

the johns hopkins
NEWS-LETTER

TEJU COLE READ SELECTIONS OF HIS POETRY AND PROSE

By Anne Hollmuller, November 16, 2017



The President's Reading Series and the Writing Seminars Department presented a reading by Chaffee Visiting Writer Teju Cole on Tuesday night at 6 p.m. in Mudd Auditorium. Cole read some of his lyrical, lilting prose from his books *Blind Spot* and *Open City*, which feature a combination of his essays and photographs.

The audience of Hopkins students, faculty and others were able to gain insight into the mind of an intellectual engaged in interdisciplinary work across the arts, fiction and nonfiction.

Born in the U.S. and raised in Nigeria, Cole is the author of two works of fiction, *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*, which won the PEN/Hemingway Award. Cole is Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College and the photography critic for *The New York Times Magazine*. Most recently, he authored *Known and Strange Things*, an essay collection, and a book featuring both prose and photography entitled *Blind Spot*.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

At the event on Tuesday night, Cole read several of his extended prose poems while his photographs were displayed on screens throughout the room. The selected poems and photographs are featured in his upcoming book *Blind Spot*, whose title is inspired by his 2011 diagnosis with “big blind spot syndrome,” a condition caused by blood vessels bursting behind his retina that temporarily impaired his sight.

The book draws from Cole’s personal experiences in the field of photography but also analyzes and critiques the work of other photographers.

Cole spoke about his excitement to speak with Hopkins students and professionals who were knowledgeable about writing and whom he suspected would be eager to hear some of his more experimental work.

“I can try and present material that I would not necessarily read to civilians, you know, not easy stuff,” he said.

Cole discussed how he likes to construct his work so that there are multiple endings and multiple levels on which his writing can be read.

“I always like, not surprise endings, but I always like things that have an artfulness at the end, some sense of contingency in something that’s happened, and I especially like things that sort of have two or three endings,” Cole said.

Cole was introduced by Professor Andrew Motion of the Writing Seminars department.

He hailed the innovative way in which Cole bridges genres through his intellectual, interdisciplinary style and celebrated his use of clear and precise language within his prose.

“[He is] one of the most interesting and significant minds of his generation,” Motion. “His writing crosses boundaries that have traditionally separated fiction, philosophy, meditation, documentary and analysis.”

Cole’s description of his performance art piece *Black Paper*, which was presented at *Performa 17* in New York City, encapsulated his desire to experiment with the interplay between different disciplines as well as the diversity of his intellectual interests.

Cole told the audience that he was happy to get back to “literary thinking,” as he has recently spent a deal of time working in other, more unfamiliar mediums.

“I was preparing a performance this past week, and I’m not a performance artist so it was a huge challenge for me to work on something I developed. I did the musical score and everything. It’s the kind of practice where I was very much inhabiting my body in the way an actor would or a musician would. And it’s quite nice to go back to just being a brain in a vat, just an intellectual,” Cole said.

Following the readings, members of the audience were able to address questions to Cole, who offered thoughtful and engaging responses. Following the question and answer section, a reception was held in Mudd Hall with refreshments as well as a book-signing.

This reading by writer and critic Teju Cole offered a merging of prose and photography, as well as an encounter with a probing intellectual mind that crosses the boundaries between existing disciplines.