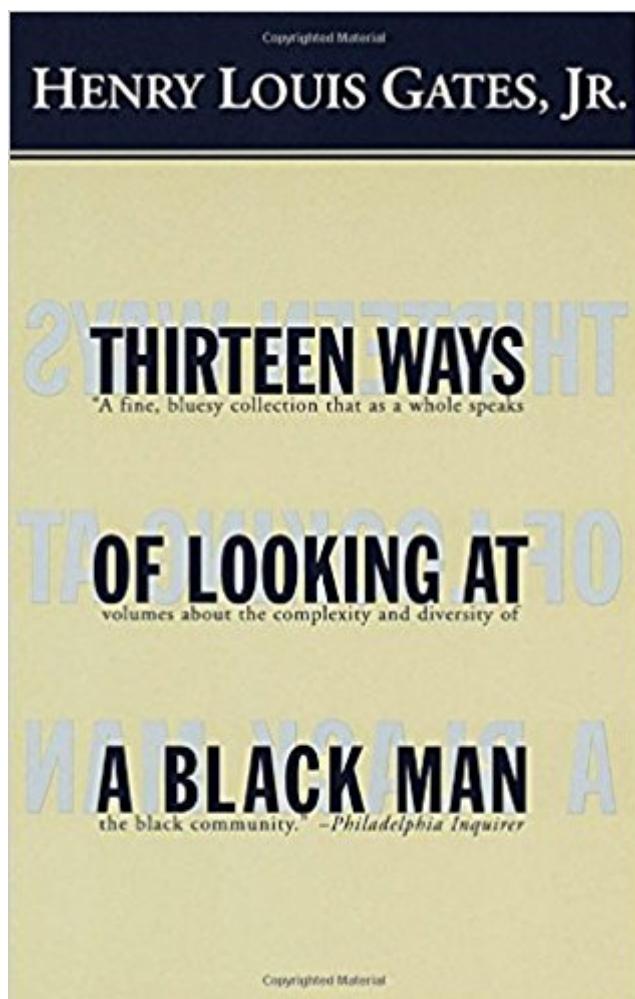


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# Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Black Man



## Synopsis

"This is a book of stories," writes Henry Louis Gates, "and all might be described as 'narratives of ascent.'" As some remarkable men talk about their lives, many perspectives on race and gender emerge. For the notion of the unitary black man, Gates argues, is as imaginary as the creature that the poet Wallace Stevens conjured in his poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." James Baldwin, Colin Powell, Harry Belafonte, Bill T. Jones, Louis Farrakhan, Anatole Broyard, Albert Murray -- all these men came from modest circumstances and all achieved preeminence. They are people, Gates writes, "who have shaped the world as much as they were shaped by it, who gave as good as they got." Three are writers -- James Baldwin, who was once regarded as the intellectual spokesman for the black community; Anatole Broyard, who chose to hide his black heritage so as to be seen as a writer on his own terms; and Albert Murray, who rose to the pinnacle of literary criticism. There is the general-turned-political-figure Colin Powell, who discusses his interactions with three United States presidents; there is Harry Belafonte, the entertainer whose career has been distinct from his fervent activism; there is Bill T. Jones, dancer and choreographer, whose fierce courage and creativity have continued in the shadow of AIDS; and there is Louis Farrakhan, the controversial religious leader. These men and others speak of their lives with candor and intimacy, and what emerges from this portfolio of influential men is a strikingly varied and profound set of ideas about what it means to be a black man in America today. From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

All but one originally published in the New Yorker, these profiles work together to create a striking collective biography of the 20th-century African-American male in all his diversity. Figures as different as Harry Belafonte and Colin Powell get equally perceptive treatment, though the essays on writer Albert Murray and literary critic Anatole Broyard (who passed for white) are particularly fine. Henry Louis Gates's pungent introduction bolsters his stature as our preeminent black intellectual, unapologetically immersed in race as a crucial element in American social discourse.

