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Waking Up White

Debby Irving

BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



Waking Up White

By Debby Irving

Debby Irving is an emerging voice in the national racial justice community. Combining her organization development skills, classroom teaching experience, and understanding of systemic racism, Irving educates and consults with individuals and organizations seeking to create racial equity at both the personal and institutional level. Now a racial justice educator and writer, Irving works with other white people to transform confusion into curiosity and anxiety into action. She's worked in private and public urban schools to foster community among students, teachers, staff, and families by focusing on honest dialog that educates and connects people through shared interests and divergent backgrounds.

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What Race and Racism Means in the Modern World

Debby Irving has struggled with questions of race for her entire life. She found herself stuck in the middle of an endless debate—both the one raging in the world around her and the one within her. She struggled in silence, trying to understand what race and racism meant in the modern world.

“For years I struggled silently to understand race and racism,” she says in the introduction to *Waking Up White*, her book detailing her journey to a better understanding of racism. “I had no way to make sense of debates in the media about whether the white guy was ‘being a racist’ or the black guy was ‘playing the race card.’ I wanted close friends of color but kept ending up with white people as my closest friends...I felt too embarrassed to admit any of this, which prevented me from going in search of answers.”

What follows in *Waking Up White* is what Irving found when she finally did go in search of those answers. It's a largely positive, impactful journey that's written with an effective focus on the issues that matter most without falling into the trap of making the path to better racial understanding about herself. Throughout the book, Irving acknowledges her racial privilege and deeply ingrained prejudices, then takes readers along with her on her quest to release them.

This willingness to turn the mirror on herself, rather than preaching to others about how they need to change, is perhaps what makes this book by a white woman about race and racism worth reading—though many potential readers may be skeptical from the outset.

The Uncomfortable Process of Waking Up

The narrative in *Waking Up White* begins in Debby Irving's childhood home, with a jarring look at childhood innocence coming up against the dark wall of inadvertent but devastating racism. Irving tells of her early childhood fascination with Native American history, culture, and people, poring over books



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and pictures of their peaceful way of life.

When, one day, she realizes that she doesn't know of any Native American people in her life, she asks her mother what happened to them. Her mother, not actively seeking to uphold racist ideas but simply a victim to what she was taught, spins a tale of how Native Americans caused their own demise by letting alcohol poison their minds, bodies, and communities, turning them into violent, dangerous, and lazy monsters that eventually began to die out.

While Irving certainly found this version of events alarming at the time, she was too young to recognize what she now knows—that this dramatically oversimplified version of events not only paints an entire race of people as 'other' and inferior, it also pointedly leaves out the role that white European settlers had in dismantling Native culture, communities, and people. It excludes the strategic introduction of alcohol as a means of manipulating Native American people.

But at the time, however subconsciously, messages like these delivered from trusted adults to a trusting young Irving built up a sense of racial superiority. "Like drops of water into a sponge," Irving says, "moments like these saturated me with the belief that I was of a superior race and wholly disconnected from other races—except as a potential victim."

It wasn't until much later that Irving began to truly question whether the single perspective on race that she'd received growing up was telling a complete story. She speaks, rather compellingly, about how she spent her formative years the way that many of us do—accepting the status quo, considering history to be something set in stone and taught by teachers with a grasp on the facts free from bias.

Difficult Questions on the Road to Racial Awareness

Perhaps one of the most effective and relatable segments of *Waking Up White* comes in Part II: Midlife Wake-Up Calls. It's here that Irving details the beginning of the process that led to her seeing racial disparities in the world for what they truly were. It's an all-too-familiar feeling experienced by many who transition from the sheltered, one-sided view presented in education during childhood into the real world where racial issues are often laid bare.

Irving does about as good a job as any writer has done at telling this story from a white person's perspective. She begins with her move to the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts after graduating college, working in arts administration within the inner-city—an area disproportionately populated by children of color. Once she had children of her own, the already troubling racial disparities she saw among children in Cambridge became even more stark.

"In my Children's Cambridge elementary school," Irving writes, "where students of multiple races actually coexisted, the white kids appeared happier and performed better academically than their peers of color."

If this were a different, more self-flattering book, Irving might then write about how she had a blinding racial epiphany in which she was suddenly awakened to the truth about race and her role in stopping racism all at once. But Irving is not that writer, and this is not that book. In a blink-and-you'll-miss it jump forward in time, Irving is suddenly 48 and working on her Master's degree. This leads her to a Racial and Cultural Identity class that asked her to turn the lens on herself rather than the world outside.

For readers skeptical of the idea of reading about racial identity from the white perspective, it's this fact that may inspire a bit more confidence in Irving's message. The entire book is an acknowledgement that racial 'enlightenment' is not a moment or an event, but a lifelong pursuit—one Irving is more than willing to acknowledge is ongoing even in her own life.

She also dives into the reason why it takes so many of us so long to awaken to the fact that the story of race many of us grow up with is incomplete, misleading, and in many ways flat-out wrong. Five chapters in the book are dedicated to this idea in Section III: Why Didn't I Wake Up Sooner?

