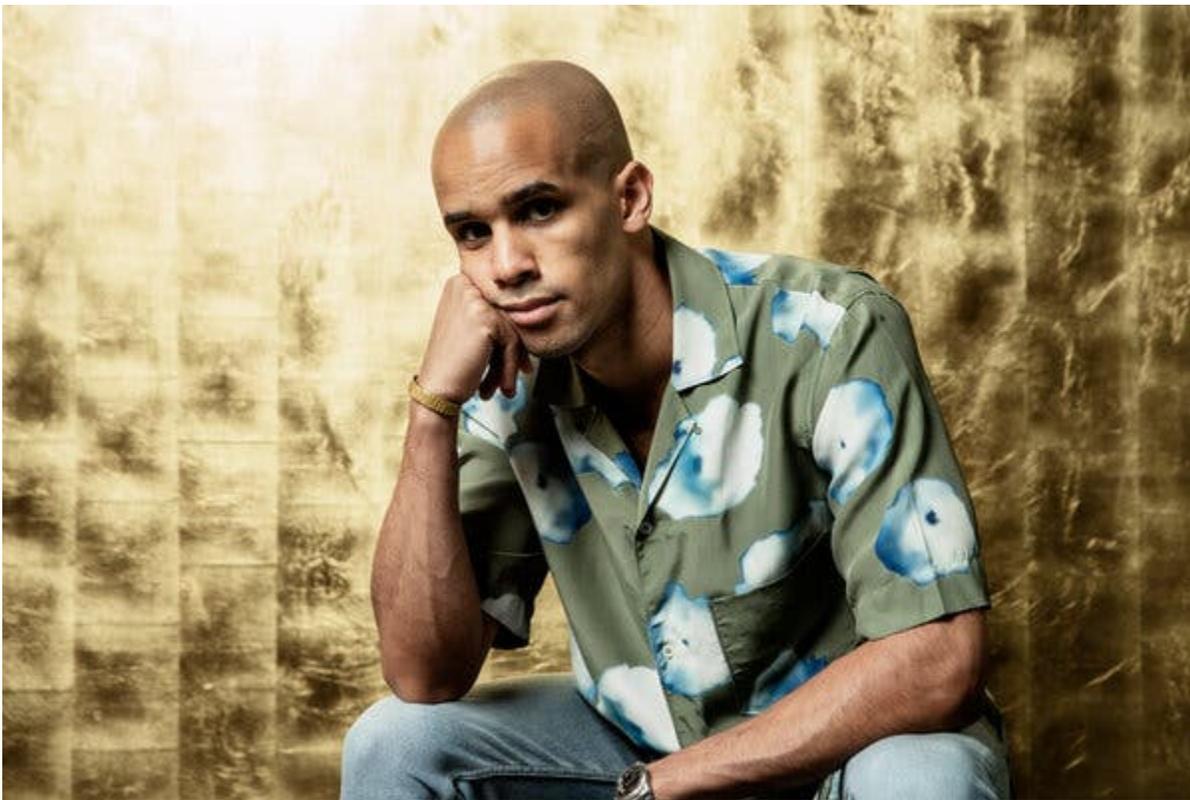


The New York Times

Read the original review here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/books/review/greyboy-cole-brown.html>

NONFICTION

What It Means to Be the ‘Token’ Black Kid in a Rich, White World



Cole Brown articulates well the inherent frustration with the subtleties of liberal racism that confront Black people in this country. Credit...Louie Douvis

