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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

## Book Information

Paperback: 512 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; Reprint edition (April 18, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393339742

ISBN-13: 978-0393339741

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.3 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 103 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #17,371 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #13 in Books > History >

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## Customer Reviews

Who are white people and where did they come from? Elementary questions with elusive, contradictory, and complicated answers set historian Painter’s inquiry into motion. From notions of whiteness in Greek literature to the changing nature of white identity in direct response to Malcolm X and his black power successors, Painter’s wide-ranging response is a who’s who of racial thinkers and a synoptic guide to their work. Her commodious history of an idea accommodates Caesar; Saint Patrick, history’s most famous British slave of the early medieval period; Madame de Staël; and Emerson, the philosopher king of American white race theory. Painter (Sojourner Truth) reviews the

diverse cast in their intellectual milieus, linking them to one another across time and language barriers. Conceptions of beauty (ideals of white beauty [became] firmly embedded in the science of race), social science research, and persistent North/South stereotypes prove relevant to defining whiteness. What we can see, the author observes, depends heavily on what our culture has trained us to look for. For the variable, changing, and often capricious definition of whiteness, Painter offers a kaleidoscopic lens. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

**\*Starred Review\*** Painter is the author of *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (1996) and several other scholarly works on the history of slavery and race relations in America, most recently *Creating Black Americans* (2006). Her latest selection examines the history of "whiteness" as a racial category and rhetorical weapon: who is considered to be "white," who is not, what such distinctions mean, and how notions of whiteness have morphed over time in response to shifting demographics, aesthetic tastes, and political exigencies. After a brief look at how the ancients conceptualized the differences between European peoples, Painter focuses primarily on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There, the artistic idealization of beautiful white slaves from the Caucasus combined with German Romantic racial theories and lots of spurious science to construct an ideology of white superiority which, picked up by Ralph Waldo Emerson and other race-obsessed American intellectuals, quickly became an essential component of the nation's uniquely racialized discourse about who could be considered an American. Presenting vivid psychological portraits of Emerson and dozens of other figures variously famous and obscure, and carefully mapping the links between them, Painter's narrative succeeds as an engaging and sophisticated intellectual history, as well as an eloquent reminder of the fluidity (and perhaps futility) of racial categories. --Brendan Driscoll --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Tough read but some fascinating ideas and facts.

Great book.

Great explanations about the 4 "enlargements of whiteness" and illustrating how race is a tool of political & economic needs.

This is an important book in its detailed history of how and why people considered themselves "white."

Brilliant, insightful book about our heritage evolving from a myriad of countries and customs and coming together as simply Americans.

We all bleed red but if one does not learn about the difference in nationality and the different culture across this world that God created peace cannot be still

This is a very worthwhile endeavor especially now with the earth on the brink of Fascism.

It is a good history of European development from a perspective I had not read before. A worthwhile read.

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