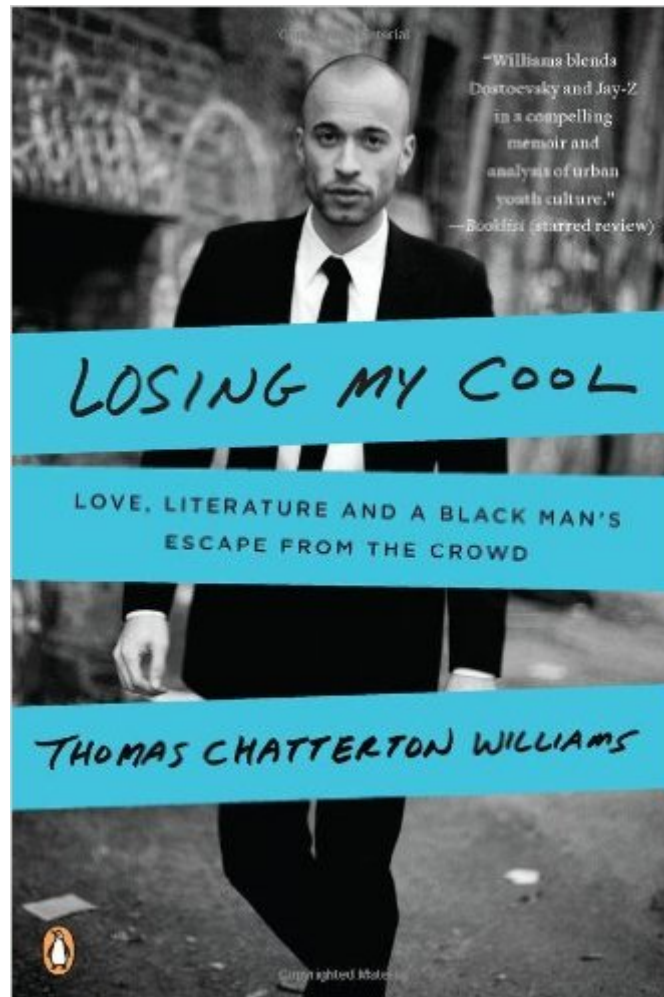


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Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, And A Black Man's Escape From The Crowd



Synopsis

"A provocative, intellectual memoir" (USA Today)-from a remarkable new literary voice. Growing up, Thomas Chatterton Williams knew he loved three things in life: his parents, literature, and the intoxicating hip-hop culture that surrounded him. For years, he managed to juggle two disparate lifestyles, "keeping it real" in his friends' eyes and studying for the SATs under his father's strict tutelage-until it all threatened to spin out of control. Written with remarkable candor and emotional depth, *Losing My Cool* portrays the allure and danger of hip-hop culture with the authority of a true fan who's lived through it all, while demonstrating the saving grace of literature and the power of the bond between father and son.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is huge, in so many ways. The writing is powerful and intelligent. The content is honest beyond compare. Williams offers insight into the seduction of finding power in the black hip-hop culture, and the difficulty of finding a way out. For educators, sociologists, and any person of compassion, Williams gives life to an extreme dilemma that many black youth experience. And more than that he has analyzed, through his own deep knowledge of literature and philosophy, some answers (if not answers, some awfully good questions) as to why this culture clash exists. I have already recommended Williams' book to several people and I've only had the book for a week! It is extraordinary.

The book examines the culture that says that blacks must imitate or even become criminals, that

such a stance is somehow more honest and worthy than other possibilities in life, and that those who do not choose such options are cowardly, and false to their blackness. He asks how for so many people did "keeping it real" get to mean being or acting like a criminal or semi criminal, not reading, not being interested in anything but hip hop and sports, and this to middle class persons? The book is about those who have been exposed to other aspects of life, who have had opportunities and options, and who rejected them. Mostly, the book relates, through the author's young life, how he has seen nihilistic attitudes and "hardness" manifested, how he was tempted by it, and how he rejected it. He pleads for more awareness from African Americans, for broad mindedness, and a realization of the opportunities in life, the things to be learned, and the humane and useful values to be embraced, values that enhance rather than detract. The world is fascinating, he is saying. Look around you and don't stay in your little world of hostility to everything outside of your world. Strange as it seems, I have seen and this author has seen people actually turn to anti social conduct, including crime, for the sake of "keeping it real," not out of necessity to get a scrap to eat or a bed to lie on, but out of some twisted notion of what it means to be black. On page 32 (hardback 2010 edition), the author remarks on how black kids imitate thugs and gangsters and how among non-blacks, it makes blacks seem hard. Among blacks, however, "it just made us seem normal." On page 93, he remarks on the "conscious decision" of his black friends and classmates to remain "socially cordoned off" from those of other races. On page 170, he addresses his friend's deliberate thought-out choice to become a "thug". On page 176, after his brother's encounter with a racist police officer in which his brother was humiliated, physically wounded, and treated with abject unfairness, he remarks on his realization that, despite that and other incidents of such racism as persist, he and his brother are freer than their father and not defined by racism to anywhere near the same extent as their father was. On page 182, he presents his discovery that whites who like gangster hip hop approach it ironically and not as a guide to life or a lifestyle to be imitated, which is how blacks view it. On page 194, he feelingly compares the sacrifices of blacks during the civil rights movement, facing terrible violence, and yet managing to retain dignity, with those who sacrifice their dignity in order to emulate or become sociopaths. On page 212, he refuses to blame the thug culture on being black, and finds it a cultural and not a color thing. On page 214, he notes that it was only after the end of segregation and in the wake of the fruits of the civil rights movement, that blacks became "so militantly provincial and wildy nihilistic". He does not have an explanation. On page 219, he raises the question that Dubois raised in the 1920s. What if the only black person that survived some centuries hence was the cartoon created by white Americans? The author asks now, what if the only black American who survives some centuries hence is the cartoon thug of the past thirty

