

## Manning Up

The Coates Family's Beautiful Struggle in Word and Deed



Ta-Nehisi Coates

By **Felicia Pride** | Posted [6/4/2008](#)

What I came to understand was the great democracy in this, and that what mattered to these boys was not so much what you came to the street with but how you carried what you were given.

--Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle*

Ta-Nehisi Coates begins his story in fear. It's 1980s Baltimore, downtown, Charles Street, no less or more dangerous than now. He and his older brother, whom he affectionately calls Big Bill, are about to get their manhood trampled by an eager crew from Murphy Homes trying to reconfirm their own.

Reputation precedes their adversaries. They "split backs and poured in salt." Two brothers without a burner against hungry opponents ready to split wigs means you haul ass. Big Bill was more versed in the streets. He's quick to jet. It takes moments of clarification and a hard right

hand for Ta-Nehisi to follow suit. He runs. He calls his father. He waits to be rescued. His brother vows never again to be caught empty-handed.

This scene begins Coates' recently released memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* (Spiegel and Grau), where violence wraps around the hearts of black boys until it feels normal. "To be a black male is to be always at war," Coates writes. Survival means you learn how to navigate chaotic streets that are more real than they are mean. Real in the sense that, as Coates declares, they, too, are their own distinct countries with "anthems, culture, and law." Whether you're patriotic or not, it's in your best interest to follow the norms established. Arm yourself with the protective exterior of an intimidating mug and bravado speech. Perfect and perform the hard bop. Front or be killed. Goal: emerge victorious. Not unscathed, but with as much manhood and sanity intact as possible.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, 32, a product of West Baltimore's Tioga Parkway, doesn't bop hard when he walks into the Harlem café where we meet, close to where he's been living for the past four years. It's an unusually warm day in April. The spot's air conditioning is broken and the heat knocks you upside the head the moment you step inside. He doesn't seem to notice. I wonder if this is the result of, as he writes in his book, his father banning air conditioners and telling his son that feeling hot was psychological.

Coates' over-six-foot stature could be deemed intimidating. His face is mild-mannered to match the voice that doesn't transmit braggadocio, only a subtle B-more accent. I almost don't recognize him from the picture I've painted inside my head, the reserved kid projected in his memoir. As a youngster, Coates was smart but terrible at school. He liked sports and girls. He wasn't a lover or a fighter. He had an embarrassing basketball game but an impressive comic-book collection. He struggled at being hard.

I've almost forgotten the accomplished journalist that he's become, backed by an impressive résumé of credits that most writers would pay for: *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, former staff writer for *The Village Voice*, and a recent stint at *Time* magazine.

On the day we meet, he's comfortable in the complex skin that's made tangible in *The Beautiful Struggle*. The book is a lyrical and well-crafted patchwork of memories that pushes toward the bizarre and pulls from the heart. Replete with recollections of his father Paul Coates, an ex-Black Panther, as a backyard beekeeper who provided his family with raw honey; of Big Bill's attempt to convert all their brothers into warriors; and of forming human pyramids on the front lawn with his six brothers and sisters. The word "half" isn't uttered to characterize his siblings from other mothers.

His memoir mimics the nonlinear path of a life that curves and cycles, dips and reverts, as it travels through Coates' adolescence, from middle through high school--a period that he believes is a critical time in young men's lives, the time when they learn the lessons to carry them into manhood. "*The Wonder Years* was a favorite show of mine, and it covers about the same period," Coates acknowledges. "I always thought Kevin was an incredibly balanced character, and I felt that was how I was."

*The Beautiful Struggle* is not a coming-of-age story--it's a coming-into-insight one. Coates chronicles his and his brother's resistance and acceptance of "consciousness" and "knowledge," an

umbrella concoction of understanding, imagination, sanity, and purpose that was directly and indirectly pushed by William Paul Coates onto his children.

