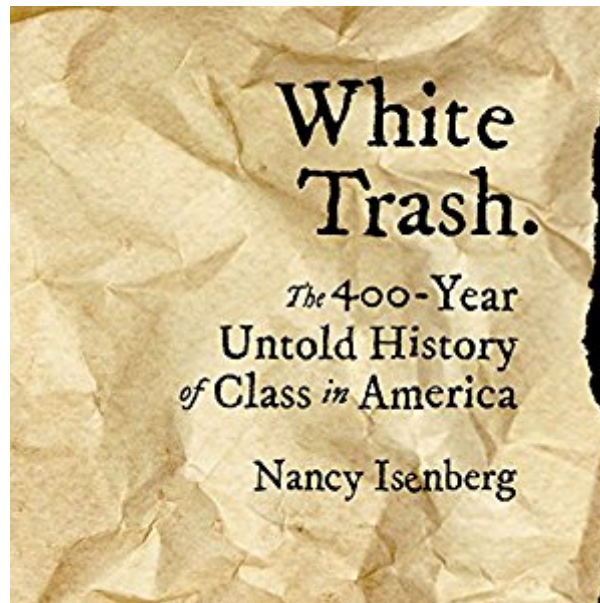




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# White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History Of Class In America



## Synopsis

The wretched and landless poor have existed from the time of the earliest British colonial settlement. They were alternately known as "waste people", "offals", "rubbish", "lazy lubbers", and "crackers". By the 1850s the downtrodden included so-called "clay eaters" and "sandhillers", known for prematurely aged children distinguished by their yellowish skin, ragged clothing, and listless minds. In *White Trash*, Nancy Isenberg upends assumptions about America's supposedly class-free society. Poor whites were central to the rise of the Republican Party in the early 19th century, and the Civil War itself was fought over class issues nearly as much as it was fought over slavery. Reconstruction pitted poor white trash against newly freed slaves, which factored in the rise of eugenics. These poor were at the heart of New Deal reforms and LBJ's Great Society; they haunt us in reality TV shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*. We acknowledge racial injustice as an ugly stain on our nation's history. With Isenberg's landmark book, we will have to face the truth about the enduring, malevolent nature of class as well.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book explains the unsavory fine points of our national identity by probing and then exposing the not so well hidden loose ends that tie the bottom half of America's social hierarchy to the top half. It reveals that there is much much more to race and class than what we see at eye level. We learn here that the colonists who came to the Americas were very much a mixed bag. Initially, the upper classes were investor friends of the British Crown, given concessions to search for gold and to find

a non-existent water passage across North America to India. Later, they were made up of political and religious enemies of the beheaded King Charles I. Jamestown was one of the many failures at finding gold or the non-existent passage to the East. And thus, only as an afterthought did the leaders decide to salvage their costly expeditions by killing two birds with one stone: England's horrendous social problems of crime, poverty and street violence would be solved by shipping the poor off to America and Australia. Then tracts of Indian lands would be sold off to entice the many lost souls hoping to make a life in the New World. These lost souls thus mostly were tricked onto ships in large numbers under a number of unsavory land contract schemes, the most prominent of which was called the "head-right system," in which those who did the tricking were paid in 50-acre land parcels, and in which the contractees thought they would all end up as rich English gentlemen, with free land, slaves and tools, living a life of leisure. Of course, it was all a lie, for most of them ended up as slaves. Most of the founding fathers became rich by acquiring large parcels of land through land scams of the head-right variation. At the bottom of the heap were those of the poor and criminal classes, including children sold off by their parents, or shipped off for petty crimes, or just kidnapped off the streets. But they also included roguish highwaymen or pirates, vagrants, Irish rebels, whores, and convicts shipped to the colonies for a variety of crimes, such as refusing to be impressed into the army, being in debt, etc. The progeny of these groups are today's poor white trash. The majority of those brought to America's shores came as indentured servants, a British euphemism for "slaves." And even the few that did later manage to either escape slavery, or win their freedom outright after long periods of indentureship, seldom owned more than just token amounts of the least productive and most remote land. Most ended up as "squatters" forced into the outer rims of the Western territories to "squat" on Indian lands in violation of the Treaty of Paris. The power of land, for most of American history, lay in being able to get married, "put down roots," breed a large family of field hands, and then work the land with as many hands as possible. "Squatters," despised by all sides, typically had none of these. Being the 17th through the 19th centuries' version of transients, they were young, virile, aimless and restless single white men, ineligible for marriage and forced to keep moving West in search of better and freer land. These unattached single men, wanderers and squatters, were the "free radicals" of the American heartland. In 1676, a petite English Gentleman, Nathaniel Bacon, in what was called the Bacon Rebellion, along with a contingent of a few dozen single white men, plus an assortment of an equal number of red, white and black slaves, rebelled against being pushed to the outer edges of the colonies, left in hostile Indian territories to fend for themselves. They tried to burn down Virginia. It was the only time in American history when the lower classes have combined to rebel against the upper class. With

