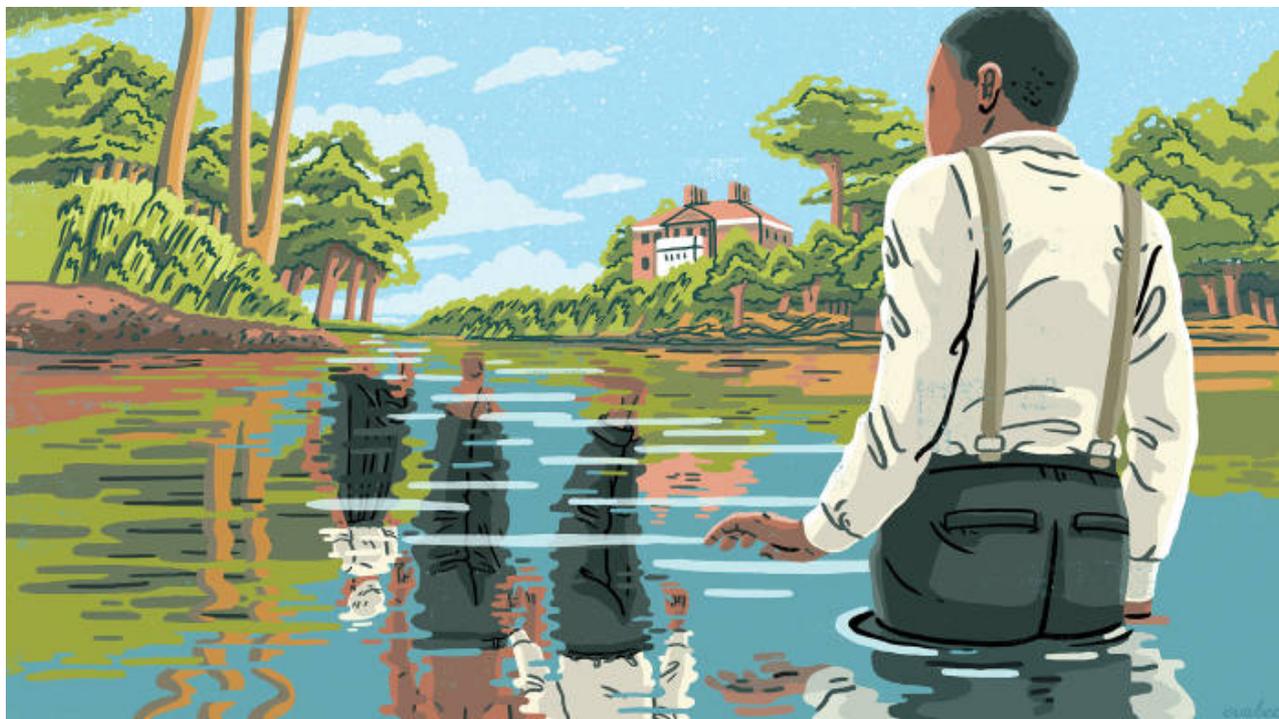


Fiction**The Water Dancer by Ta-Nehisi Coates – freed spirits**

The National Book Award winner's first foray into fiction melds the fantastical with the brutality of human bondage



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Diana Evans SEPTEMBER 27 2019

The classic drama of two brothers with contrasting fates is at the centre of National Book Award winner [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#)'s much anticipated first foray into fiction. Ten years in the making, amid acclaimed journalism and long-form essayistic writing filling three books, most notably *Between the World and Me*, *The Water Dancer* is a vast and hugely ambitious undertaking, not just for its subject matter — the horrific innards of American slavery — but its shift in authorial form. The essential preoccupations remain the same, though: the theft and health of black bodies in the face of white supremacy on US soil.

Hiram Walker, upstanding, hardworking, gifted and a slave, is brother to Maynard Walker, lazy, drunken, failed yet white, their father the once powerful leader of a Virginia plantation called Lockless. The tobacco fields are fading. Slaves, or, in the novel's chosen language, "the Tasked", are being sold off down "Natchez-way", a hell along the Mississippi where "the Task" plays out in its most extreme and merciless form. Hiram's mother Rose was also sold, when Hiram was a child, and the memory of this becomes a kind of key to what emerges as an otherworldly talent, a superpower, in fact, that enables Hiram to magically transfer the Tasked to freedom.

The method is called Conduction, a vague, esoteric thing to do with the bending of time and space and a mist, a thick fog, lifting off the river Goose as the bodies enter its waters, craving self-ownership. Coates's love of comics and his contributions to the Marvel empire (he has written series of *Black Panther* and *Captain America*) are apparent in the epic daring of this tale, its allegiance to the fantastic and mythical. Yet, as in his non-fiction there is a solid grounding in brutal reality, here reaching back into history, in particular the era of the American civil war. Although at times the research lays heavily on the first-person narrative, impeding on the delicious flow and natural lift of Coates's writing, it does offer fresh insight into the never-ending labyrinth of a terror that has broken the world. Harriet Tubman herself makes an appearance in Hiram's work with the Underground Railroad, the network of slave liberation and abolition which Colson Whitehead dissected in his 2017 Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller (the comparisons stop there, however; these are very different books).