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By Michael Pina

• Sept. 15, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

GREYBOY

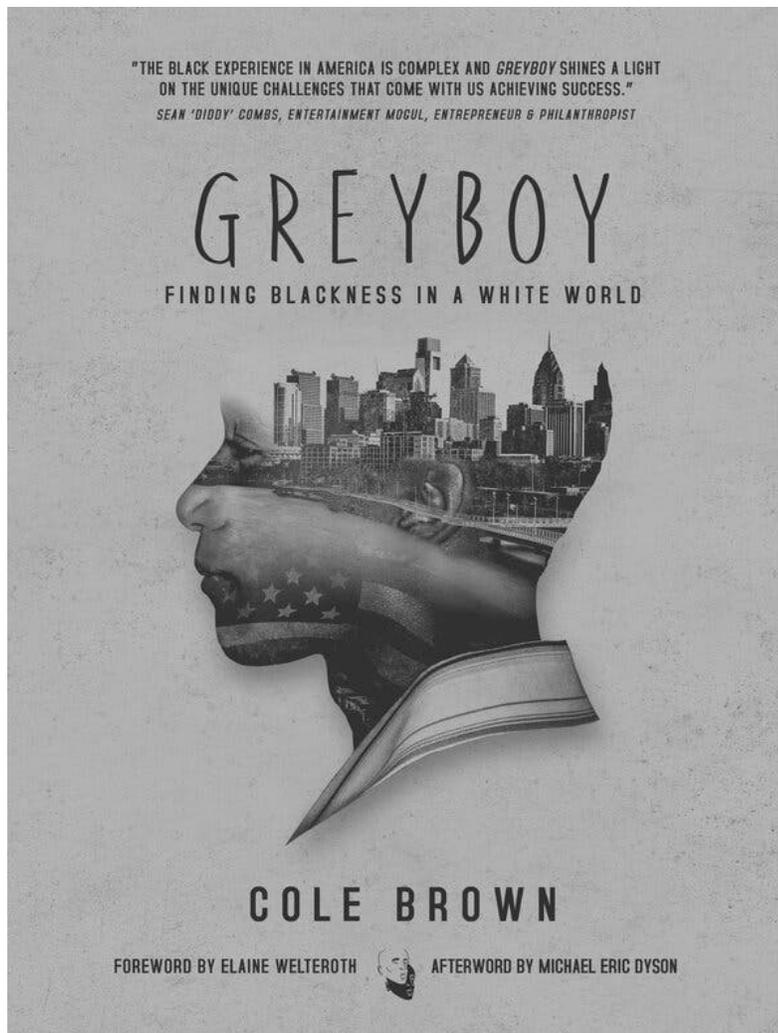
Finding Blackness in a White World

By Cole Brown

What is Blackness to a token, to a dark-skinned boy or girl being raised in the predominantly white world that is America? For Cole Brown, the 24-year-old author of “Greyboy” — a debut essay collection that reflects his futile quest to pin down questions that won’t sit still — growing up as the rare Black child in a world of white privilege is at once an unavoidable affliction and a golden ticket.

The son of a Fortune 100 executive and grandson of Ethiopia’s first female senator, Brown grew up vacationing on Martha’s Vineyard. He belonged to the Philadelphia Cricket Club, took model rocketry courses at summer camp and went to storied private schools. He has access, opportunity and wealth. As an undergraduate finance major at Georgetown, Brown aspired to one day work at Goldman Sachs.

“Greyboy” begins here, a couple of years into college, when Brown starts to reflect upon the significant moments of prejudice he’s already encountered from a young age. His existence is filled with confusion. A fellow token tells Brown: “I was either too white for the Blacks or too Black for the whites.” From the “backhanded sting of Not Really Black” to the default ostracization of the “Black table” at his middle school cafeteria, the penetrating buildup of outside judgment turned into his own rite of passage.



For many, the desire to embrace Blackness is motivated by empowerment. But how can empowerment be measured by those who don't need it in an economic sense?

Brown spells out the subtle and aggravating liberal racism that confronts Black Americans. It's more invisible odor than scalable wall. As someone born into an opulence his grandparents were denied and his ancestors could never imagine, Brown meanders through myriad personal topics and feelings — parenthood, love, masculinity, depression, friendship, community — that are often seen differently by Black people and white ones. There are gripping anecdotes and keen observations, sometimes from his perspective and sometimes from those of others he interviews.

In between this introspection, though, Brown squirms into provocative missteps that beleaguer his contribution to an important conversation. A book like this should open minds, but it stumbles whenever Brown keeps his closed. “Greyboy” drags when singular experiences are pluralized — from how Black parents raise their children to the horizon-broadening benefits of an interracial relationship, which Brown initially approaches with trepidation, fear and pity. “Two white girlfriends in only a few years of dating life? People have had their Black cards revoked for less,” he writes. “I couldn't do it.”

Brown is poetic and passionate, but another of the book's flaws is the self-seriousness that infects its prose. Every other sentence doesn't need to stand on tiptoes to reach for elegance. Sometimes he grabs it, other times he arrests his own message in the attempt. (“Today, years from fatherhood, the long limbs of anxiety stretch out to me, faintly brushing my bristles.”)

To the author, Blackness is a guiding principle: coveted, acquired, at once learned and inherited. He yearns for the pride that accompanies cultural acceptance, that can direct his lifelong journey through the many forms of systemic oppression that menace even those Black people who are embedded in luxury and security. For many people, the desire to embrace Blackness is motivated by empowerment. But how can empowerment be measured by those who don't need it in an economic sense?

Tokenism's infinite complexity forces its victims to be wary of the ease with which race permeates all of our daily conversations, transactions and presentations. Brown's valuable perspective highlights the many grievances felt by those who are successful and Black in America, but ultimately, in “Greyboy,” no true epiphanies ever materialize. That's understandable. In a life of privilege, it's hard to tell whether you're liberated or suffocating. By the end, Brown makes it clear that he too is gasping for air.

Michael Pina writes about sports and the N.B.A. for GQ.

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