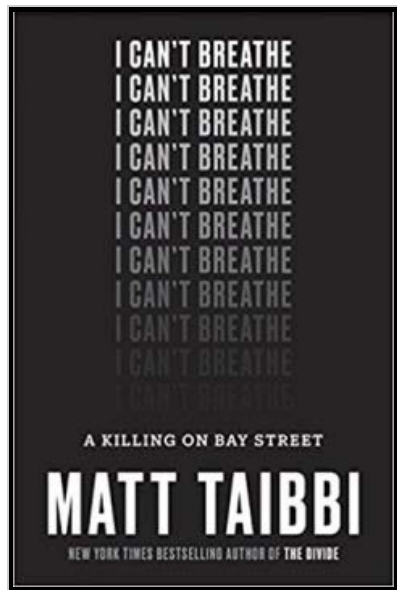


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I Can't Breathe

by Matt Taibbi

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From the Publisher: A work of riveting literary journalism that explores the roots and repercussions of the infamous killing of Eric Garner by the New York City police—from the bestselling author of *The Divide* “[A] searing exposé . . . What emerges from the author’s superb reporting and vivid writing is a tragically revealing look at a broken criminal justice system geared to serve white citizens while often overlooking or ignoring the rights of others.”—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) On July 17, 2014, a forty-three-year-old black man named Eric Garner died on a Staten Island sidewalk after a police officer put him in what has been described as an illegal chokehold during an arrest for selling bootleg cigarettes. The final moments of Garner’s life were captured on video and seen by millions. His agonized last words, “I can’t breathe,” became a rallying cry for the nascent Black Lives Matter protest movement. A grand jury ultimately declined to indict the officer who wrestled Garner to the pavement. Matt Taibbi’s deeply reported retelling of these events liberates Eric Garner from the abstractions of newspaper accounts and lets us see the man in full—with all his flaws and contradictions intact. A husband and father with a complicated personal history, Garner was neither villain nor victim, but a fiercely proud individual determined to do the best he could for his family, bedeviled by bad luck, and ultimately subdued by forces beyond his control. In America, no miscarriage of justice exists in isolation, of course, and in *I Can’t Breathe* Taibbi also examines the conditions that made this tragedy possible. Featuring vivid vignettes of life on the street and inside our Kafkaesque court system, Taibbi’s kaleidoscopic account illuminates issues around policing, mass incarceration, the underground economy, and racial disparity in law enforcement. No one emerges unscathed, from the conservative district attorney who half-heartedly prosecutes the case to the progressive mayor caught between the demands of outraged activists and the foot-dragging of recalcitrant police officials. A masterly narrative of urban America and a scathing indictment of the perverse incentives built into our penal system, *I Can’t Breathe* drills down into the particulars of one case to confront us with the human cost of our broken approach to dispensing criminal justice. “Richly reported and evocative . . . a vivid folk history that should prove useful to anyone who seeks to understand the world Eric Garner inhabited, not just progressives.”—Jill Leovy, bestselling author of *Ghettoside*

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About The Author

Matt Taibbi

Matt Taibbi has been a contributing editor for *Rolling Stone* and the author of five previous books, including the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Great Derangement*, *Griptopia*, and *The Divide*. He lives in New Jersey.

