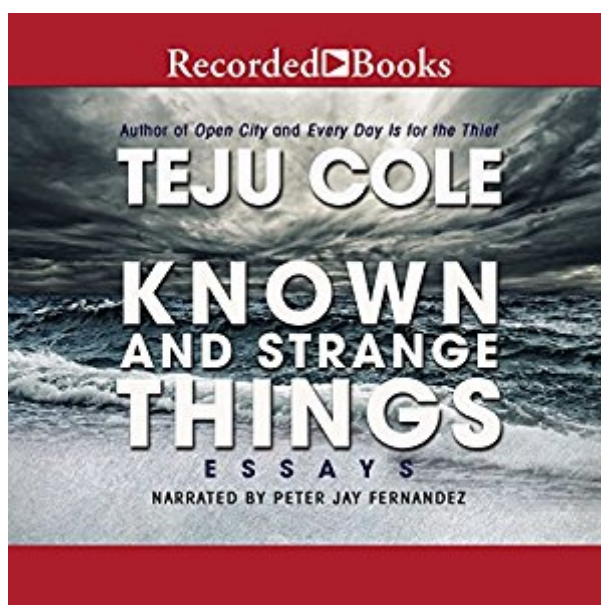


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Known And Strange Things: Essays



Synopsis

With this collection of more than 50 pieces on politics, photography, travel, history, and literature, Teju Cole solidifies his place as one of today's most powerful and original voices. Minute after minute, 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. 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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*,
“œas 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 “œBlack
Body” • in which he tells of visiting the small town in Switzerland, Leukerbad (or LoÃche-les-Bains),
where Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* found its final form. Cole expands on his time in
Switzerland in “œFar Away From Here,” • 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
crag, 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.

Given the success of “Open City” and “Every Day is for the Thief”, I think of Teju Cole as
predominantly a writer - and a very good one at that. However, as is clear from the get-go, he is also
an art historian and amateur photographer. I mention this because it helps me to describe this book.
In nearly every essay of the book, there is a sense that Cole is standing behind the lens of a
camera, carefully curating the image in the viewfinder. Eventually, he has found the most revealing,
meaningful image and uses this as a launching point for the evocative description of a novelist and the
precise contextualization of a historian. Structurally, the book is split into three sections: “Reading
things”, “Seeing things”, and “Being there.” In “Reading things,” he explores the writers and poets
that have had the most influence on him. He opens with an essay about James Baldwin and the
commonalities - and limits of that identity - that is especially germane, given the current national
discussion of identity. Along the way, we meet great personages, either imaginatively with Baldwin
as above or through actual meetings such as with V.S. Naipul. It is interesting that all of these artists
are male, given his efforts to transcend any one personal definition. Overall, however, with the
exception of the aforementioned essays and one on the poet Transtomer, this is the weakest
section of the book. It lacks the vividness and passion that the rest of the book so brilliantly
exploits. The second section, “Seeing things,” focuses on art. It is here that one can truly sense
Cole’s love of the visual. His writing is bright and spry in its descriptions, never getting bogged
down with trying to describe inexplicable elements.

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