



Title: Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

Author: Isabel Wilkerson

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BOOK RESUME: CASTE

BOOK SYNOPSIS

In this brilliant book, Isabel Wilkerson gives us a masterful portrait of an unseen phenomenon in America as she explores, through an immersive, deeply researched, and beautifully written narrative and stories about real people, how America today and throughout its history has been shaped by a hidden caste system, a rigid hierarchy of human rankings.

Beyond race, class, or other factors, there is a powerful caste system that influences people's lives and behavior and the nation's fate. Linking the caste systems of America, India, and Nazi Germany, Wilkerson explores eight pillars that underlie caste systems across civilizations, including divine will, bloodlines, stigma, and more. Using riveting stories about people—including Martin Luther King, Jr., baseball's Satchel Paige, a single father and his toddler son, Wilkerson herself, and many others—she shows the ways that the insidious undertow of caste is experienced every day. She documents how the Nazis studied the racial systems in America to plan their outcasting of the Jews; she discusses why the cruel logic of caste requires that there be a bottom rung for those in the middle to measure themselves against; she writes about the surprising health costs of caste, in depression and life expectancy, and the effects of this hierarchy on our culture and politics. Finally, she points forward to ways America can move beyond the artificial and destructive separations of human divisions, toward hope in our common humanity.

Original and revealing, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* is an eye-opening story of people and history, and a reexamination of what lies under the surface of ordinary lives and of American life today.

REVIEWS AND PRAISE

"An instant American classic and almost certainly the keynote nonfiction book of the American century thus far." —Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

"Should be required reading for generations to come . . . A significant work of social science, journalism, and history, *Caste* removes the tenuous language of racial animus and replaces it with a sturdier lexicon based on power relationships." —Joshunda Sanders, *The Boston Globe*

"A surprising and arresting wide-angle reframing . . . Her epilogue feels like a prayer for a country in pain, offering new directions through prophetic language." —Bilal Qureshi, *The Washington Post*

"A transformative new framework through which to understand identity and injustice in America." —Justin Worland, *Time*

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*Publisher suggested age range covers the wide range of readers publishers envision using the book, whether for independent reading, family sharing, group study, or in other ways. Educators have the best sense of the appropriate range for their diverse learners they work with and understand these ranges vary depending on a book's intended use.

“*Caste* is a luminous read, bearing its own torch of righteous wrath in a diamond-hard prose that will be admired and studied by future generations of journalists.”
—Hamilton Cain, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Brave, clear and shatteringly honest in both approach and delivery . . . Extrapolating Wilkerson’s ideas to contemporary America becomes an unsettling exercise that proves how right she is and how profoundly embedded into society the caste system is. . . . Her quest for answers frames everything and acts as the perfect delivery method for every explanation.” —Gabino Iglesias, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“*Caste* will spur readers to think and to feel in equal measure.” —Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Wilkerson’s book is a powerful, illuminating and heartfelt account of how hierarchy reproduces itself, as well as a call to action for the difficult work of undoing it.” —Kenneth W. Mack, *The Washington Post*

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

- Winner of the 2022 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Current Interest
- Finalist for the 2020 Kirkus Prize for Nonfiction
- Finalist for the 2020 National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction
- Finalist for the 2021 Dayton Literary Peace Prize
- Finalist for the 2021 PEN/John Kenneth Galbraith Award for Nonfiction
- Longlisted for the 2020 National Book Award for Nonfiction
- Named the #1 Nonfiction Book of the Year by *Time*
- Named One of the Best Books of the Year by: *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe*, NPR, The New York Public Library, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *Library Journal*, and more

MEDIA AND RESOURCES

- [First-Year & Common Reading Guide](#)
- [Discussion Guide](#)

RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES

- [“Judge orders books removed from Texas public libraries due to LGBTQ and racial content must be returned within 24 hours,” CNN \(2023\)](#)
 - “Seven residents sued county officials in April 2022, claiming their First and 14th Amendment rights were violated when books deemed inappropriate by some people in the community and Republican lawmakers were removed from public libraries or access was restricted. . . . Books ordered to return to shelves include “*Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*” by Isabel Wilkerson[.]”

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