Raised in North Philadelphia, Paul Coates knew what the world outside the front door had in store for his sons. Like Ta-Nehisi, he found no comfort in the exhausting posturing that comes with acting hard, although he understood how to survive. He found refuge in libraries snooping around for a history that extended beyond the City of Brotherly Love. He was in search of a consciousness that would help him explain it all. The Army and his deployment in Vietnam didn't provide it. The honest words of black male writers such as Richard Wright, Claude Brown, and James Baldwin, however, revealed Paul to himself. He joined the local Black Panther Party and eventually led the Baltimore branch ("Fighting the Power," *Feature*, Feb. 1 and Feb. 8, 2006). "But he planned no insurrections," Ta-Nehisi writes about his father's involvement in the organization, which didn't truly suit his intellectualism and worldview, that education can be just as effective as guns.

"Violence shapes how you walk and what you say," Coates says. "When you are a young black male, the law is, 'I ain't gonna be a punk.'" And Coates' father and eldest brother taught him, in different ways, to man up.

Ta-Nehisi Coates has four other brothers, but it was William Coates Jr., a larger-than-West-Baltimore-life character who prompted the book's subtitle. As a youngster, Big Bill was street struck--their father's antithesis, his little brother's connection to the young excitement of being a badass. Bill's claim to eldest son was only determined by a few months (he and brother Johnathan were born in the same year), but he exerted his power like he paid dues for it. He primarily lived with his mother but would inhabit his father's house on visits or forced suspensions. He'd claim the top bunk, making younger brothers Ta-Nehisi and Menelik share the bottom bed. But to Ta-Nehisi, Big Bill was his minister of information, disseminating the know-how not just to survive the streets, but to thrive. He was the better-dressed one. The one who encouraged a shy Ta-Nehisi to holler at "jennys." He ran his own resistance movement against the teachings of his father. "Big Bill was never scared," Coates writes. "He had a bop that moved the crowd, and preempted beef." He also managed to be the ringleader of other wannabe tough guys from around the way who reveled in the lighter side of crime--stealing bus tickets and jumping dudes.

"My older brother is such a big influence," Coates says. "He's lively and, like my father, he's a very dominant person." To this day, eldest brother jokes with younger brother in the "you know I raised you" sort of way.

"I assumed the leadership capacity," says Damani, as Big Bill is now known, in a confident tone when we chat by phone. "He seemed so square," he adds about his younger brother with a laugh. "I was the opposite of him. I was more street-oriented, so I took him under my wing."

All quests begin somewhere. "I was black as Edmondson Avenue and AFRAM," Ta-Nehisi writes, meaning he was as Baltimore as he was black. His name, given to him by his conscious father, was the ancient word for Nubia, land south of Egypt. So he's also as African as he is his father's son. But during a chunk of his adolescence, Coates preferred around the way.

"Mondawmin was my world," Coates says in between memories of using a Charlie Rudo bag to carry his school books and hopping the subway to Rogers Avenue. "I can't separate Baltimore from being a kid." And *The Beautiful Struggle* is fully equipped with shout-outs--from Frank Ski to Shake and Bake--to add authenticity.

At an early age, however, Ta-Nehisi showed signs of wanting more than his neighborhood could offer--more knowledge, more understanding. He read books like it was his job, although it was partly his father's. But when his father would broach discussions that led down the path of consciousness, Ta-Nehisi would tune out, happier to tune into morning wrestling matches on television.

In efforts to wake up a daydreaming Ta-Nehisi, his father enrolled him in Lemmel, one of the most violent middle schools in West Baltimore. Father thought the school had the structure his son needed. Big Bill warned his brother to watch his back--cats there didn't mess around. Ta-Nehisi was scared, but in hindsight he sees the value in his experience--from being afraid to walk to school alone on the first day to learning the natural order of things, including the bop and the scrap.

"Other people pay for your inability to stand up for yourself," Ta-Nehisi adds as another law he learned during his days at Lemmel. "When you punk out, that makes more trouble for everyone else who is associated with you." So he became a law-abiding citizen.

Coming of age in the late '80s was doubly significant. Crack met the golden era of hip-hop; lives were lost over Starter jackets and families destroyed by vials. Transformed rappers exchanged gold chains for African medallions with intentions to emerge out of the rubble that rocks produced.

