

Breathe: A Letter to My Sons

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Explores the terror, grace, and beauty of coming of age as a Black person in contemporary America and what it means to parent our children in a persistently unjust world.

Emotionally raw and deeply reflective, Imani Perry issues an unflinching challenge to society to see Black children as deserving of humanity. She admits fear and frustration for her African American sons in a society that is increasingly racist and at times seems irredeemable. However, as a mother, feminist, writer, and intellectual, Perry offers an unfettered expression of love-finding beauty and possibility in life-and she exhorts her children and their peers to find the courage to chart their own paths and find steady footing and inspiration in Black tradition.

Perry draws upon the ideas of figures such as James Baldwin, W. E. B. DuBois, Emily Dickinson, Toni Morrison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Ida B. Wells. She shares vulnerabilities and insight from her own life and from encounters in places as varied as the West Side of Chicago; Birmingham, Alabama; and New England prep schools.

With original art for the cover by Ekuia Holmes, Breathe offers a broader meditation on race, gender, and the meaning of a life well lived and is also an unforgettable lesson in Black resistance and resilience.

Imani Perry is the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, where she also teaches in the Programs in Law and Public Affairs, and in Gender and Sexuality Studies. She is a native of Birmingham, Alabama, and spent much of her youth in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Chicago. She is the author of several books, including *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry*. She lives outside Philadelphia with her two sons, Freeman Diallo Perry Rabb and Issa Garner Rabb. Connect with her on Twitter (@imani Perry)."A masterfully poetic and intimate work that anchors mothering within the long-standing tradition of black resistance and resourcefulness."

-Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

"This mother's striking and generous admonition to thrive even in the face of white mendacity also is a meditation on parenting. Reflective insights about injustice adjoin a few visceral apologies about every responsible parent's regrets, which might remind parents of the divide between 'the deed of giving life' and 'the social consequence of the deed.' For Black boys and their parents who struggle to get childhood and mothering-along or fathering-along correct: "Just always remember: even if you tumble . . . you must move towards freedom."

-Booklist, Starred Review

"Perry's uplifting and often lyrical meditation on living invites readers to delve into their self and particularly into the complicated categories of mother, parent, African American, and human. Highly recommended."

-Library Journal, Starred Review

"To read Imani Perry's new book, *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*, as an African American

mother of a teenage son is both an excruciating and exhilarating experience It is so startling and apt and timely that you will likely devour it the way a swimmer takes a giant gulp of air as she cracks the surface of the water-greedily and gratefully That Perry can navigate so seamlessly between interiority and the interrogation of American culture is astonishing. There's something so tender and vulnerable about Perry's voice here, yet I would not call it "raw." It's refined and honed, each word burnished and given to us with care, as a hand-carved, African sculpture might be bestowed by its creator; it's a loving gesture, this book, mindful of its recipient To be clear, we've never seen a book like this before."
-Women's Review of Books

"With Breathe, Dr. Perry departs from her previous academic works and presents a resolute call for courage, compassion, and hope by, and for, her boys. In doing so, she has penned the most important book of her career."
-Ms. Magazine

"In Breathe, Perry offers a lyrical meditation that connects a painful, proud history of African American struggle with a clarion call for present-day action to protect, defend, and celebrate the promise of the next generation."
-Stacey Abrams, founder and chair of Fair Fight Action, Inc.

"Perry urges her sons to hold history but not be hindered by it. She is determined that the dissonance that accompanies growing up young and Black in this country is not destiny. This book is an honest examination of the contradictions that make us whole and human. Breathe is a love letter to and about us all."
-Phillip Agnew, codirector of The Dream Defenders

"Breathe: A Letter to My Sons is deeply cathartic and resonant for parents attempting to raise their children with intention and integrity. Imani Perry shows deep compassion for both parents and children . . . while incisively underlining the realities of raising Black boys in a country that will inherently betray them. It is a book filled with love and insight for difficult times."
-Tarana Burke

"Beautifully written with brilliant insights that leap off the page, Breathe announces the arrival of Imani Perry as a literary force. With each sentence, Perry reveals her mastery of the genre of the essay and her vast knowledge of the tradition of African American letters. From that deep well, she offers her wisdom not only to her sons but for all of us. This is a must-read-especially in these dark times."
-Eddie S. Glaude Jr.

