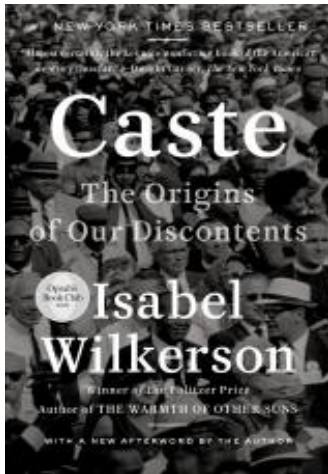


# Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

by Isabel Wilkerson

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## About the Book

**The Pulitzer Prize-winning, bestselling author of *THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS* examines the unspoken caste system that has shaped America and shows how our lives today are still defined by a hierarchy of human divisions.**

*As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power --- which groups have it and which do not.*

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 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 outcast 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.

Beautifully written, original and revealing, CASTE 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.

## Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of CASTE, author Isabel Wilkerson compares American racial hierarchy to a dormant Siberian virus. What are the strengths of this metaphor? How does this comparison help combat the pervasive myth that racism has been eradicated in America?
2. Wilkerson begins the book with an image of one lone dissenter amidst a crowd of Germans giving the Nazi salute. What would it mean --- and what would it take --- to be this man today?
3. What are some of the elements required for a caste system to succeed?
4. Wilkerson uses many different metaphors to explain and help us visualize the concept of the American caste system: the bones inside a body, the beams inside a house, even the computer program in the 1999 film *The Matrix*. Which of these metaphors helped make the concept click for you? Why was it successful?
5. Caste and race are not the same thing. What is the difference between the two? How do casteism and racism support each other?
6. Discuss how class is also different from caste.
7. Who does a caste system benefit? Who does it harm?
8. "Before there was a United States of America," Wilkerson writes, "there was a caste system, born in colonial Virginia." How can Americans reckon with this fact? What does it mean to you to live in a country whose system of discrimination was cemented before the country itself?
9. Did learning about the lens and language of caste change the way you look at U.S. history and society? How?
10. Wilkerson discusses three major caste systems throughout the book: India, Nazi Germany and America. What are some of the differences that stood out to you among these three systems? What are the similarities? How did learning about one help you understand the others? For instance, did the fact that the Nazis actually studied America's segregation practices and Jim Crow laws help underscore the breadth of our own system?
11. Harold Hale, an African-American man, helped his daughter defy the "rules" of their caste in 1970s Texas by naming her Miss. As Wilkerson illustrates throughout the book, the dangers of being seen as defying one's caste can range from humiliation to death. What do you think of the lengths Mr. Hale felt he needed to go to assure dignity for his daughter? What are the risks he took by doing so? Should Miss have had a say in her father's quietly revolutionary act? Explain your thinking.
12. Discuss the differences and similarities between how Miss was treated in the South, where racism and casteism have historically been more overt, and in the North, where they still exist, but can be more subtle. Do you think these various

forms of racism and casteism must be fought in different ways?

**13.** Wilkerson quotes the orator Frederick Douglass, who described the gestures that could incite white rage and violence: "in the tone of an answer; in answering at all; in not answering..." These contradict each other: One could incite rage by answering and by not answering. Discuss the bind that this contradiction put (and still puts) African-American people in.

**14.** Wilkerson frequently uses her own experience as an African-American woman to illustrate her points regarding caste --- including the experience involving the confusion when someone "rises above" his or her presumed station. What do readers gain from hearing about Wilkerson's personal experiences in addition to her deep historical research?

**15.** "Indians will ask one's surname, the occupation of one's father, the village one is from, the section of the village that one is from, to suss out the caste of whoever is standing in front of them," Wilkerson writes. "They will not rest until they have uncovered the person's rank in the social order." How is this similar to and different from the process of determining caste in America? Have you ever, for instance, asked someone what they did for work or where they lived or went to school, and been surprised? Did you treat them differently upon hearing their answer?

**16.** Analyze the process of dehumanization and how it can lead to people justifying great acts of cruelty.

**17.** "Evil asks little of the dominant caste other than to sit back and do nothing," Wilkerson writes. Whether in the dominant caste or not, what are some of the ways that each of us, personally, can stand up to the caste system?

**18.** Wilkerson gives examples that range from the horrifying (lynching) to the absurd (the Indian woman who walked across an office to ask a Dalit to pour her water from the jug next to her desk) to illustrate caste's influence on behavior. How do both of these types of examples --- and everything in between --- help cement her points? Why do we need to see this range to clearly understand caste?

**19.** Discuss how overt racism subtly transforms into unconscious bias. What are the ways that we can work to compensate for the unconscious biases inherent in a caste system?

**20.** Wilkerson writes about the "construction of whiteness," describing the way immigrants went from being Czech or Hungarian or Polish to "white" --- a political designation that only has meaning when set against something "not white." Irish and Italian people weren't "white" until they came to America. What does this "construction of whiteness" tell us about the validity of racial designations and the structure of caste?

**21.** It is a widely held convention that working-class white Americans may often "act against their own interests" by opposing policies designed to help the working class. Discuss how the logic of caste disproves this concept and redefines that same choice from the perspective of maintaining group dominance.

**22.** How does the caste system take people who would otherwise be allies and turn them against one other?

**23.** Wilkerson describes dinner with a white acquaintance who was incensed over the treatment they received from the waitstaff. Why did the acquaintance respond the way that she did, and how did it hurt or help the situation?

24. What do we learn from Albert Einstein's response to the American caste system upon arrival from Germany?

25. What are some of the steps that society, and each of us, can take toward dismantling the caste system?

## Author Bio

Isabel Wilkerson, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Humanities Medal, is the author of the critically acclaimed *New York Times* bestseller *THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS*. Her debut work won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction and was named to *Time's* 10 Best Nonfiction Books of the 2010s and *The New York Times's* list of the Best Nonfiction of All Time. She has taught at Princeton, Emory and Boston Universities, and has lectured at more than 200 other colleges and universities across the United States and in Europe and Asia.

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