Initially, both Bill and Ta-Nehisi were made speechless by the foreign yet familiar music, which big bro introduced to his student. Coates writes:

I'd search the liner notes for clues, play back lyrics until they were memory, and then play back memory until I gleaned messages, imagined and real. And slowly I began to pull something from the literature. Slowly I came to understand why these boys needed to wear capes, masks, and muscle suites between bars. Slowly I came to feel that I was not the only one who was afraid.

The "New York noise," as Coates describes hip-hop, was to him like the lives of black youth: "None of it made sense." Now backed by a heart-pounding beat and a Chuck D confidence, Coates gorged on the militant texts of his father, seeking links between West Baltimore, the Bronx, and Nubia. He began pumping Gil Scott-Heron, assigning his own reading, and studying the legacy of the Panthers. His life, upbringing, and lineage started to make sense.

Big Bill had been ripping mics as a member of the hip-hop group West Side Kings. Eventually, he, too, started searching for the bigger picture. The group started rhyiming about rebellion and changed its name to Foundation. Bill, moving toward consciousness--an internal struggle aided and abetted by knowledge and his determined parents--eventually followed suit, changing his name to the Swahili "Damani," which means "thoughtful." Other parts of self were found and pieced together during his time at Howard University, known to the Coates as "The Mecca."

Two brothers started to feel the real "rebel blood" that was keeping them alive--the same blood that pumped through their father.

If Baltimore is where Ta-Nehisi Coates spent his childhood, it's where Paul Coates, now 62, became an adult. And *The Beautiful Struggle* captures his journey into manhood from the eyes of his son. Coates writes:

Dad made an unromantic impression. He wore cheap clothes. His hair rebelled against combs. He had five kids, who at any moment could be roaming the store. He wore old shoes. He lived with various women. But he was all brainpower. He had dropped out of high school but could think in ways that the credentialed class could not conceive. He helped my mother get an A on her senior thesis. He preached about the people's need for books, and he provided them. He organized social activities--celebrations of the family or children's books. His kids were always with him. His various lovers were put to work.

Complex is too simple a word to describe Paul Coates. He was a young man who had seven children by four women. He negotiated romantic relationships. He's a self-taught intellectual who holds an advanced degree and, Ta-Nehisi notes in his memoir, "outlawed eating on Thanksgiving" in protest over the Attica prison uprising, the plight of Native Americans, and gluttony. He's a former librarian who got a job at Howard University so he could send his children there for free. He was a disciplinarian who passed out ass-whippings like revolutionary literature. He was known to bring his own syrup to IHOP. He became a social entrepreneur before the term was made popular.

But he's also warm and thoughtful. He talks like words matter, a trait Ta-Nehisi inherited. He wears his sixth decade well. He's gentle in face and demeanor--wise, filled with captivating stories.

Paul Coates left the Black Panthers in 1972. "At that point that I left the Black Panther Party, it was everything to me," he says. "It was what I lived for and was prepared to die for. To walk away from it . . . I didn't think anything was wrong with the Panthers at the time, I thought something was wrong with me--like I couldn't cut it. I had to compensate.

"In leaving," he says, "I had to create a way that I could justify my existence and my worth to the black community."

Paul compensated for his exit from the Panthers by expanding his definition of revolution. "It's not like overthrowing the government," he says. "It's like restoring humanity to a person and putting that person in the community to be a positive force. What could be better than that?"

With revolution in mind, he connected with six other "exes"--Panthers, socialists, and black nationalists--to develop a three-tiered program called the George Jackson Prison Movement. Step 1: Open a bookstore to sell books to the community and send texts to the brothers and sisters in jail as a way to promote intellectual growth during incarceration. Step 2: Establish a publishing company to publish books that the bookstore could sell as well as fund the efforts of the store. Step 3: Establish a printing company to print books for the publisher. The brothers and sisters in jail were to work for the program once released.

The mismatched group stayed together for about five days. Paul and another former Panther, Reginald Howard, connected and opened a bookstore in 1972, the second black bookstore in Baltimore, around the corner from Panther headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue.

In 1978, in his basement, Paul started publishing pamphlets that were assembled and stapled by the Coates children. Ta-Nehisi remembers vividly traveling with his father to sell the literature at fairs, lugging boxes of texts when he'd rather be playing.