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What We Say

Matt Taibbi is a journalist at Rolling Stone who has eviscerated the greed and criminality of the financial industry with a series of explanatory essays over the years. He's a flame thrower, albeit one rooted firmly in the facts. It took me a while to warm up to his gonzo style, which combined hyperbolic disdain with gleeful profanity that struck me -- at first -- as frat boy-ish and tiresome. Eventually, Taibbi's gift for excellent reporting and way with a phrase won me over. I mean, if you can't gin up some righteous anger over the greatest act of theft in human industry, when can you? He's also covered politics, inequality and other issues with similarly lacerating prose. Now he's turned to the incendiary case of Eric Garner, the man choked to death by New York City policemen, gasping "I can't breathe" as they slowly squeezed the life out of him and all of it caught on video. While only a full trial offering the proper context for evidence and events not captured on camera might be necessary to determine guilt in a court of law, the fact that the case didn't even draw an indictment for the cops involved proved a worldwide scandal. So here comes Taibbi, presumably breathing fire. And what do we get? A sober, nuanced, devastating critique that is all the more powerful for being so damned straightforward. Each of the book's sixteen chapters is given the name of a person who plays a central role beginning with Ibrahim -- a man blindsided by a vicious attack from the police when sitting in his own car on private property -- to Erica, the daughter of Eric Garner who found herself thrust into the public spotlight when seeking justice. Taibbi covers the origins of NYC's Broken Windows policy and how it was always vulnerable to prejudice, the long history of mistreatment of black people by the police, the demeaning Stop And Frisk program, the court system in New York and especially Staten Island, the history of activism and Al Sharpton, the missteps of Mayor Bill De Blasio and so much more. Yet above all, it creates a deft and compelling portrait of Eric Garner, a man who was liked by all. That sounds like a bromide, but Taibbi does Garner the honor of not sanctifying the man -- he has no problem accepting and illustrating the complexity of a person who was a one-time drug dealer, estranged at times from his children, familiar with prison and yet also obsessively determined to provide for his kids ahead of himself, keeping the peace in the park where he worked so hard day and night to make a little money (all of which went to his family) and ultimately doomed by a world in which he was deemed suspicious just for being alive. Taibbi is by no means holding back here. He ends with an impassioned recognition that yes, this is about race -- yet again and always -- and what can be done. By recognizing the flaws in everyone from the mayor to the court system to Al Sharpton to the police union head Pat Lynch (who is almost ALL flaws) to Garner himself, Taibbi has done justice to a tragedy that lacked it long before Garner gasped his last breath. -- Michael Giltz

What Others Say

Advance praise for *I Can't Breathe* "A complex and textured examination of the complicated personalities, flawed legal system, and politics revolving around the police killing of forty-three-year-old Eric Garner, whose final words became a rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement."—Boston Globe, "Must Read Books for the Fall" "[A] brilliant work of narrative nonfiction . . . [Matt] Taibbi is unsparing in his excoriation of the system, police, and courts that led to the fatal choke hold and worked to blur the abuse afterward. . . . This is a necessary and riveting work."—Booklist, starred review "[A] searing exposé . . . After deeply exploring Garner's life from a variety of perspectives, Taibbi offers detailed reporting about the out-of-control Staten Island police officers present at the death scene . . . [and] the futile efforts of the Garner family to achieve posthumous justice. . . . What emerges from the author's superb reporting and vivid writing is a tragically revealing look at a broken criminal justice system geared to serve white citizens while often overlooking or ignoring the rights of others."—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) "Richly reported and evocative. Although Taibbi is not shy about his point of view, he keeps the narrative nuanced and realistic. He is unafraid of the less charitable aspects of Garner, and he's diligent and agnostic when it comes to detailing his world. Taibbi is the rare partisan who understands that, even as he makes his case, he need not pretend that the world is a simple place, and that the best way to grapple with its complexities is to let facts speak for themselves. The result here is a vivid folk history that should prove useful to anyone who seeks to understand the world Eric Garner inhabited, not just progressives."—Jill Leovy, bestselling author of *Ghettoside* "Matt Taibbi's *I Can't Breathe* marries the best instincts of explanatory narrative journalism with uncompromising moral clarity. The result is a riveting walk through decades of policing policy and big city politics that culminated, seemingly inevitably, in Eric Garner's killing by the New York Police Department. While he may have set out to document a fatal injustice, the tale Taibbi tells is not one of a death, but one of a life. In capturing the fullness of Garner's 'imperfect humanity,' *I Can't Breathe* adds a vital account of police violence and a vivid exploration of its lingering costs. Taibbi, through thorough reporting and captivating writing, captures the totality of an American tragedy."—Wesley Lowery, Pulitzer Prize-winning national correspondent for The Washington Post and author of the New York Times bestselling *They Can't Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore and a New Era in America's Racial Justice Movement*

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