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Known And Strange Things: Essays



Synopsis

A blazingly intelligent first book of essays from the award-winning author of *Open City* and *Every Day Is for the Thief* NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *Time* • *The Guardian* • *The Atlantic* • *Harper's Bazaar* • *San Francisco Chronicle* • *Financial Times* • *Kirkus* Finalist for the PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay and PEN/Jean Stein Book Award With this collection of more than fifty pieces on politics, photography, travel, history, and literature, Teju Cole solidifies his place as one of today's most powerful and original voices. On page after page, deploying prose dense with beauty and ideas, he finds fresh and potent ways to interpret art, people, and historical moments, taking in subjects from Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare, and W. G. Sebald to Instagram, Barack Obama, and Boko Haram. Cole brings us new considerations of James Baldwin in the age of Black Lives Matter; the African American photographer Roy DeCarava, who, forced to shoot with film calibrated exclusively for white skin tones, found his way to a startling and true depiction of black subjects; and (in an essay that inspired both praise and pushback when it first appeared) the White Savior Industrial Complex, the system by which African nations are sentimentally aided by an America "developed on pillage." • Persuasive and provocative, erudite yet accessible, *Known and Strange Things* is an opportunity to live within Teju Cole's wide-ranging enthusiasms, curiosities, and passions, and a chance to see the world in surprising and affecting new frames. Praise for *Known and Strange Things* • "On every level of engagement and critique, *Known and Strange Things* is an essential and scintillating journey." • Claudia Rankine, *The New York Times Book Review* • (Editors' Choice) • "A heady mix of wit, nostalgia, pathos, and a genuine desire to untangle the world, or at the least, to bask in its unending riddles." • *The Atlantic* • "Brilliant . . . [*Known and Strange Things*] reveals Cole's extraordinary talent and his capacious mind." • *Time* • "[*Known and Strange Things*] showcases the magnificent breadth of subjects [Cole] is able to plumb with . . . passion and eloquence." • *Harper's Bazaar* • "[Cole is] one of the most vibrant voices in contemporary writing." • *LA Times* • "Cole has fulfilled the dazzling promise of his novels *Every Day Is for the Thief* and *Open City*. He ranges over his interests with voracious keenness, laser-sharp prose, an open heart and a clear eye." • *The Guardian* • "Remarkably probing essays . . . Cole is one of only a very few lavishing his focused attention on that most approachable (and perhaps therefore most overlooked) art form, photography." • *Chicago Tribune* • "There's

almost no subject Cole can't come at from a startling angle. . . . His [is a] prickly, eclectic, roaming mind.

•The Boston Globe "[Cole] brings a subtle, layered perspective to all he encounters.

•Vanity Fair "In page after page, Cole upholds the sterling virtue of good writing combined with emotional and intellectual engagement.

•The New Statesman "[Known and Strange Things] possesses] a passion for justice, a deep sympathy for the poor and the powerless around the world, and a fiery moral outrage.