Black Classic Press, now considered the second-longest-running continuous black book publisher, is the baby of a movement, an extension of the successes and failures of the Black Panther Party, birthed by a generation who saw book publishing as a means of communicating and elevating the struggle. "We work to preserve black history," Paul Coates says. "Not like formaldehyde, but by keeping it alive as an active history."

The first actual book that the press published was Drusilla Dunjee Houston's *Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire*, a 1926 book that makes connections among ancient black populations and one that Paul felt was particularly appropriate to illustrate the press' dedication to uncovering lost voices and illuminating African history and black intellectualism not seen in average texts. The title set a precedent for works that followed, including Yosef ben-Jochannan's 1983 *We the Black Jews*, 1988's *The Second Crucifixion of Nat Turner* edited by John Henrik Clarke, and Reginald Major's 2007 *A Panther is a Black Cat*. The press has also released books by Washington-based poet E. Ethelbert Miller as well as a groundbreaking collection of African-American writing inspired by the Black Arts Movement, *Black Fire*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal.

The early '90s bred good times for book publishers. The expanding Barnes and Noble and Borders chains stocked anything and everything, Paul Coates says, and independent bookstores were still neighborhood staples. But the big chains smartened up by implementing efficient computer systems to track the success of individual book sales. Titles that didn't sell were sent back to publishers by the train load.

By 1995, Black Classic had endless pallets filled with unsold books. The small publisher still had more titles it wanted to bring back to print but was afraid to add additional pallets.

"I didn't see Black Classic Press as a business until about close to 20 years [after starting it]," Paul acknowledges. "I saw myself as a student of publishing. From that perspective, I didn't have to be saddled with knowing a damn thing about business. I can talk that deep-brother stuff, but it is a for-profit business. You can't get out here and expect people to give you money to stay in business. You have to figure out a way for it to sustain itself."

Before leaving his job as a librarian at Howard University in 1991, Coates had read about futuristic machines that could print one book at a time. At first, it seemed like useless technology to him. But the combination of too many books in the warehouse and not enough titles in the catalog translated into an epiphany: There is a place for a machine that can perform short-run printing.

In 1995, Black Classic secured digital printing equipment from Xerox, a clairvoyant move that proved to be the business' lifesaver. "The decision was made out of desperation," Paul

acknowledges. "Life is often the result of desperation." The decision to start BCP Digital Printing also completed the program for the George Jackson Prison Movement that was hatched two decades earlier.

Paul leads me on a tour of the printing operations, which now are 90 percent of the company's revenues and employ about nine people. It's a large, noisy warehouse filled with heavy-duty machines. Printed materials of all kinds are everywhere, including stacks for one of BCP Digital's big clients, the University of Maryland Medical System. "We put in the digital printer to save the publishing side of the business," Paul says. "But also to create a stream of income and employ more people from the black community. There was no way we could pay for it if we were doing our own printing." A friend once joked with Paul that one DocuTech machine probably costs three times the price of Coates' house. The friend was right.

Paul also points out copies of *To All Gentleness: William Carlos Williams, the Doctor Poet*, by Neil Baldwin, a book about a man who shared a love for medicine and verse. It's the first nonblack book the company has published. Black Classic Press started Imprint editions to publish all types of books and keep Black Classic dedicated to its African-centered mission. "If you spend 30 years publishing black books," Paul says, "you must know how to publish other books."

They could be selling insurance in BCP's nondescript offices. As Paul points out, no red, green, or black motherland decorations adorn the walls. There are virtually no signs that the business was born out of the Black Power movement. But there's no doubt that it's a Coates operation. Visit the offices, and there's a good chance that you'll bump into Paul's daughter Kristance (Kris for short), or a grown-up, 37-year-old Damani, who works with Kris in building and maintaining BCP Digital Printing.

"Every day is a new experience," Kris says about her five years working for her father. "I'm definitely on the track for my son to sit here," she says while pointing to her desk. "He knows that before he becomes a rapper, an artist, or whatever, he has to work at BCP. That's how we were raised."