lop-sided gender demographics favoring single white men 10 to 1 (in the Caribbean, the male slave ratio alone was sometimes as much as 100-1), minimally marriageable women became a scarce resource. As the author notes, "women went to market with their virginity;" and marriage and fertility played a critical role in defining the shape of early American society. Any woman under 50, no matter how unattractive, could find a husband in the top tier of colonial American society. "Breeding capacity became a calculable natural resource -- commodified and exploited in the marriage exchange." For slave women, the womb became an article of commerce; and slave children, like cattle, were transactional property. In Virginia their "natural increase," literally would become a cottage industry, making it one of the world's leaders in the export of slaves. James Cartwright has written a wonderfully important book, called "Violent Lands," on the meaning of these lopsided gender demographics in which large numbers of virile young white men were unable to find wives or become stakeholders in frontier American society. He claims this is why America became, and remains even today, one of the most "Violent Lands" in the world. Thus, added to the staid and highly sensitive class hierarchy inherited from class conscious Britain, the reader can see why America became an incubator for deep race and class sensitivities, divisions and resentments. This "witches brew" of breeding, biology, race, backed up by Christian biblical text, seamlessly turned into an ideology of white supremacy, still the most enduring instrument on the palette used to shape the American social order. Put more directly, America's founding generations saw good breeding and race as God's way of establishing white supremacy as nature's "taken for granted" class hierarchy; and ever since the days of the Puritans, American elite have frowned upon both race-mixing and upward mobility for the poorer classes. Both have been seen as threats, either to the menial labor force, which the plantation owning elite depended upon for their very existence; or, to the white supremacist social order, underwritten and mandated by the biblical story of ham, which simply meant that blacks would remain slaves at the bottom of the pecking order, in perpetuity. Imported slaves and immigrants, either through indentureship, apprenticeships, debtors prisons, or due to indictment on criminal charges, prison-work release programs, etc., have all been forced into long-term arrangements for free, or nearly free, and always grossly unfair wages. These discrepancies between "fair" and "grossly unfair" wages have always rebounded back to land owners, or to big businesses' bottom line as obscene and unsavory profits. Inequality, denial of the right to vote or to own land, all followed logically from assumptions of superior breeding and race superiority assumptions. Submission to those at the top of the societal hierarchy was regarded as a natural condition of humankind in early America. The Christian Bible was the final authority that reinforced these notions, pouring them into the mainstream. By teaching that some were born to

rule, while others were born to submit and obey, breeding, and the biblical story of ham, had placed poor whites, as well as those with black skin, at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy.