years, even worse than the racist caricatures by whites because blacks themselves drew it? Apart from the author himself, the person most readers will remember is his loving and tough father. It is touching and amusing that Shelby Steele, a black writer, reviled by many as a black conservative, helped to awaken the author. He describes the effect that an article by Steele had on him, an article about the right of blacks to be just people and not to have to base everything on being black, despite what the world was saying to them. The author notes that blacks fought against whites to be just people, and now some, like himself, are fighting against other blacks for the same right. John McWhorter, of whom this author reminded me, was similarly inspired by Steele. So, despite the coals heaped on his head, Steele has not written for nothing.

It is always easier for an outsider to be objective about an unfamiliar culture than it is for someone totally immersed in that same culture, especially when strict conformity to the accepted norm of the culture serves as a means of survival within it. I recognize, however, that an outsider brings his own baggage and bias into any discussion about a culture foreign to his eyes. And when it comes to the hip-hop culture that so completely dominates overall black culture today, especially the lives of its younger members, I am absolutely an outsider. But, as such, I have long wondered how, and why, American blacks have allowed their culture and their image as a people to be disgraced by something as shallow and destructive as hip-hop. "In Losing My Cool," Thomas Chatterton Williams explores how the hip-hop culture came to dominate Black America and what needs to be done to counter its terrible influence on young people. As the subtitle to his book ("How a Father's Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture") indicates, Thomas Chatterton Williams was one of the lucky ones. It was a close call, but he saw through the false bravado of hip-hop before it was too late for him to make something of his life. Williams and his brother are the products of the marriage between a white woman from California and a black man from Galveston, Texas. The boys grew up in a New Jersey home in which their father stressed to them that learning is a skill that needs to be practiced each and every day. There were no days off for Thomas. His friends might be wasting their summers by posing as thugs on the streets and local basketball courts but Thomas was spending hours preparing for his next school year or prepping for the SAT examination. His father, largely a self-educated man, led by example; the man practically devoured books. He did not just read them; he had conversations with them, leaving notes and underlined passages on practically every page he read. But for Thomas, as for everyone else he grew up with, hip-hop culture trumped whatever good influence he received at home from his parents. As he puts it, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down. To survive, I drank in my community's mores, including its fear of learning,

even as I capitulated to my father's seemingly eccentric will at home...had mastered the delicate balance of keeping it real and keeping Pappy satisfied at the same time."Even after the countless hours of study with his father paid off in a scholarship to Georgetown University, Thomas continued to immerse himself exclusively in the world of his fellow black students. He paid no attention to his white dormitory mates, skipped class as much as he attended it, and spent as much time as possible with the black students of Howard University, where he felt totally at home because its students were living exactly the debasing lifestyle he knew from high school. Thomas Chatterton Williams, though, is a learner and, by his second year at Georgetown, he began to realize just how badly the hip-hop culture had cheated him and his peers out of the finer things of life. They had been compelled to embrace a dishonorable lifestyle, one with no dignity and no future. Thomas discarded a culture that promoted self-hatred, denigrated women, and ridiculed books and learning for his own vision of what a man should be. Thanks to Pappy's influence, Thomas embraced the degree of non-conformity that allowed him to become the man his father always hoped he would become. "Losing My Cool" is a frank look at what has gone wrong in Black America. Williams points his finger at the culprits - and he names them. Sadly, those who would most benefit from the lessons in "Losing My Cool" are the least likely to read the book, either because they cannot, or because they will not. Either way, that is a tragedy.

This book is much more about culture, and finding it, than about abandoning hip-hop. Williams writes about his dismissal of the much glamourized street mentality, but more importantly he does not replace one oversimplified, mass-marketed lifestyle with another. His story is not about leaving the excitement and dangers of the hood for the respectability and materialism of the suburbs, but rather leaving behind a provincial way of thinking for a life of intellectual curiosity and enlightenment. A great read for anyone who wants to spread knowledge for its own sake.

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