After graduating from Howard in '95 and working in environmental science for a few years, Damani felt the familiar feeling of being unfulfilled. "I always had in my mind that I wanted to work for a black company and be a part of establishing them," he says in a mature voice that bears no hint of the boisterous Big Bill. He approached his father right around the beginnings of the digital printing business in '95. "What better opportunity to do that then when your father is about to start a new business venture?" he asks.

"It's been challenging and relentless, but overall, pleasing, stimulating, and spiritually rewarding," Damani says of working with his father, even though in *The Beautiful Struggle*, Big Bill is known for butting heads and testing boundaries. "It's been extremely fulfilling to live my dream, which included being able to work with my father, my biological mother, and my sister."

The thought of working for his father hasn't gotten past Ta-Nehisi. "I think about it all the time," he says proudly. "My dad does important work, and if we're going to come up, it's going to be through wealth-building. . . . To see how he's built the business from a little basement office is incredible."

Black Classic is primarily run by its associate publisher, Natalie Stokes, who also co-founded the Baltimore-based Three Sistahs Press. Paul currently splits his time between the printing and publishing businesses but is adamant that Stokes will run the press starting next year.

"It's great that we're working together, but there's something larger than family, and that's enterprise," he says. "If you think about what you are doing and trying to accomplish, like transforming our community and our world, suddenly family is very limiting."

Paul doesn't see these goals as lofty or impossible when action is involved. "In the Black Panther Party we talked a lot. So by the time I left, I became convinced that a lot of the talk and rhetoric, while it was very effective during that period, was not what we needed," he says about the genesis of Black Classic Press. "We as a people talk too much. It is much more important that we speak through our actions."

The publishing arm, which has about 100 titles in print, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, although Paul isn't necessarily impressed with the longevity. "I think doing is significant, period," he says. "It doesn't matter if you're here for 30, it doesn't matter if you're here for one year. It matters that you do."

Black Classic Press continues to do. In May it released *The Tempest Tales*, a unique exploration of the gray areas between right and wrong by Walter Mosley, the third book the press has published by the best-selling mystery novelist and essayist. It's rare for a writer of Mosley's stature to publish with a small press.

"Walter described [our relationship] as two coyotes walking down the road," Paul Coates says. "They fall in line with one another. They see something to eat. They go and get the grub. When they finish they go their separate ways until they get together again."

He smiles at their relationship. But what Paul finds really inspiring is the fact that both father and son released a book in the same month. "That's kind of awesome," he says.

It's a shared feeling. Ta-Nehisi Coates calls his father the single most important literary influence in his life. "He loved words and passed it on like religion," he recalls.

But Paul didn't think Ta-Nehisi would become a writer: "We had to struggle to get Ta-Nehisi to write."

Ta-Nehisi was a C student. Talent, however, was brimming at the surface. Ta-Nehisi's early experiments with words were "awkward" rhymes that tried to capture the heat of the lyrics injected into his soul by his big bro and masters like Rakim and KRS-One. When Ta-Nehisi started writing poetry, Paul began to appreciate his son's gift.

At Howard University, Ta-Nehisi took his poetry more seriously, linking up with others trying to better their craft. Disillusionment eventually hit because so much of the creative scene became based on performance. Ta-Nehisi didn't secure a college degree, which makes him the only nongraduate among his siblings, but his talent got him a position at *Washington City Paper*, a place that he says changed his life.

It was his point of no return: He became a writer. It was at the alternative weekly that Ta-Nehisi wrote like his life depended on it--attacking music criticism, book reviews, and local politics. A voice emerged, an amalgamation of whom he is-- Baltimore, hip-hop, conscious and knowledgeable, his father's son. It's a voice of an old soul with new-jack sensibilities. And he has since exerted the mess out of that voice, online and offline--from *The Washington Post* to Slate--when so many keep theirs hidden behind glossy eyes and corner ambitions. Ta-Nehisi captures both the black and the American experiences, including when the two meet, in all their complicated glory--from the presidential race, the irrelevance of the Rev. Al Sharpton, and the appeal of Condoleezza Rice, to Wal-Mart's courting of urban areas, Stanley Crouch's inner gangster, and police brutality--like a true Baltimorean, complete with middle-finger vigor, honesty, and passion.