•Poets and Writers

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Customer Reviews

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dazzlingly wide-ranging collection. *San Francisco Chronicle* “[Cole] brings a subtle, layered perspective to all he encounters. *Vanity Fair* “Erudite and wide-ranging . . . Mr. Cole proves himself a modern Renaissance man. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* “Teju Cole proves the twenty-first-century essay is in fine fettle. *The New Statesman* “[Known and Strange Things” possesses] a passion for justice, a deep sympathy for the poor and the powerless around the world, and a fiery moral outrage. *Poets and Writers* “Bold, thoughtful essays. *Minneapolis Star Tribune* “We have in Cole . . . a continuation of [James] Baldwin’s legacy; he’s an observer and truth-seeker of the highest order. *The Seattle Times* “Essays pulse with the possible; the best ones gesture at unexplored territories. But they feel most satisfying where the author has followed his ideas to places the reader hadn’t thought to visit. *Known and Strange Things* contains many essays that do this beautifully, combining the thoughtful pause with insistent questioning, tumbling over different terrains, picking up bits of them as they go, taking on the grain and texture of all the places they’ve been. *Financial Times* “An immersive experience into a wide-ranging set of concerns, memorably conveyed onto the page. *Men’s Journal* “[Cole] displays infectious inquisitiveness as an essayist. *O: The Oprah Magazine* “[Known and Strange Things] showcases the magnificent breadth of subjects [Cole] is able to plumb with . . . passion and eloquence. *Harper’s Bazaar* “Erudite, committed and finely observed. *The Age* “[Known and Strange Things” reveals] fascinating aspects of Cole’s searching and unusual mind . . . omnivorously exploring everything from Virginia Woolf to his now-famous essay on the White Savior Industrial Complex. *The Washington Post* “Cole’s essays are brilliantly written—sharp, intelligent—and yield a pleasurable sweetness. His prose, in its variations, is impeccable where he wants it to be. His erudition is put to work humbly. But in encountering these essays, perhaps the most important quality to grasp is Cole’s deep sense of the seriousness of life. . . . I am sentimental about Teju Cole and think of him as an emissary for our best selves. He is sampling himself for our benefit, hoping for enlightenment, and seeking to provide pleasure to us through his art. May his realm expand. *Norman Rush, The New York Review of Books* “Cole combines the rigor of a critic with the curiosity of Everyman. *BookPage* “A bold, honest, and controversially necessary read. *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Cole is a literary performance artist, his words meticulously chosen and deployed with elegance and force. To read, see, and travel with him is to be changed by the questions that challenge him.”
 •Publishers Weekly “Cole’s insights cast fresh light on even the most quotidian of objects . . . [and his] collection performs an important service by elevating public discourse in an unsettled time.”
 •Booklist (starred review)
 “A terrific collection of essays from one of our greatest public intellectuals.”
 •Vox “Cole’s writing is masterful and lyrical and politically and socially engaged, and he is probably one of the most interesting African writers at work today.”
 •Chris Abani, author of *Graceland* and *The Face* “The forms of resistance depend on the culture they resist, and in our era of generalizations and approximations and sloppiness, Teju Cole’s precise and vivid observation and description are an antidote and a joy. This is a book written with a scalpel, a microscope, and walking shoes, full of telling details and sometimes big surprises.”
 •Rebecca Solnit, author of *Men Explain Things to Me* “Absolutely wonderful . . . Teju Cole is so erudite, so laser sharp, that his intelligence shimmers, but best of all, his personality shines through as being kind and generous. I found myself transported and moved deeply.”
 •Petina Gappah, author of *The Book of Memory*

Teju Cole was born in the United States in 1975 and raised in Nigeria. He is the author of *Every Day Is for the Thief* and *Open City*, which won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Internationaler Literaturpreis, the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the New York City Book Award, and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His photography has been exhibited in India and the United States. He is Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College.

With concern, compassion, and vast insight and intelligence, Teju Cole’s essays engage a wide range of subjects. The book’s first section shines a bright lens on the work of literary giants such as Baldwin, Tranströmer, Walcott, Naipaul, and Sebald. Cole nicely blends his own experiences into his literary examinations. In section two, his passion (bordering on obsession) is the art of photography. It is a joy to read how he discusses famous photos with the keen eye of a poet. By the book’s third section, Cole turns his attention into that of an activist, as he bears witness to the politics and turmoil around the globe. Startling and frightening pieces, such as “A Reader’s War,” address the horror of drone strikes and what these attacks say about our moral

stature. In another powerful piece called "In Alabama," Cole reminds us that "no generation is free of the demands of conscience," as he links the bloodshed of the Civil Rights movement to the modern epidemic of young black men murdered by police. Another piece such as "Bad Laws" takes an illuminating look at the perpetual crisis between the unjustly-treated Palestinians and the law-enforcing Israelis. Some of the shorter pieces pack just as much intensity. Cole addresses torture in South Africa during apartheid in one piece and the demolition of ancient statues by the Taliban in another. He recounts heartbreaking stories of mob violence in Nigeria, and he concludes the book with the sorrowful fates of immigrants and migrant workers trying to cross the U.S. border. After reading *Known and Strange Things*, you're compelled to give deeper reflection to the world at large. The beauty of Cole's words and the depth of his ideas are at once inspiring and empowering.

