel that they helped connect you to each piece?
- 8 *We Were Eight Years in Power* is going to bring out different experiences for each reader. Was there an essay that you felt particularly connected to? Why?
- 9 Some readers may be coming to this collection having never read any of the essays before, some this might be their second or third time. Did you read each note and essay separately, or as a whole and what effect do you think it had on your experience as a reader? Did you agree with this formatting?
- 10 Had you read any of the pieces in this collection before? Did you approach them differently in this volume, and did the notes impact how you read them?
- 11 Do you think *We Were Eight Years in Power* leaves us with hope for the future of politics and race relations in America? Why or why not? What else do you think Coates was trying to convey on where we go from here?
- 12 Were there ideas in this collection that you hadn't come across before? Such as the process of redlining? Do you see any parallels with this practice today?
- 13 An overarching struggle Coates presents through his notes of each year is that his own fame as a writer became more present, and he became more recognized. He also recognizes that because of this he had the fortune of writing in the era of a black president. Had you read his previous book, *Between the World and Me*? What made you pick up this collection, and did it meet the expectations you had?
- 14 *We Were Eight Years in Power* covers a wide variety of social issues that are as current today as they were 100 years ago. In "The Case for Reparations" for example, Coates brings up there's more to the fear than a monetary commitment, but that it threatens American history, this is apparent in the current arguments for and against confederate statues. Do you see this anywhere else? Was this essay a surprise for you, or did you already know a lot of this history?