--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Gates, the head of Harvard's Afro-American studies department, is not only the nation's most prominent black scholar. As the author of the widely praised *Colored People* and as an essayist, he has become a leading interpreter of "the perplexities of race and gender." Originally published in the New Yorker, these deft, absorbing reports on prominent black men—from literary critic Albert Murray to choreographer Bill T. Jones and singer/activist Harry Belafonte—are enlivened by Gates's own expertise and engagement. He likens Colin Powell to bootstrap philosopher Booker T. Washington and deconstructs the racial iconography that makes Powell unthreatening to whites. Though on record as a critic of Louis Farrakhan, a visit to the Nation of Islam leader reminds Gates that he, like most African Americans, "feel[s] astonishingly vulnerable to charges of inauthenticity." He finds Farrakhan alternately charming and chilling yet concludes that the scariest thing is Farrakhan's (and America's) lack of true vision to transform black rage. In the title essay, on black responses to the O.J. Simpson trial, Gates acknowledges his outrage was mingled with relief, and he teases out the mixed opinions of other prominent blacks. The book's closing essay, is the most surprising in its examination of how New York Times literary critic Anatole Broyard passed as a white man and how that passing, by which Broyard aimed to liberate himself from the shackles of identity, ultimately hindered his writing. Gates, on the other hand, suffers no such block. He offers here fine magazine journalism, substantial portraits that are great fun to read. Author tour. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This is a good book. It is thought provoking and challenging. More relevant to an American audience but definitely worth a read.

Love this book! Provides some really insightful information about the personalities of those discussed.

This book will challenge you to look at men who have been instrumental politically and educationally in America. You may not close the book liking them all and probably won't agree with everything they said or did, but you will go away with more knowledge and understanding of their positions.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. masterfully profiles eight black men in this collection of his *New Yorker* essays. He writes in a bluesy, artistic style and has the ability to get quotes from these men that any other journalist would fail to do. The men intimately discuss the tragedies and successes of their lives. The stories of these men details their ascent and depicts the world around them. Gates daringly portrays O.J. Simpson and the infamous trial and Louis Farrakhan, the outspoken leader of the nation of Islam. The other men profiled are James Baldwin, Albert Murray, Bill T. Jones, Colin Powell, Harry Belafonte, and Anatole Broyard. Each of their lives have distinct differences, but it is also interesting to find the areas where they overlap. The portraits of Powell and Farrakhan stand out the most to me as Gates sheds light on the stories behind the men that we rarely see. I recommend this book for its intriguing stories, dynamic language, and true concepts of what it means to be a black man in America.

One of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s stated goals is to expose the constant hovering shadow of racial identity that, unbidden and unspoken, lives beside us. In that venture he succeeds and, I suspect, most poignantly for Negroes. Yet as illuminating and cathartic as this book might be for the black psyche, it may be more so its white counterpart. Daily news and live encounters too often remind us, or me anyway, of the unsavory and resistant pathologies that blight our black communities, so that the actual potential of an entire people can seem in doubt. (Is it too much to ask that reality matches our desperately hopeful cant?) But Gates's talent alone refutes this notion; his prose flows so smoothly and cuts so deftly that I'd do the shopping and pay the bill, just to read his grocery list. And if Gates alone doesn't accomplish that, then the seven complex lives he splays on his pages certainly do. This happens not because of some strained attempt to rehabilitate an image. Rather, because he examines his subjects like the diamonds that they are, and unflinchingly rotates them to reveal both superb facets and fatal flaws wherever they arise. In doing so, any nagging questions of ability seem ridiculous, leaving cultural impediments as the villain in a national tragedy. Black excellence is the ultimate rejoinder. I grabbed this collection in a rush at the bookstore, and only later did I realize that I had read two of the chapters in *The New Yorker*. Most (all?) of them were first published there. Still, I don't regret it.

Gates was wrong to include the late Anatole Broyard in his collection of "black" men. Broyard was a Creole born of two mixed-caucasian parents. He was not racially or culturally "black." His first wife wasn't "black" either. She was a Puerto Rican who identified as white and saw her husband and in-laws as white. She reared Broyard's older daughter as white in Jim Crow Texas. This was all revealed in the book written by Broyard's younger daughter. People with a fascination for white people with "black blood" would be better off reading: *A Legal History of the Color Line: The Rise And Triumph of the One-drop Rule*

Gates is a master of his craft; his writing is original, insightful and is of the whole cloth-- weaving visual images with literary allusions and references to the person that render all of what we might rightly know of a visible self. The portraits are intellectually rich and intellectually satisfying. His rendition of the crack in Jesse Jackson's reaction to Colin Powell-- which only comes out in private, is absolutely magical and priceless for the emotional nuance it conveys (in a loving and hilarious style). Like an exquisite and rare gourmet meal for the mind, one wants these profiles never to end for the knowledge and reality that they impart.

For this colored individual who at age 50 is still laboring to untangle his identity, Gates' book was a breezy plateau for reflection on a long hot, steep climb. The broad spectrum of personalities which Gates chooses to describe, the thoughtful, balanced probity with which he approaches them and - best of all - the wit and world-accepting irony of his writing style often brought me to tears and laughter at the same time. Any afro male trying to see himself clearly, and who frequently feels himself "drowning in a sea of jive", to quote Jon Hendricks, may find in Gates' book the first windings of some sort of lifeline.

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