Like a young Rakim, Ta-Nehisi makes articulating the undefined world around him look effortless. Although he says, "Writing is a very physical process. It feels manual. I know it's not, but it feels like it."

In crafting his first book, he went back: "I took a rapper's approach." *Struggle* uses lyrics as chapter openers. "Fools think hip-hop is easy," Ta-Nehisi says, blasting the ignorance of detractor Wynton Marsalis. "Great MCs have to be careful with their words, you can only say so much within a bounded frame. I had a beat in my head, and I wanted the writing to be lyrical and rhythmic. I just couldn't come out and say stuff, or it would literally fall off beat."

*The Beautiful Struggle* took him about two years to complete, although he says he had been thinking about the content for years. Family was supportive.

"When he interviewed me," Damani Coates says, "I told him anything you want to put in, put in. I'm not ashamed of my past--it has helped make me the person I am today." Big brother thought the book was dead-on in encapsulating their Baltimore upbringing and their father's ideology and sternness.

In reading *The Beautiful Struggle*, Paul Coates was very pleased with his son's first literary work and could interact with his son's words in a very intimate way, unlike any other reader. "He's a very honest writer," father says about son. "His greatest beauty is that he allows you inside his chest and in his head. He's writing in a way where he is weaker than thou, but the weakness that he writes about is in thou. It's a complete part of thou. And it is us who are thou."

"He's a critic, so he had issues," Ta-Nehisi notes about another aspect of his father's reaction. "He didn't have any issues with how I presented him. We had relationship conversations after he finished the book. Not so much about the book. He'd give me the other side of things."

Among other things, the other side involved fear. "He writes about a time when he was jumped downtown," Paul says about the book's opening scene. "He called me up, and I came very quickly. He writes about it through his fear. But he can't measure my fear. I didn't know what was going to happen. I was fearful of him. I was fearful of me. I was fearful of what I would do. Those fears he has no way of calibrating."

When Ta-Nehisi Coates was a freshman at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, he got into an altercation with a teacher that resulted in handcuffs and suspension. His father awaited him when he arrived home and, with an open hand, knocked his son to the floor. Ta-Nehisi writes, "He

swung like he was afraid, the world was closing in and cornering him, like he was trying to save my life." To a concerned mother and wife, Paul Coates posed the question, "Cheryl, who would you rather do this: me or the police?"

Whether his father did the right thing or not, Ta-Nehisi eventually gained both consciousness and knowledge. As the father of a 7-year-old son, whom he describes as a much tougher book lover, Ta-Nehisi found a new respect for what his father accomplished: "He raised five black boys, all of them except me college graduates. He was great at what he did."

Damani Coates agrees. "Even though I didn't live in the house, he was able to discipline from afar," he says. "I adopted many of the same styles myself as a father. He wasn't my best friend growing up, but I'm glad that wasn't his role at the time."

"One of the largest challenges we face as black people is raising black men," Paul says. For what seems like the first time during our conversation, he's momentarily at a loss for words when I ask him what made his parenting successful. He points out the village--his children's four mothers, Linda, Patsy, Sola, and Cheryl--and their families. He brings up expectation, which seems to be the secret weapon. "Marcus Garvey is a large inspiration to me," he says. "The thing that he gave black people was expectation and hope. Those things get melded. If there's expectation, there's some hope around."

The Coates clan had both. That's why *The Beautiful Struggle* ends in optimism. The car is packed with his suitcases and boxes. Ta-Nehisi and his parents head down I-95 to the Mecca. He survived high school and West Baltimore. As they roll up Georgia Avenue in D.C., he spots his brother, Damani, sitting in front of some dorms. Ta-Nehisi writes:

He had never looked so at ease. He was sitting there talking when we pulled up, loose with the sort of causal humanity that Baltimore never allowed. The old anger which guarded him and maybe saved him during the days of Murphy Homes, was drained and what was left was all my father, all my people, ever wanted. Was a man.

Everything in between to get to this point--the character-building, the perspective shifting, the indoctrination, the tough love--loosened the bop, smoothed out the face, opened the mind and prepared a black man who was once a black boy, for the beautiful struggle that's to be continued.