### Arkansas White Trash: A True Story

At the age of nine, I learned about this bottom-most tier of our society first hand a block from the Arkansas River where I grew up in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Just below us -- both figuratively and literally -- down the sloping banks that slid right into the water, lived poisoned snakes, eels, gar and cat fish, turtles, bullfrogs, and an odd assortment of white people, who, though it was never said so openly, frightfully were the true wretched of the earth: These were Pine Bluff's "poor white trash:" authentic rednecks in the flesh. The shanty town of jerry-rigged huts made of corrugated tin, cardboard and scrap wood, that they had fashioned as homes, had sprung up over night. It was a racially homogenous tribe of "bruised fruit" and "day old" bread peddling white folks. Daily, in push carts and horse drawn wagons, they sold to us, nearby blacks who lived just up the hill, food-stuffs that had been savaged from grocery store dump bins. These "petite entrepreneurs" were a curious and motley sort, having to defer to blacks -- if for no more reason than to encourage us, their only customers, to buy their "rank" produce. But here's the catch: Whenever we bought it, they surely knew that we did so only out of pity for their dismal plight. Yet, curiously, other than interacting at their peddler's stations, and playing ball with two brothers around my age, who would occasionally come up the hill, we maintained a silent *modus vivendi* that served as an invisible shield between our two radically distinct subcultures. While most of my neighbors were working class blacks, sprinkled with a few college educated professionals, like my stepfather, Carl Redus, the white tribes that lived under the hill, were barely literate, and by anyone's social reckoning, had fallen well off the deep end of America's socio-economic grid.... That is except for two things that I still vividly remember: First, during the school year, a school bus headed down King Street, would disappear beneath the sloping hill stopping just short of sliding into the water to pick up a handful of shanty town redneck kids. It would then proceed clear across town past several black schools to the nearest white school to deposit them. Second, and this came as quite a shock to a nine-year old black kid, almost without fail on the weekends, noisy redneck parties would ensue down under the hill. Rival redneck tribes living farther around the river bend, would come to party, and invariably before Sunday morning rolled around, a humongous fight would break out, and things would turn very violent and ugly indeed. Somewhere in the wee hours of Saturday night, I would be awakened by ear-shattering noises, when literally all hell broke loose in shanty town. The sky would light up like Roman candles on the Fourth of July. Bullets would be flying every which way. Shanty town huts would go up in flames, and residents would be running up the hill and screaming as they fanned-out in every direction. It was like a mini race riot, but involving only one race, the white

race. And then, over the flaming carnage and the war-like din, one could hear puffing up the hill, a loud desperate banging on our neighbor Mr. Harris' backdoor. In a blood-curling southern drawl that is still unforgettable -- literally a life-and-death scream -- I could hear an older white man say: "Harris! Harris! Oooh lord Mr. Harris, please Harris, call the law! Call the law Harris! Please call the law! As multiple sirens howled in the distance, headed in our direction, soon everything would go completely silent, as the paddy wagons, fire trucks, ambulances and stretchers would arrive. Through my bedroom blinds, I could see parties alien to us, bleeding profusely being carried away on stretchers or handcuffed, being hauled off to hospitals and jails. Altogether it was a sight to behold! The only way we found out what happened in the dark down that hill, is the next day, Marshall and Leonard, the two brothers who occasionally played baseball with us, shamelessly would arrive at our backdoor, in search of food, clothing, bandages, medication, etc. And in exchange for a free breakfast, and a "care package," we would invite them in to give us the low-down on the fighting that had just taken place. They never came to our front door and never had enough racial pride to turn down our breakfast invitation, or the "care package" containing black hand-me-down clothes and assorted goods that we invariably gave them. And thus, the brothers, bruised and scraped, seemed to find it cathartic to be able to unload the gory details of the "redneck wars" of the previous night. What they told us was unsurprising. Invariably the wars were about personal slights, turf encroachments, being "dissed," and men from the wrong side of the river banks "hitting on" women from the right side. Add to this, the occasional hell-raising redneck males, armed and liquored-up, and generally on edge -- disgusted with not having a secure and respected place in society -- and the tableau of causes of the redneck wars is complete. This book, "White Trash," is the first time I have ever seen in print the whole story of people like my river bank redneck friends, Marshall and Leonard, who I later learned both ended up in Reform School, which in Arkansas was the expressway for ending up on Cummings State prison farm. The themes exposed here by this author, run true, and vector directly from the banks of the Arkansas River straight through American history like the jagged edges of the St. Andreas fault. What this author has uncovered, is that, like race, class too is an unacknowledged independent variable that runs straight through American History, and is also America's most enduring fault line. One that when taken together with race, creates a reality coterminous with American culture itself. How she was able to skillfully separate race from class, and then stitch them back together again, when clearly they seem virtually inseparable, is part of the beauty of this fine treatment of both subjects. In short, throughout American history, (including today's race to the bottom of the global labor pool), America's social pecking order has depended on maintaining in a steady-state, two racially separated poorer working

