



White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness

By Maurice Berger



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The acclaimed work that debunks our myths and false assumptions about race in America

Maurice Berger grew up hypersensitized to race in the charged environment of New York City in the sixties. His father was a Jewish liberal who worshiped Martin Luther King, Jr.; his mother a dark-skinned Sephardic Jew who hated black people. Berger himself was one of the few white kids in his Lower East Side housing project.

Berger's unusual experience--and his determination to examine the subject of race for its multiple and intricate meanings--makes *White Lies* a fresh and startling book.

Berger has become a passionate observer of race matters, searching out the subtle and not-so-subtle manifestations of racial meaning in everyday life. In *White Lies*, he encourages us to reckon with our own complex and often troubling opinions about race. The result is an uncommonly honest and affecting look at race in America today--free of cant, surprisingly entertaining, unsettled and unsettling.

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White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness By Maurice Berger Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Maybe this is what President Clinton had in mind when he tried to kickstart a national discussion on race. Berger's book is subjective, fragmented and, most appealingly, devoid of piety. The son of a dark-skinned but racist Sephardic Jewish mother and a pale-skinned father who admired but didn't know blacks, Berger was raised in a mostly black New York City housing project, where he found himself navigating the shoals of identity and allegiance. In this book, he juxtaposes his memories and observations with a collage of interviews, anecdotes and quotes from other writers—many of them black—about the way we mythologize race. In some ways, this is a particularly good subject for such an approach, since attitudes about race are so much a matter of individual perspective and experience. And his broadening of focus allows Berger to encompass some potent voices, from the dreadlocked black person mistaken for Whoopi Goldberg to the white-seeming black artist Adrian Piper, whose *Calling Card 1*, a work of art and functional calling card, alerts people to racist remarks. But the format also has its limitations. Berger's treatment of affirmative action doesn't give enough credit to strong criticisms, and the story of his university education, in which black intellectuals were slighted, isn't followed by acknowledgment of today's multiculturalism. (He now teaches at the New School for Social Research in New York.) But Berger deserves credit—and readers—for coming up with an idiosyncratic way to think publicly about the vexing problems of race and racism.

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From [Booklist](#)

White "lite" characterizes the type of racism on which Berger focuses in this interesting treatment on race relations. But that doesn't negate the substantial value of this book to the new genre that deals with whiteness as an appropriate focus of America's troubled race relations. Berger does a good job of highlighting the subtleties of modern racism as unconsciously practiced by white Americans. He notes that when such practices are pointed out, whites usually deny the implication, and embarrassment results. Berger also focuses on his own experience and background as a white orthodox Jew, growing up in New York. He was raised by a mother whose expressions of racism against blacks were mirrored by a preference, if not favoritism, his father felt toward blacks. Yet neither parent had substantive relations with blacks who were their neighbors. The book is rounded out with numerous race-significant experiences of some whites and a few blacks that further mirror the myths and lies under which we reflect, if not relate, in an interracial world.
Vernon Ford

From Kirkus Reviews

A book that is both immensely interesting and ultimately frustrating: part autobiographical vignettes, part a collection of anecdotes and quotes by whites and blacks on how each group perceives the other. Berger, a senior fellow at the New School's Vera List Center for Art and Politics, has a fascinating background: he is the son of lower-middle-class Jews, his mother a dark-skinned Sephardi with strong racist attitudes; his father highly sympathetic to the civil rights movement. As a gay man, Berger also is sensitive to being an oppressed, often "hidden" minority. His many short topical chapters, on such matters as "Rage," "Fear," "Envy" and "Beauty," focus in an immediate, personal way on "the game of racial avoidance and evasion." Berger performs a real service in discussing the most uncomfortable aspects of his subject, such as the competitive racial resentment he felt against a black man who was awarded a prestigious fellowship when Berger appeared better qualified. He also demonstrates through the evidence of numerous informants that "white people, while vigilantly aware of the presence of blackness, are most often oblivious to the psychological and political weight of their own color." Yet Berger's almost exclusive reliance on autobiographical and anecdotal material precludes him from exploring with sufficient depth or nuance most

of the topics he touches upon. He also errs more profoundly in positing the existence of "whiteness" as something more than a racial category, without paying more than glancing attention to the fact that "white" is as much a social construct as "black." Many whites may relate to blacks in terms of crude stereotypes (e.g., that of disproportionate black drug use; Berger shows that whites are about as likely to use drugs as blacks). But to speak of "whiteness" itself and at the end of his book, Berger extols the emerging field of "whiteness studies" may undermine rather than advance a thoughtful, self-reflective dialogue between two major American races by propagating still another racial/ethnic myth. -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Thomas Smith:

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