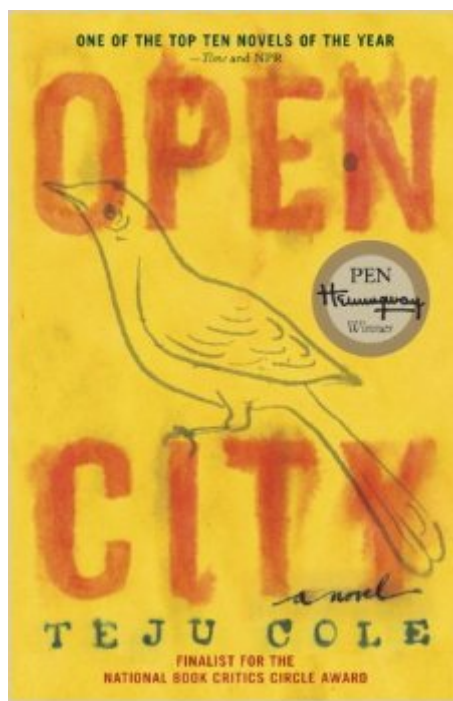


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# Open City: A Novel



## Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book • One of the ten top novels of the year • "Time and NPR NAMED A BEST BOOK ON MORE THAN TWENTY END-OF-THE-YEAR LISTS, INCLUDING The New Yorker • The Atlantic • The Economist • Newsweek/The Daily Beast • The New Republic • New York Daily News • Los Angeles Times • The Boston Globe • The Seattle Times • Minneapolis Star Tribune • GQ • Salon • Slate • New York magazine • The Week • The Kansas City Star • Kirkus Reviews

A haunting novel about identity, dislocation, and history, Teju Cole's *Open City* is a profound work by an important new author who has much to say about our country and our world. Along the streets of Manhattan, a young Nigerian doctor named Julius wanders, reflecting on his relationships, his recent breakup with his girlfriend, his present, his past. He encounters people from different cultures and classes who will provide insight on his journey "which takes him to Brussels, to the Nigeria of his youth, and into the most unrecognizable facets of his own soul. [A] prismatic debut . . . beautiful, subtle, [and] original. "The New Yorker • "A psychological hand grenade. "The Atlantic • "Magnificent . . . a remarkably resonant feat of prose. "The Seattle Times • "A precise and poetic meditation on love, race, identity, friendship, memory, [and] dislocation. "The Economist

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Full disclosure: I briefly worked with Teju Cole eleven years ago. At the time, I was a little awed by how eloquent he was: he spoke like he had already written five or six books. So I wasn't surprised to

learn, recently, that he had published a book, or that it was getting good reviews. I want to take an angle that I haven't seen taken yet, and talk about what one can learn from *Open City*. Books are teachings, even when they're fictional. Authors take the knowledge they have acquired and share it with the public, like teachers do. Sometimes it's facts; sometimes it's subtler stuff like perceptions, analyses and open questions.

1. Race. (Whatever that is.) The book made me feel like I was understanding race better. Many of the characters are also involved in thinking about race.
2. Compassion. Many of the characters, including the narrator, are engaged in the narratives of other individuals and groups. There's a sense that it's possible for each of us to go beyond our own tribal obsessions. In this way, the book offers an antidote to identity politics. This is not a book about the Holocaust, but it's deeply engaged with many forms of human suffering, and it contains a passage about the Holocaust that was, at least to me, remarkably insightful and moving, while remaining, like most of the book, calm and understated.
3. History. The book analyzes New York as a palimpsest containing traces of all that has happened before. If you're not already an expert, and maybe if you are, you'll learn plenty of new things about the city.
4. Classical music. Ditto. If you don't want to listen to Mahler by the end of the book, there might be something wrong with you.
5. Art history. Ditto. Note that Cole studied art history. There's a scene in which the narrator, Julius, visits an art exhibit. It's like visiting the mind of an art historian and looking out through his eyes.
6. Psychology. Julius, a psychiatrist, is a preternaturally keen observer of his own thoughts, and an equally keen listener to other people's discourses.
7. The immigrant experience. Most of the characters are discussed partly in terms of their relationship to migration. What does it mean to move across the world? Is it possible to have two spiritual homes? What is the nature of one's allegiance to each? This relates, unless I'm being completely obtuse, with the book's title. The title directly refers to Brussels, but indirectly to New York, and the implication is (again, unless I'm missing the point) that New York has survived and thrived by being open to new arrivals.
8. Historical and personal memory. What aspects of the past do we seek to retain through acts of memory? What do we obliterate in order to move unfettered into the future?
9. Contemporary history. The book engages with 9/11, refugees, and global climate change. The present appears in the context of a deep vision of history. Cole gives us a lucid discussion of this historical moment; *Open City* is both a mirror that reflects and a lamp that illuminates.
10. The effects of light on physical objects. Some of the visual details -- small stuff -- read like things that Vermeer would have written if he had been a novelist. A man that Julius sees one day is described like this: "He was silhouette dark, and his body bore signs either of long hours at the gym or of a lifetime of physical labor." And later, "I could no longer see his bright black back among the throng in the direct glare of the sun." Cole's prose bears signs

