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The History Of White People



Synopsis

A New York Times bestseller: "This terrific new book . . . [explores] the notion of whiteness, an idea as dangerous as it is seductive." • Boston Globe Telling perhaps the most important forgotten story in American history, eminent historian Nell Irvin Painter guides us through more than two thousand years of Western civilization, illuminating not only the invention of race but also the frequent praise of "whiteness" for economic, scientific, and political ends. A story filled with towering historical figures, *The History of White People* closes a huge gap in literature that has long focused on the non-white and forcefully reminds us that the concept of "race" is an all-too-human invention whose meaning, importance, and reality have changed as it has been driven by a long and rich history of events. 70 black-and-white illustrations

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Customer Reviews

At first blush readers may be a bit off-put at a black woman writing a history of white people and the usual questions are likely to arise. But as a historian it is Nell Irvin Painter's job to transcend identities such as race and gender and to remain objective about her subject matter. There are many compelling arguments about the relative pros and cons of writing about a part of your identity or about an identity other than your own. Those arguments aside, Painter sets an ambitious goal of writing a history on the construct of the white race; the who, what, where, when, why and how of its origins, its evolution and change over time, and its greater societal significance and meaning to our present day and age. Rather than an angry diatribe against racism Painter seeks to provide a

narrative of the evolution of white identity. Painter begins in antiquity, a time in which race was not important so much as place; where you were from, a time of social hierarchy and class more so than racial consciousness. The disturbing truth is that class served more to define one's status and place than ethnicity or race for many centuries. Slavery, the great sin of any age, was racially colorblind in antiquity, and even in colonial America it was initially colorblind if indentured servitude is included. Painter guides readers through the evolution and construct of whiteness leading up to the harsh realities of the 19th Century, a time where whiteness took on further nuances, differences, and distinctions owing to increased immigration. It was a time when the Irish, Italians, Jews, and "others" were denigrated for their otherness; for not fitting the Anglo-Saxon ideal of whiteness. These ideas and concepts linger in American consciousness and inform public policy and public opinion for nearly a century, resulting in some of the most egregious sins of the republic, including the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, the exclusion of Asians from immigration, anti-Semitism and more. By the time of the Civil Rights Movement whites felt increasingly under attack, becoming the "other" in their own society. If Malcolm X and James Brown could exhort blacks to proclaim "Say it loud! I'm black and proud!" then why couldn't whites revel in their own racial pride? And here's where it gets interesting. Painter's argument is that a nation, founded by slaveholders with justification for its class system based upon the inherent inferiority of black people a foundational belief, must reach some form of reassessment of what it should be once slavery has ended. That process has not yet fully occurred in the United States and until such a time remains unfinished business for us to move forward. The end result is thought-provoking, certainly controversial, and more into the realm of history of ideas than most lay people will be comfortable with. Many will undoubtedly be offended by what Painter has to say, but her point is not to provide a hagiography of a race, but to examine the larger meanings of what race is, what it means, and how it shapes us as a people and a society. The results are meant to be unsettling and to initiate further thought, contemplation and introspection. To that end Painter succeeds wonderfully. This is meant to be a challenging and polarizing book and quite honestly those who make it through will be rewarded for it. Undoubtedly many will find points to contend and debate, but they will miss the larger argument.

Apparently, some who have read this book misunderstand what the author's aim was. The goal of the book was to document the historical foundations of the term "race" and Anglo-Saxon racial theory, which began in Europe and gained supporters across the Pond here in the United States. She also made very clear at the beginning that the term "race" began in the 1800s and that scholars

now recognize that people are ethnicities, not races. I was very impressed by her thorough research into the lives of the people who created the theory of race. Yes, she does make a point to highlight that the main actors were Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic Nordics. So what? Yes, she's a black woman and yes she has a leftist viewpoint. But she would be less than competent as a historian if she had not pointed this out. My only objection is that sometimes she gets bogged down in too much minutiae on the lives of the scholars she's describing. On the other hand, she also delves into the personal and collegial relationships of these race theorists to each other and that's interesting. Very good book and well worth reading.

This is a fascinating book, scholarly and erudite, well researched and well documented by a respected historian. I was expecting something a great deal more angry and focused on white oppression of African Americans. That is apparently what a number of reviewers saw, so I was pleasantly surprised as well as instructed. I always wondered why white people are called 'Caucasian'. Anyone who has had a few history courses will have known something about the craniometry craze in the late nineteenth century, but Dr. Painter draws it all together by showing who the influential scientists were and how they became spread the idea of seeing everything in racial terms through an imagined glorious, pure Saxon past. It was startling to see how deeply Ralph Waldo Emerson was involved. A description of the stunning amount of scholarship devoted to dividing up Europeans into races and ranking them according to 'Saxon' cultural ideals of beauty while largely ignoring the rest of humanity occupies the first twenty-six chapters; relations with blacks do not come up until the last two short chapters (of 28). Measuring skulls and blathering on and on about some imagined Saxon golden age now seems daft and laughable, but it should be a continuing lesson to science. Many of these people saw that their data had problems but ignored the contradictions, and ignored even common sense. When they were taken up by the Nazi party and implemented into government policy, they were a contributing factor to the holocaust the Germans visited on Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, anyone perceived to be deficient breeding stock. I was in university before black studies and had not even heard of white studies until I read this book. The idea of whiteness being continually redefined and expanded due to the exigencies of immigration to the New World was entirely new to me. Dr. Painter presents the concept of four great expansions of whiteness: 1) in the 1840's when the property-owning requirement for voting was abandoned, paving the way for the rise of the 'Jacksonian common man', 2) in the 1890's when previous waves of Irish and German immigrants were accepted as white so they could join us in discriminating against new waves of Irish, Germans, Jews, Italians, Slavs, pretty much everybody

from southern and eastern Europe, 3) in the 1940's during World War II when Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were accepted as white, and even other Catholics, and 4) in the 1960's when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally forced the inclusion of blacks and Asians in the definition of 'American' and thus in a strange way as 'white'. It's a bit of a saving grace that the great harms done in this whole deluded effort to define whiteness led to continual expansions of the definition of what it means to be a citizen of America. Franz Boas, with his students Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, are presented as modernist heroes in this book. They constructed an alternative theory of human nature, the 'blank slate', the idea that the human mind has no inherent structure and can be molded into any shape, to battle the pervasive racial theories of the day. They were somewhat too successful in convincing academia and the lay public into abandoning nature as the explainer of all and substituting nurture in its place. Many of their well-meaning ideas have been shown to have no basis but continue to hinder our ability to address societal problems such as violence.

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