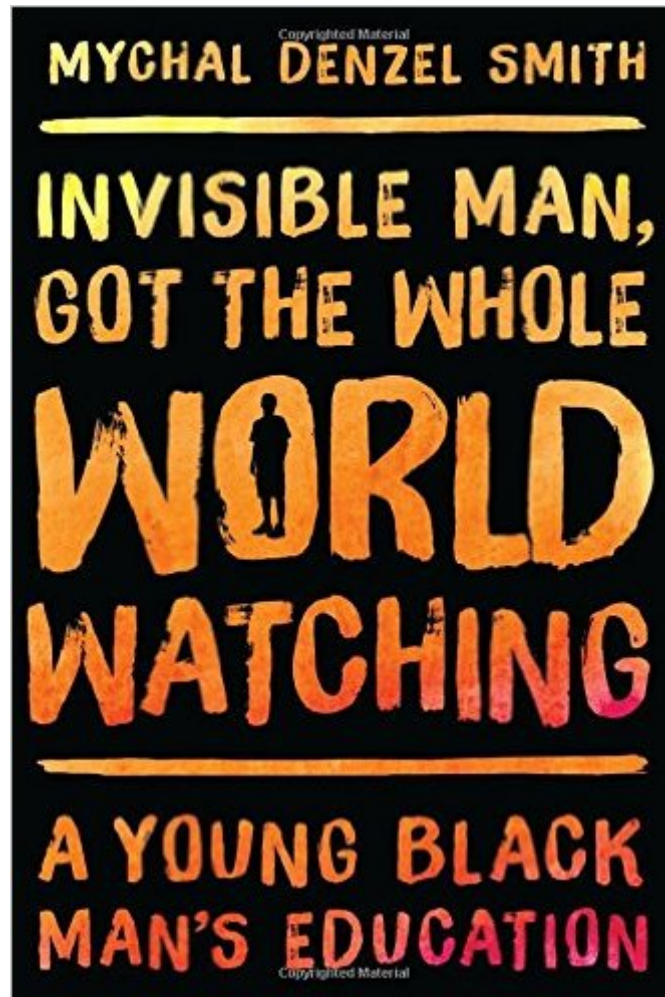


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Invisible Man, Got The Whole World Watching: A Young Black Man's Education



Synopsis

A New York Times BestsellerNew York Times Book Review Editor's ChoiceHow do you learn to be a black man in America? For young black men today, it means coming of age during the presidency of Barack Obama. It means witnessing the deaths of Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, and too many more. It means celebrating powerful moments of black self-determination for LeBron James, Dave Chappelle, and Frank Ocean. In *Invisible Man*, *Got the Whole World Watching*, Mychal Denzel Smith chronicles his own personal and political education during these tumultuous years, describing his efforts to come into his own in a world that denied his humanity. Smith unapologetically upends reigning assumptions about black masculinity, rewriting the script for black manhood so that depression and anxiety aren't considered taboo, and feminism and LGBTQ rights become part of the fight. The questions Smith asks in this book are urgent—for him, for the martyrs and the tokens, and for the Trayvons that could have been and are still waiting.

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Customer Reviews

My copy finally came in the mail. As much as I love books, I almost never order books before they are released. Usually, I have to read before I buy. This time, I purchased the book 6 months ago. This time, I just wanted to support. I'm glad that I did. Mychal Denzel Smith wrote a collective autobiography. This is a memoir of a generation -- my generation. While Mychal tells his own story, the larger narrative is that of Bush to Obama, Katrina to Jena, Trayvon to Michael. As far as memoirs

go, the dominance in the national scene makes his own personal story a little less dim. This is not the story of how his father treated his mother; this is not the story of him growing up with his brother. This is not the story of what it feels like for a man to have his heart broken. Or the story of poverty and hardship. And that's okay. This is an honest critique of President Obama as a Black man. This is an honest look at masculinity norms within the Black community and in America as a whole. This is an honest look at depression and mental health amongst Black folks. And thus, I love this memoir for being just what it is. I can tell that Mychal is the type of guy I would want to be friends with. We read all the same books. In fact, if a Black man wanted to find his way through this jungle, if he wanted to discover what being a great Black man is, I would recommend him read every single text (and album) referenced in this book, including those written by Black women. I am proud that the Black men in my generation are beginning to examine themselves for possible misogyny and possible homophobia. It makes me believe in Black men even more. This is a young Black man's education.

Having been born the same year as Mychal Denzel Smith - coming of age during the delusional post-Reagan 90s during which nearly everyone tried to teach us that sexism and racism were problems only of the past - I too share Smith's inclination towards borderline obnoxious activism. When we were too young to know better, we were unknowingly guided into an apathetic posture towards issues of discrimination that were mostly swept under the rug but have recently come back into the public eye with fresh urgency. As Smith witnesses the deaths of Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and many more, he begins to ask himself how he has learned to be a black man in America, when so many black boys have not even been allowed to become men at all. But the difficulty for Smith has been learning how to vocalize and express black masculinity when much of the language he has been taught to express himself is also rooted and framed within a racist and sexist framework. As a teenager, he finds solace and hope in the words of Malcolm X, Mos Def, Dave Chappelle, and Ralph Ellison - his black male heroes. But until he reaches college, he fails to consider the voices of those who understand those black men the most, those who "see them most clearly" - black women. Having been on the receiving end of discrimination his entire life, Smith also finds himself also posturing the same attitudes towards women without realizing how much these learned attitudes prevented him from seeing the whole picture. And this is truly what lies at the heart of Smith's brilliant discourse - the coming to terms with the latent systems of oppression that subtly influence his ability to understand the world, and more importantly, himself.

Smith's youth is the gift and curse of *Invisible Man*, *Got the Whole World Watching*. A gift because

the book, as a work of creative non fiction, offers an intellectual genealogy of the worldview that motivates the activism at the center of the current struggle for black liberation (BLM, BYP100, Dream Defenders, et al). In mapping his personal political awakening alongside the traditional bildungsroman narrative, Smith gestures toward a longer history of thought work in the black community that preceded the murders of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin and recovers an important cultural moment where the current intersectional vocabulary that is rightly deployed to challenge anti-black state violence, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia had not yet found a wide audience. Many progressive black folks, black men especially, were not "woke" in the early 2000s and Smith mines valuable ground in exploring how the black left was redefined by black women and queer folks to become broader and more inclusive. The curse comes in the form of underdeveloped craft and readymade criticism. Smith has many of the tics of a young writer and at times the prose can be a bit ham fisted and precious. As a work of memoir, Invisible Man has no harrowing "moment that changed everything" so much as a series of realizations through Smith's pretty mundane twenty-something experiences. That presents a tremendous structural challenge for the book that a more dexterous writer could solve by weaving broader histories of the black experience into the narrative or by offering illuminating cultural criticism that connects the writer's life to important events at the time.

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