of long hours at the computer and a lifetime of intellectual labor. In other words, the prose is seriously buff. It's likely to appeal to both your mind and your heart, and it might make you a slightly wiser person.

Open City is an exceptional novel. Its intense, detailed and specific narrative, unravelling inside the mind of one man, Julius - a young Nigerian-German doctor completing his residency in psychiatry in a New York hospital - brings the city of New York hauntingly to life in a different, slower, deeper way from anything I've ever read. From this detail and specificity, it reaches out widely to the global flows of our fluxing, ungraspable world, personified by the various immigrants and asylum seekers he encounters. It reaches in, too, to touch the reader's mind and senses and emotions. For this restrained, intellectual voice, you realise, is piercingly sensitive - it gets to you! This is not one for the fan of plot-heavy page-turners, perhaps. Julius spends much time alone, walks a lot and thinks a lot, about art and memory and history. He sees a lot, as loners sometimes do, and has strange, surprising, significant encounters, often with other immigrants, as loners sometimes do. His story, perhaps, goes nowhere much. And yet, in his actual journey to Brussels, his journeys of memory back to Nigeria, and in the mouths and memories of those he meets from far-flung places, it goes to Africa, to Europe... and to places in the heart. It travels too, through his observations and reflections, in time, political and cultural history. Full of seeming digressions, it digresses in fact not at all, but is a seamless deepening through detail of the whole picture and atmosphere of today's global city. And it goes to a sharp inner twist that you will not forget. It's a book to love, and to reread many times.

New Yorkers are often heard to say that they have not yet been to Ellis Island or taken a walk to the Cloisters. Teju Cole's Open City nudges us out of our complacency and opens our eyes to everyday life, the life that passes us by while we rush around. This book makes us pause, look around, think of the people past and present who have viewed these same city streets. A well thought out and wonderfully written prose pulls you into a year of Julius's life: his sensitivity to what goes on in another's life, his failure to fully reckon with his own delusions. As other reviewers have said, this book is really not for readers in a hurry. In the midst of our hectic life, Open City has given us a reason to slow down and add a few more years to our years. Nicely done, Mr. Cole.

Julius, a New York City psychiatry intern in his early 30s, is an African with a white German mother and black Nigerian father. Racism, politics, mental states, music and death are the dominant themes of Open City, with death a constant chord in this monotone chant. Open City begins with

Julius taking long walks around New York City. With elegant descriptions and historic data, it gives a refreshing look at parts of the city seen hundreds of times, as well as those avoided or rarely seen. And as a reader and great walker, it drew me in immediately. I thought I would love this book because Teju Cole is so wonderfully descriptive about what he sees around him, but soon I felt estranged from this character. He is one-dimensional. A ghost (not literally) who expresses little, feels little, is not particularly involved with his own life. He does not attach to anyone or anything deeply. It is a surface life, this camera of a person who takes many pictures but just snaps and keeps walking. Even Julius's own horrid actions are slipped over without attachment or concern. Cole brings up racism and politics and death, but he is like a tour guide: On your left is where this horrible event occurred; on your right we see this injustice. There's no there, there. I think Cole has literary skill--and if he intended to portray emptiness and alienation, he has done that well. But the themes just don't feel justified.

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