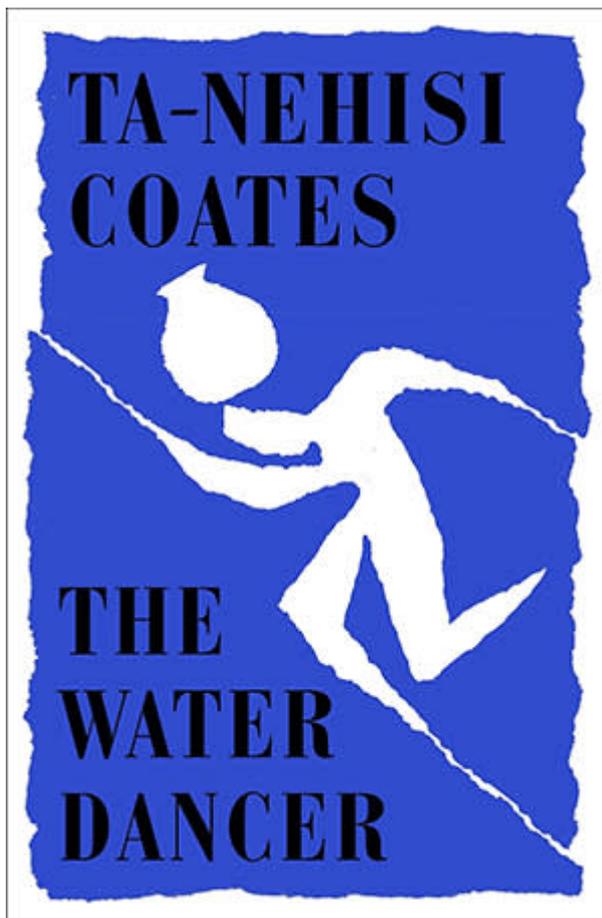
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Maynard meets his fate early in the novel, having been cushioned in the standard luxury of "Quality" life, that is, reality as experienced by white slave-owners. An echelon below that is the "Low", poor whites who today might be popularly and ungraciously thought of as "trailer trash" or "poor white trash", a distinction that nevertheless evaporates in the context of

slavery. It's not always easy to navigate this terminology, with its imposed, possibly ironic capitalisations and cumbersome effect, but I do love a novel with a language, and it's an important element in Coates's wider project, to chart and expose the deep connection between capitalism and "the flesh trade" through rigorous, dehumanising categorisation.

He declares in a standout passage of characteristic sociopolitical analysis that, in order to enslave a man, "you cannot feel him the way you feel your own. You cannot see yourself in him, lest your hand be stayed, and your hand must never be stayed, because the moment it is, the Tasked will see that you see them". Later he states, through the mouth of his most forthright female character, a white Underground agent disguised as Maynard's wife, "Power makes slaves of masters . . . But I have given up my power . . . so that now I might begin to see."

Peppered through the story are tragic and heart-wrenching manifestations of this dehumanisation, such as the mother who leaves her children to try to escape because she won't be able to carry them, or a man cutting off his own arm with an axe in order to deem himself unsaleable.



But also held in focus are the everyday lives of the Tasked, the semblance of normality achieved through finding love and letting loose and building families. It's a way of offering that humanity back, physicalising and dignifying the history, while at the same time driving the spear even further into the wound of consciousness, because of course those same families were routinely dismantled, "formed in the shadow and quick, and then turned to dust with the white wave of a hand". Hiram's superpower, in an espousal of hope, in that power of myth and dreamscape to call on hope, means that he can surpass his oppressors, shift his fate, break chains — impossible feats that in reality were effected by ordinary human beings with no magic at their disposal, fuelled instead by desperation and courage.

This is not a novel of natural virtuosity or masterful ease. Despite some beautiful description and an elegance of tone, it is tentative, almost withholding in its scene-setting, its characters don't quite lift off the page, and there is occasional idiomatic misjudgment in its dialogue. Drenched in centurial sorrow, the voice of the tale nevertheless has a piercing resonance, reminding us of the imperative of continuing this painful archaeology, not just to honour those who were tortured, murdered and abused, but to understand its impact on our troubled contemporaneity.

A transcendent, arresting work from a crucial political and literary artist, now with an expanded repertoire.

The Water Dancer, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *One World*, RRP\$28, 416 pages
Published in the UK in February 2020 by Hamish Hamilton, RRP£16.99

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