A powerful yet gentle collection of essays that introduced me to people I didn't know (like some of the photographers) and people I knew like Naipaul and Baldwin. Lyrical is the word that keeps coming back to my mind.

Essays that delve deeply into the ordinary and the not-so-ordinary. Thoughts that force the reader to think beyond the ordinary.

This book of essays by Teju Cole aren't always essays: they might be scraps of thought, well-digested and to an immediate point. They are fiercely intelligent, opinionated, meaningful in a way that allow us to get to the heart of how another thinks. And does he think! Let's be frank: many of us don't do enough thinking, and Cole shows us the way it can be done in a way that educates, informs, and excites us. The work in this volume are nonfiction pieces published in a wide variety of outlets and that he chose from an eight-year period of travel and almost constant writing. The emphasis in these pieces, he tells us in the Preface, is on "epiphany." We can enjoy kernels of ideas that may have had a long gestation, but have finally burst onto the scene with a few sentences but little heavy-handedness or any of the weight of "pronouncements." This reads like a bared heart in the midst of negotiating life, as James Baldwin says in *The Fire Next Time*, "as nobly as possible, for the sake of those coming after us." Cole references Baldwin in all these pieces in his unapologetic gaze, but he does so explicitly in several pieces, notably "Black Body" in which

he tells of visiting the small town in Switzerland, Leukerbad (or LoÃfÃche-les-Bains), where BaldwinÃfÃcÃ â Ã â„¸s Go Tell It on the Mountain found its final form. Cole expands on his time in Switzerland in ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å“Far Away From Here,ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å• which might be my favorite of these essays. Cole tells how he was given six months to live and write in Zurich and though he did precious little writing, he was totally absorbed every day, gazing at the landscape, walking the mountains, photographing the crags, trails, and lakes, thinking, unfettered. This is someone who carries all he needs in his head, and I loved that freedom as much as he. But how can I choose a favorite from among these pieces when each spoke of ways to approach a subject with which we have struggledÃfÃcÃ â Ã â•or havenÃfÃcÃ â Ã â„¸t yetÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å|About race and class: ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å“how little sense of shame [Americans] seemed to have,ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å• he writes, looking at America from his upbringing in Lagos. Cole echoes Baldwin again in ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å“Bad LawsÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å• about Israel and its laws concerning the rights of Palestinians:ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å•The reality is that, as a Palestinian Arab, in order to defend yourself against the persecution you face, not only do you have to be an expert in Israeli law, you also have to be a Jewish Israeli and have the force of the Israeli state as your guarantorÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å|Israel uses an extremely complex legal and bureaucratic apparatus to dispossess Palestinians of their land, hoping perhaps to forestall accusations of a brutal land grab.ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å•Earlier Baldwin reminded us that ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å“ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å|few liberals have any notion of how long, how costly, and how heartbreaking a task it is to gather the evidence that one can carry into court [to prove malfeasance, official or not], or how long such court battles take.ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å• Americans looking at Israel and Palestine should be able to discern some outline of our own justifications and methods, and vice versa. Photography is one of ColeÃfÃcÃ â Ã â„¸s special interests and he is eloquent in Section Two "Seeing Things" in discussing what makes great photography as opposed to the ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å“dispiriting stream of empty images [that the] Russians call 'poshlost' fake emotion, unearned nostalgia.ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å• And then he discusses ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å“Death in the Browser Tab,ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å• wherein he tells us what he sees and what he knows after retracing the steps caught by the phone footage recording Walter Scott being shot in the back by eight bullets from a .45-caliber Glock 21. Politics is what humans do, though ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å“the sheer quantity of impacted bullshit in politicsÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å• is clearly not something Cole relishes. In "The Reprint" Cole admits he did not vote until sixteen years after he was eligible, and when he did vote finally, for Obama, ÃfÃcÃ â Ã Å“like a mutation that happens quietly on a genetic level and later completely alters the bodyÃfÃcÃ â Ã â„¸s function, I could feel my relationship to other Americans changing. I had a senseÃfÃcÃ â Ã â•dubious to me for so long, and therefore