classes at the very bottom rung of the social ladder. Since Bacon's rebellion of 1676, rationalizing these two groups as inferior, and pitting them against one another, has proven quite sufficient to keep the ideology of white supremacy in place, and the price of labor at rock bottom. Ten stars

I was super excited about the release of this book; I've been a fan of the PBS "People Like Us" movie for a very long time. A lot of the narrative in the U.S. tends to focus on race, overlooking elements of class that exist and have some pretty strong historical roots. This is a good read, it's a great read if you're someone who is faintly familiar with ideas in sociology or in general about class struggle. It's a sociology/history book, so may not be as mainstream as people would like. What's nice is that this particular author actually articulates the ideas some have come across in sociology/history regarding class and puts those often underlying murmurs of class struggle into historical context, along with supporting ideas and accounts. It ties in some of the ideas of the Founding Fathers, especially as it pertains to Thomas Paine and variations and distinctions between the land-holding and non, as property is often tied to wealth. The author starts out in discussing the elements of Protestant Work Ethic and the reverberations of that in the U.S. The author does a great job of going through the different evolutions of the idea of "white trash" especially as it pertains to the name and variations of the name. There is also the element of how the imagery of white trash changes over the years; such as mountain folk or those in Kentucky, or those who grow corn. It's relatively an always evolving term as explained by the author. The author takes the reader through the present day, and links it back to the civil war and to the revolutionary war. All and all, a great book and a quick read that I enjoyed. This is a history narrative, meaning I don't really know where some of the reviews dog it for being "political." It takes the reader through the evolution of the term white trash, it looks at variations of white trash and how it is portrayed, how it comes to be viewed in the U.S., it's a term that has had some unique applications and has been crossed applied to various groups throughout the U.S.'s history. The citations are well done, lots of primary sources and clear links to where the author is drawing conclusions from. The author also focuses on the term in both the north and south, albeit after the Civil War it becomes more concentrated within the southern region. The author also stays pretty focused on her niche, which makes it a compact and enjoyable read.

This is a compelling, comprehensive history of America from the Colonial Period in Jamestown to today's media world seen brilliantly through the lens of social class. In the process of seeing how class conflicts with America's innocent dream of democracy and equality, Isenberg shows

convincingly that much of what America treasures as a refuge where all people are on equal footing is a fantastical myth with no bearing on reality. Looking at class stereotypes handed down from the British who saw America as a wasteland, a rubbish field in which to discard their undesirables, America has always hated the poor and justified their hatred by seeing them as genetically hard-wired to be sloths. We see this ugly type of classism in the works of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and it extends into the eugenics craze of the 1920s, the Depression, and our current scoffing of such media figures as Honey Boo Boo. In this "untold history of class in America," we see why the story is untold: Because our contempt for the poor conflicts with our childish delusion that we are a country that believes in the equality of all people. Isenberg makes a convincing case that we have never valued equality and have always had a convenient scapegoat for our country's injustices. Highly Recommended.

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