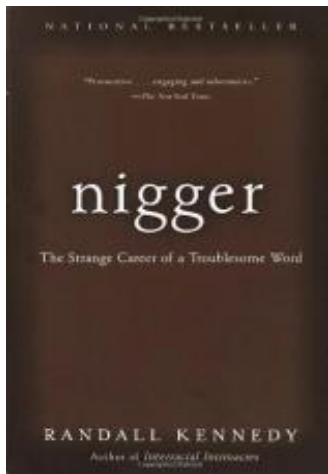


Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word

by Randall Kennedy



About the Book

In **Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word**, Harvard Law School professor Randall Kennedy grapples with a key term in the lexicon of race relations. He traces the history of the word *nigger*, showing that it has been primarily employed as an insult, probably the most notorious racial epithet in America, and perhaps, the world. Kennedy also demonstrates, however, that people have used the term *nigger* in other ways. Some have written or spoken the word in order merely to document its usage. Others have written or spoken the word in order to condemn it. Still others have used it in order to attempt to transform its meaning, to convert it from a negative slur into a positive gesture of solidarity. All of these uses are intensely controversial, and many observers believe that everyone should refrain from using *nigger* given its history, its continued use as a wounding slur, and the very real risk that it will hurt feelings regardless of the intentions of a given speaker or writer. Kennedy describes and assesses these arguments and counter-arguments. Along the way he introduces readers to intense debates over such issues as the propriety of assigning to students Mark Twain's **Huckleberry Finn** (in which the word appears 215 times), the wisdom of imposing special speech codes on college campuses, conflicting ways of defining *nigger* in dictionaries, and contending approaches to disciplining those who respond violently to racial insults.

By tracing the origins of this controversial word, mapping its connotations, and exploring the surrounding controversy, Randall Kennedy provides a comprehensive framework for a reexamination of our laws, attitudes, and culture.

Discussion Guide

1. How should *nigger* be defined? Is there only one meaning of the word? How has the semantics of the word evolved over time? What does this term mean to you personally? What do you think it means to your parents' generation? What does it mean to those in other racial communities? Does its meaning vary depending upon age, race, community, class, and setting?
2. Is *nigger* part of the American cultural inheritance that should be preserved? Should we ban books from the nineteenth century such as *Huckleberry Finn* that contain the word? What about books from the twentieth century such as **To Kill a Mockingbird** or **Uncle Tom's Children** or **Invisible Man**? What about contemporary works such as the movie *Rush Hour*?
3. Why does *nigger* generate such powerful reactions? Is it more hurtful than other racial, ethnic, and religious epithets? Why are such words so plentiful? Should *nigger* be treated differently than other racial or ethnic slurs?
4. Should Kennedy have used "the n-word" instead of *nigger* in his book? Should the title have been "The N-Word"? Does the title or Kennedy's continued use of the word throughout the book offend you? Why do you think that Kennedy used *nigger* as the only word in the title?
5. Should blacks be able to use the word *nigger* in ways forbidden to others? Why or why not?
6. Is there an important distinction between "nigger" and "niggah"?
7. Under what conditions, if any, should a person be ousted from his or her job or school for saying *nigger*?
8. How can we go about changing the connotations of the word *nigger*?
9. In an episode of the television show "Boston Public," Marla Hendricks, a black teacher, wants Danny Hanson, who is white, to be fired for discussing the word *nigger* in his classroom. She says, "That word has always stood for hatred coming out of a white mouth. No teacher in any school is good enough to erase that in a sensitivity class." Do you agree with her? Would it have made a difference if Danny Hanson was black? Is a commercial television show an appropriate forum in which to explore this type of issue? What do you think the program hoped to achieve? Has it succeeded?
10. Do you feel we should be discussing the word and its social and cultural connotations? Or is this issue too explosive to be resolved? What do you think about discussing this word in the classroom?
11. What is your reaction to hearing *nigger* or *niggah* in rap lyrics sung by blacks? How about when used in skits by black comedians? How would you react if you heard these words used in a routine performed by a white comedian on "Saturday Night Live" or Comedy Central?
12. Andy Rooney of "60 Minutes" has said that "the best way to get rid of a problem is to hold it up to the bright light and look at all sides of it, and that's what Kennedy does in this book." Do you agree?

Author Bio

Randall Kennedy received his undergraduate degree from Princeton and his law degree from Yale. He is a Rhodes

Scholar and served as a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall before joining the faculty of the Harvard Law School. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Association, and the American Law Institute, His previous book, **Race, Crime, and the Law**, was awarded the Robert F. Kennedy Book Prize in 1997. Mr. Kennedy lives in Dedham, Massachusetts.

Critical Praise

"Demonstrates a key truth about the N-word. . . . it tracks our racial history and stars in a slew of court decisions that reveal large truths about bigotry and free expression."

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