avoided. He notes that Obama was not an angry black man, the son of slaves but a biracial outsider who invisibly worked his way to the center of the political establishment piggybacking the experience of American blacks by hiding in plain sight. The night Obama won, Cole was in Harlem. "There was as exuberant and unscripted an outpouring of joy as I ever expect to see anywhere. Black presidents are no novelty for to me. About half my life, the half I lived in Nigeria, had been spent under their rule, and, in my mind, the color of the president was neither here nor there. But this is America. Race mattered. Cole will speak out in "A Reader's War" against Obama and his clandestine brand of justice and his ominous, discomfiting, illegal, and immoral use of weaponized drones against defenseless strangers done for our sakes. He admits that Obama believes he is trying "to keep us safe, and writes "I am not naive and I know our enemies are not all imaginary. I am grateful to those whose bravery keeps us safe. It is one of the most difficult questions about political and military power that we face today and Cole wrestles the issue heroically. Not any of us have yet answered this question well, and until we do, the disconnect between justice and drone strikes will continue to plague us. We have unleashed a terrible swift sword on far away lands while we continue to suffer the brutality of a thousand cuts from our own citizens. Cosmic justice? When Cole talks about literature I experience a frisson. There is nothing quite like someone very clever and well-spoken addressing something about which one cares deeply. His insights add to my pleasure, and detract nothing. His description of the poetry of Derek Walcott remind me of the first time I encountered Walcott's work: "This is poetry with a painterly hand, stroke by patient stroke. I have forever thought of Walcott in this way, in color and in motion: turquoise and pale yellow, cool beige and hibiscus pink, the palest gray and an ethereal green I am not sure is water, air, or sea grass. The ocean creates tides through his work, and it seems so fresh. When Cole writes of his visit to V.S. Naipaul in "Natives on the Boat," we sense how Cole's initial reserve is eventually won over by Naipaul's deeply curious and wide-ranging questions. In the very next essay, "Housing Mr. Biswas," Cole writes an ecstatic celebration of Naipaul's accomplishment in creating the "smart and funny, but also often petulant, mean, and unsympathetic Mr. Biswas in Trinidad, "an important island in the Caribbean but not a particularly influential one on the

world stage. The times and places—the farms, the roads, the villages, the thrumming energy of the city, the mornings, afternoon, dusks, and nights—are described with profound and vigilant affection. It brings to startling fruition in twentieth century Trinidad the promise of the nineteenth century European novel.

He's right of course. Naipaul is a beloved writer of a type of novel no longer written, and perhaps now not often read. Reading all these essays in one big gulp was a lot to digest so I am going to recommend a slower savoring. This is a book one must own and keep handy for those small moments when one wants a short, sharp shock of something wonderful. By all means read it all at once so you know where to go back to when you can dig up copies of some of the photos he talks about or want to recall how Cole manages in so few words to convey so much meaning. His is a voice thoughtful in expressing what he sees and yet so vulnerable and human I want to say—read this—this man is what's been missing from your lives. These collected essays will be published August 9, 2016. I read the e-galley provided to me by Netgalley and Random House. I note that some of the essays about art or photography that were initially published in newspapers sometimes were accompanied by examples of the work he discusses. In a perfect world, these would be included in the final book, but truthfully, his writing is clear and compelling enough to not make that nicety strictly necessary. Apologies to the publisher for quoting from a galley: my excuse is that the work is previously published and therefore no surprise.

Wonderful essays. Will definitely recommend

A masterful and important writer. A must read.

Arrived promptly. As described.

Great read, love the stories.

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