



Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man

By Henry Louis Gates Jr

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Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man By Henry Louis Gates Jr

"This is a book of stories," writes Henry Louis Gates, "and all might be described as 'narratives of ascent.'" As some remarkable men talk about their lives, many perspectives on race and gender emerge. For the notion of the unitary black man, Gates argues, is as imaginary as the creature that the poet Wallace Stevens conjured in his poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

James Baldwin, Colin Powell, Harry Belafonte, Bill T. Jones, Louis Farrakhan, Anatole Broyard, Albert Murray -- all these men came from modest circumstances and all achieved preeminence. They are people, Gates writes, "who have shaped the world as much as they were shaped by it, who gave as good as they got." Three are writers -- James Baldwin, who was once regarded as the intellectual spokesman for the black community; Anatole Broyard, who chose to hide his black heritage so as to be seen as a writer on his own terms; and Albert Murray, who rose to the pinnacle of literary criticism. There is the general-turned-political-figure Colin Powell, who discusses his interactions with three United States presidents; there is Harry Belafonte, the entertainer whose career has been distinct from his fervent activism; there is Bill T. Jones, dancer and choreographer, whose fierce courage and creativity have continued in the shadow of AIDS; and there is Louis Farrakhan, the controversial religious leader.

These men and others speak of their lives with candor and intimacy, and what emerges from this portfolio of influential men is a strikingly varied and profound set of ideas about what it means to be a black man in America today.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

All but one originally published in the *New Yorker*, these profiles work together to create a striking collective biography of the 20th-century African-American male in all his diversity. Figures as different as Harry Belafonte and Colin Powell get equally perceptive treatment, though the essays on writer Albert Murray and literary critic Anatole Broyard (who passed for white) are particularly fine. Henry Louis Gates's pungent introduction bolsters his stature as our preeminent black intellectual, unapologetically immersed in race as a crucial element in American social discourse.

From Publishers Weekly

Gates, the head of Harvard's Afro-American studies department, is not only the nation's most prominent black scholar. As the author of the widely praised *Colored People* and as an essayist, he has become a leading interpreter of "the perplexities of race and gender." Originally published in the *New Yorker*, these deft, absorbing reports on prominent black men—from literary critic Albert Murray to choreographer Bill T. Jones and singer/activist Harry Belafonte—are enlivened by Gates's own expertise and engagement. He likens Colin Powell to bootstrap philosopher Booker T. Washington and deconstructs the racial iconography that makes Powell unthreatening to whites. Though on record as a critic of Louis Farrakhan, a visit to the Nation of Islam leader reminds Gates that he, like most African Americans, "feel[s] astonishingly vulnerable to charges of inauthenticity." He finds Farrakhan alternately charming and chilling yet concludes that the scariest thing is Farrakhan's (and America's) lack of true vision to transform black rage. In the title essay, on black responses to the O.J. Simpson trial, Gates acknowledges his outrage was mingled with relief, and he teases out the mixed opinions of other prominent blacks. The book's closing essay, is the most surprising in its examination of how New York Times literary critic Anatole Broyard passed as a white man and how that passing, by which Broyard aimed to liberate himself from the shackles of identity, ultimately hindered his writing. Gates, on the other hand, suffers no such block. He offers here fine magazine journalism, substantial portraits that are great fun to read. Author tour.

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From School Library Journal

YA. A collection of essays that bases its title on Wallace Stevens's poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Through the selections, many of which have appeared in *The New Yorker* and other popular publications, Gates explores the subject of being a black man in America. He concentrates on the multiple issues that individuals face that make them unique and not representative of any one race or gender. The author goes beyond cut-and-dried biographical sketches and steps boldly into the mind set and spirit of each of his subjects, offering keen observations and drawing parallels along the way. His professional tone is lightened with personal anecdotes. (Before visiting Colin Powell, Gates had his shoes shined, which the General noticed immediately.) He speaks of his acute nervousness upon meeting Louis Farrakhan, a man whom he has often written about unfavorably. Scanning the index, readers will find names such as Amiri Baraka, Wynton Marsalis, Albert Murray, and Jessye Norman. These and many others give insight into the issues that Gates undertakes. In the title chapter, he tackles the "racial paranoia" of the Simpson verdict and the Million Man March. Calling attention to the existence of rumor and unofficial knowledge as one of the mainstays of African-American culture, the author acknowledges the vast array of opinions as to what constitutes reality for a black man in today's world. Connie Freeman, Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, IN

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Users Review

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Ann Macdonald:

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