The History of White People

Ever since the Enlightenment, race theory and its inevitable partner, racism, have followed a crooked road, constructed by dominant peoples to justify their domination of others. Filling a huge gap in historical literature that long focused on the non-white, eminent historian Nell Irvin Painter guides us through more than two thousand years of Western civilization, tracing not only the invention of the idea of race but also the frequent worship of "whiteness" for economic, social, scientific, and political ends.

Nell Irvin Painter
A mind-expanding and myth-destroying exploration of notions of white race—not merely a skin color but also a signal of power, prestige, and beauty to be withheld and granted selectively.

Our story begins in Greek and Roman antiquity, where the concept of race did not exist, only geography and the opportunity to conquer and enslave others. Not until the eighteenth century did an obsession with whiteness flourish, with the German invention of the notion of Caucasian beauty. This theory made northern Europeans into "Saxons," "Anglo-Saxons," and "Teutons," envisioned as uniquely handsome natural rulers.

Here was a worldview congenial to northern Europeans bent on empire. There followed an explosion of theories of race, now focusing on racial temperament as well as skin color. Spread by such intellectuals as Madame de Staël and Thomas Carlyle, white race theory soon reached North America with a vengeance. Its chief spokesman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, did the most to label Anglo-Saxons—icons of beauty and virtue—as the only true Americans. It was an ideal that excluded not only blacks but also all ethnic groups not of Protestant, northern European background. The Irish and Native Americans were out and, later, so were the Chinese, Jews, Italians, Slavs, and Greeks—all deemed racially alien. Did immigrations threaten the very existence of America? Americans were assumed to be white, but who among poor immigrants could become truly American? A tortured and convoluted series of scientific explorations developed—theories intended to keep Anglo-Saxons at the top; the ever-popular measurement of skulls, the powerful eugenics movement, and highly biased intelligence tests—all designed to keep working people out and down.
Advance praise for *The History of White People*

"Deeply researched, intelligent, and wonderfully common-sensical, this is a groundbreaking book, and if we're ever going to get to that so-called 'post-racial' society, a necessary book. It locates race where it actually exists, inside our heads, and shows us how recently it came to reside there."

—RUSSELL BANKS, author of *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Affliction*

"In this wide-ranging and passionate book, Nell Painter makes the story of American history into something new. Her array of writers, artists, and politicians, some familiar and some surprising, struggle mightily to create a concept many Americans of all backgrounds now take for granted: 'white people.'"

—EDWARD AYERS, author of *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*

*The History of White People* is a brilliant meditation on the invention of the idea of ‘whiteness.’ Deeply researched and elegantly written, Nell Painter’s presentation will certainly spark conversation and controversy—as it should. Painter’s high-octane intelligence makes her perfectly suited to the task."

—ANNETTE GORDON-REED, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *The Hemingses of Monticello*

"Nell Painter’s *The History of White People* is an amazing race-bending narrative. With grace and energy, she confronts the myth of white people as race-less. She offers an eye-opening examination of slavery, the creation of white-ness, and the way in which racial categories have been both false and destructive. This is storytelling at its best."

—ELLEN GOODMAN, syndicated columnist, *Washington Post* Writers Group

"Not since Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* has there been such a synoptically provocative appreciation of the myths by which a now demographically challenged people sustained themselves and restrained others."