Here she explores the obstacles on the path to a more complete understanding of the story of race, before moving forward to confront the key concepts that must be readjusted within all of our minds before real progress can be made.

Rethinking Race

After detailing the long journey that led her to recognize that the story of race in America and the globe was not what she thought, Irving devotes much of the book to systematically dismantling many of the tropes and stereotypes about race and racism that many of us are taught. She does so through the prism of her own growth and learning, still willing to acknowledge where she's fallen short along the way.

For example, a particularly striking moment comes when Irving realizes that she is on the path to repeating the same mistakes her mother did all those years ago when she oversimplified the 'downfall' of Native American people.

"Once I saw myself as part of the system," Irving writes, "I recognized myself as part of the problem. If that didn't sting enough, I also faced the dawning realization that I was now raising my own children to continue the pattern. I'd encouraged them to feel compassion for the 'less fortunate' and be grateful for all they had without helping them see the bigger picture, the system that connected their good fortune to the 'less fortunate' they experienced as separate from themselves. I was passing along what I'd been taught, teaching them to be benevolent do-gooders, not critical social thinkers and problem solvers."

That distinction between 'benevolent do-gooders' and critical social thinkers is a theme in the later parts of the book. Irving outlines and then dismantles the rosy-sounding idea of being 'color-blind' or 'not seeing race,' detailing how this idea in and of itself is one of the most dramatic marks of privilege in white people.



...in racism, just as in bullying, the real power lies in the many bystanders who can choose to become allies—or choose to remain on the sidelines.

This privilege is perhaps most starkly conveyed when Irving tells of a class in which students were asked to fill out a survey that asked how often participants talked about race. Irving, who estimated that she talked about race a few times a year, was shocked to discover that all of the students of color answered that they spoke about race daily.

Throughout the book, Irving ends each chapter with a question or series of questions for readers to consider about their racial privilege or attitude towards race generally. They're all incisive and effective at generating inward-looking thoughts, but the conclusion of this chapter features one of the most striking.

"If both of your parents are white, imagine just one of them being a person of color. Rethink your life from birth to the present. How would your race have influenced your experiences and your outcomes?"

From Inner Work to Outer Work

One of the most unique and compelling aspects of *Waking Up White* is the way in which Irving focuses much more on making internal changes to mindsets and attitudes about race than outward action. While action is the driver that leads to institutional changes, Irving seems to recognize that it's these internal shifts that lead to anti-racist attitudes.

That said, once Irving has devoted ample time in the book to inner work—covering the difficult but necessary changes in attitude surrounding race that include acknowledging dominant white culture, starting with equity before equality, dismissing the myth of the 'rugged individual, and understanding the implications of what it truly means to become multicultural—it's time to move forward to what she calls the outer work. How does a person harness the positive changes in their mindset that come from active self-reflection and self-education to create real change in the world.

In this section, Irving confronts the real work that people must be willing to do to move from apologetic bystander to actual ally.

"The ultimate goal is to interrupt, advocate, and educate without doing more harm than good," she writes. "As a racial justice advocate, I need to become aware of my own racialized tendencies as well as find ways to interrupt racism when I see it in the world around me."

In the book's concluding sections, Irving effectively builds on the preceding soul-searching to produce something of an outline for aspiring allies in the fight to create true racial equality. She begins with a powerful comparison to anti-bullying training she re-

ceived as a teacher, and how any bullying event actually features three distinct roles—the bullies, the victims, and the bystanders. Educators and other experts have found that in racism, just as in bullying, the real power lies in the many bystanders who can choose to become allies—or choose to remain on the sidelines.

Irving also writes on the topics of solidarity and accountability, outlining how solidarity is positive but can stop short of addressing real issues due to an 'other'-ness that persists in the attitude of sideline allyship. For white people in particular, mere solidarity stops short of the full truth—that people of color aren't just victims of some 3rd party, outside force, but are being affected by institutions and mindsets that white people have helped perpetuate and benefitted from themselves. It's this step from solidarity to accountability that Irving evangelizes in the book.

Other subjects include the movement from tolerance to active engagement, the importance of listening first, and finally the normalization of conversations on race that once shocked Irving all those years ago in her college survey.

Conclusion

While anyone looking to enlighten themselves on topics of race would do well to start with any number of effective, educational books by authors who are people of color, *Waking Up White* does serve as an excellent companion to these resources in that it offers a direct perspective from a white person who recognizes that her privilege and ignorance have had a real negative impact on the world—and who has taken active steps to correct them.

Debby Irving guides readers through her own journey with humility and grace, never sugarcoating her own shortcomings or failures when it comes to racial understanding. It's this warts-and-all approach that makes this book so effective without ever straying into performative self-flagellation. In the end, *Waking Up White* works because it isn't just one long apology from a white person to the BIPOC community. It's a powerful perspective on how racist ideas perpetuate in non-minority groups, how they can be recognized, and how they can be stopped.