"Breathe is what it says it is, a letter from a mother to her sons, but it is more than that. It's a meditation on child-rearing, world-building, fire-starting, and peace-building. Imani Perry combines rigor and heart, and the result is a magic mirror showing us who we are, how we got here, and who we may become."
-Tayari Jones, author of An American Marriage

"Imani Perry wants her young sons 'to make beauty and love in a genocidal time.' Bless them! And bless her, for this book is a wonderful model for doing just that! So much joy and caring and pain and rage distilled into soaring, striking sentences."

-Amitava Kumar, author of Immigrant, Montana

"Breathe is a masterpiece. With an approach that is at once vulnerable and brave, scholarly and artistic, critical and hopeful, Imani Perry has written the book that we desperately need. Breathe arms us with the wisdom, courage, and hope necessary to parent Black children within a White supremacist world. Breathe not only demonstrates Perry's deep love of her sons but also her profound and abiding faith in the rich traditions, ambitious freedom dreams, and boundless possibilities of Black people. This is an offering of profound beauty and brilliance that marks Imani Perry's emergence as the leading writer and thinker of this generation."

-Marc Lamont Hill

"Before reading Breathe, I knew that Imani Perry was the most important cultural worker in my professional life. But I had no idea that Imani Perry, or any writer in this country, could pull off what she pulls off in Breathe. More than any book I've read in the last twenty years, Breathe boldly reminds us that artful intentionality is not nearly as important as artful effectiveness, and artful effectiveness is shaped by the love a writer has for her intended audience. Somehow, Perry manages to mourn, celebrate, theorize, and welcome us into the space between, and around, this Black mother and her Black sons. Though the language here is different from all of Perry's other work, the attentiveness to sustained analysis is even more apparent. One feels that Perry had to write her other five books to write this one, the smallest and ironically the most rigorous, personal, and soulful of all of her genius work. Breathe is the first book I've ever needed to read out loud with my mother."

-Kiese Laymon, author of Heavy: An American Memoir

"There are moments when a piece of writing is so honest, so personal, that it crawls into us. Moments when words attach themselves to instances in our pasts, visions of our futures, or the purgatorial questions of today. Breathe is that. Perry gives us a look into what it means to love her children-her Black sons-in a world that may not. What it means to arm them with information, history, culture, spirit, pride, and joy. What it means to celebrate with them the vastness of their lineage and the tight network of community, which affords them an impenetrable freedom to be. To just . . . be. And as Perry gives this to her sons-her family-with such candor and respect, I couldn't help but hear my own mother speaking her truth, our truth, to me."

-Jason Reynolds, Newbury Award honoree and author of the Track series, Ghost, Patina, Sunny, and Lu

"Breathe is at once a resplendent meditation on the labor and art of parenting and on the 'special calling' of mothering Black boys in America. By turns fierce and loving, intimate and erudite, and drawing with deep complexity on her Catholic theology and spirituality, Imani Perry interweaves the most universal of dreams and desires with the particular traumas of our world of 'wild-eyed' whiteness. In so doing she offers her sons-and all the rest of us, and

our sons and daughters—a vision of human resilience and wholeness that could reframe and redeem this young century's painful reckonings."

-Krista Tippett, founder and CEO, The On Being Project, and curator, The Civil Conversations Project

Other Books

A Manual for Heartache. 'I devoured A Manual for Heartache in one sitting . . . a kind, honest and wise book about how to make a friend of sadness.' - Rachel Joyce, author of The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry. When Cathy Rentzenbrink was still a teenager, her happy family was torn apart by an unthinkable tragedy. In A Manual for Heartache she describes how she learnt to live with grief and loss and find joy in the world again. She explores how to cope with life at its most difficult and overwhelming and how we can emerge from suffering forever changed, but filled with hope. This is a moving, warm and uplifting book that offers solidarity and comfort to anyone going through a painful time, whatever it might be. It's a book that will help to soothe an aching heart and assure its readers that they're not alone.

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