



Book Club Set

So You Want to Talk About Race

By Ijeoma Oluo

About the Author

Ijeoma Oluo is a writer, speaker and internet yeller. She is the author of the #1 New York Times bestseller *So You Want to Talk About Race* and most recently, *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America*. Her work on race has been featured in The Guardian, The New York Times and The Washington Post, among many other publications. She was named to the 2021 TIME 100 Next list and has twice been named to the Root 100. She received the 2018 Feminist Humanist Award and the 2020 Harvard Humanist of the Year Award from the American Humanist Association. She lives in Seattle, Washington.

Retrieved from: <https://www.ijeomaoluo.com/>

About the Book

In this #1 *New York Times* bestseller, Ijeoma Oluo offers a revelatory examination of race in America.

Protests against racial injustice and white supremacy have galvanized millions around the world. The stakes for transformative conversations about race could not be higher. Still, the task ahead seems daunting, and it's hard to know where to start. How do you tell your boss her jokes are racist? Why did your sister-in-law hang up on you when you had questions about police reform? How do you explain white privilege to your white, privileged friend?

In *So You Want to Talk About Race*, Ijeoma Oluo guides readers of all races through subjects ranging from police brutality and cultural appropriation to the model minority myth in an attempt to make the seemingly impossible possible: honest conversations about race, and about how racism affects every aspect of American life.

"Simply put: Ijeoma Oluo is a necessary voice and intellectual for these times, and any time, truth be told." —Phoebe Robinson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *You Can't Touch My Hair*

Retrieved from: <https://www.ijeomaoluo.com/books>

Discussion Questions

1. In chapter 1, the author states: “It is about race if a person of colour thinks it is about race. It is about race if it disproportionately or differently affects people of colour. It is about race if it fits into a broader pattern of events that disproportionately or differently affects people of colour.” After reading the author’s explanation of these points, can you think of social or political issues that many people currently believe are not about race, but actually might be? Which of the above guidelines for understanding when it is about race fit those issues.
2. The chapter about privilege is placed right before the chapter on intersectionality. The author has stated in interviews that she placed those chapters in that border because it is impossible to fully understand intersectionality without first comprehending privilege. How do the concepts discussed in the chapter “Why am I always being told to check my privilege?” help deepen your understanding of intersectionality and help implement intersectionality into your life?
3. The author states that she grew up in a majority white, liberal area and was raised by a white mother. How might that upbringing have influenced the way that she wrote this book? How might it have influenced the personal events she describes in the book? How might this book have been different if written by a black person with a different upbringing, or written by a person of colour of a different race?
4. Throughout the book, the author makes it clear that this book is written for both white people and people of colour. But does the author expect white people and people of colour to read and experience this book the same way? What are some of the ways in which the author indicates how she expects white people and people of colour to react and interact with portions of the book? What are some of the ways in which the author discusses the different roles that white people and people of colour will play in fighting systematic racism in our society?
5. In Chapter 12, “What are microaggressions?”, the author lists some of the racial microaggressions that her friends of colour said they often hear. What are some of the other racial microaggressions that you have encountered or witnessed?
6. Chapter 15, “But what if I hate Al Sharpton?”< discusses the issue of respectability politics and tone policing. What burdens of “respectability” and “tone” do you see placed on different populations of colour in our society?
7. The final chapter, “Talking is great, but what else can I do?”, discusses some actions you can take to battle systemic racism using the knowledge you’ve gained from this book and from your conversations on race. What are some actions you can take in your community, your schools, your workplace, and your

local government? What are some local anti-racism efforts in your community that you can join or support?

Retrieved from: https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/so-you-want-to-talk-about-race_readers-guide.pdf

Author Interview

Q. It seems like the entire internet is recommending that white people read your book right now. How are you feeling about that?

A. Ijeoma Oluo: It's been really surreal and almost kind of traumatizing in a way. When my agent called and said, "You're a *New York Times* best-seller again," I just sat there. It was kind of a gut punch.

This book came out over two years ago, and it was and is a book about doing the work every single day. But it seems like it's getting this massive response only when we see the horrific, blatant, disturbing murder of a Black man on camera, instead of all of the other times that we've been hurt and dismissed and brutalized over the years. It's hard to know that that's what it takes to get people to listen. It's not the person in your office saying that they're being discriminated against. It's not the people in your lives coming to you and saying, "You need to do better." It's not all of the other countless ways in which Black people in this country are funneled into the prison-industrial complex. It has to be this brutal.

That being said, it's something. And I think that many of us are used to seeing these events happen without this collective action rising up in response.

Q. Does this time feel different to you, as someone who has watched these horrible incidents bubble up to the surface of the American consciousness and then recede again?

A. It does feel different. What I'm seeing is encouraging, with people heading out day after day after day to protest. I was so afraid that the force that police were using would discourage people from coming back. And I think that law enforcement was counting on that. But it didn't work. To see people show up after being tear gassed or arrested has been so encouraging.

All across this nation and around the world, huge numbers of people are coming out to say that Black lives do matter, and that police brutality is a real and devastating and unacceptable problem in this country. That's different. It's different from what we saw with Trayvon Martin. It's different from what we saw with Mike Brown. It's an energy that, I hope, gets us to pay attention to the ways in which Black women, and Native people, and disabled people, and trans women are often targeted by police as well. Breonna Taylor should be 27. We need to keep this energy up for everyone who's been taken from us.

Q. It's hard to draw a direct line, of course, but I would think that some of the people attending these protests now decided to do so after having read *So You Want to Talk About Race* when it came out. It has in all likelihood gotten a lot of people on a different path than they might have otherwise been. Have you heard that from people?

A. It's been amazing to hear from people about that, especially hearing from people of color. I have heard from people of color who've said, "This book is making my relationships a lot better. I'm finally having a different relationship with a white relative, with a partner, with coworkers. I'm finally able to solve these problems in my office." And it's been amazing, too, to hear from white people who've said, "I didn't realize the ways in which I was harming people in my life, and I'm finally having real conversations about it. We're finally moving forward, and it's been really helpful."

Q. *Discomfort* has been an operative word and concept, both in your book and in other sources that people have been pointing to. It is something that I, as a white person, certainly think a lot about. Do you think white people have gotten better at sitting with discomfort?

A. Right now, at this moment, I am seeing some people getting better with it. It just takes practice. I think that we're all capable of it. Once you realize it won't kill you, once you realize that it's *the* way that you start to learn what you've been doing wrong and how you can do better—you will realize that there's an immediate reward to becoming the person that you want to be. Discomfort is an opportunity to really, actually live your values. And so I do think that it's happening.

But it's still true that a lot of people want to seem right. They want to seem like they've always gotten it. And the most important thing that white people can do is be wrong. Be wrong and say, "I was wrong, and I've learned." It won't kill you to be uncomfortable. It won't kill you to do better, but you have to do it publicly and you have to do it with accountability. The more that we can do this, the more that we can normalize it, the better that we will all be as a society.

Q. Do you ever hope that your own book becomes obsolete?

A. Yes, absolutely, and for a couple of reasons. One, my book is kind of a primer for talking about these issues. I hope first that it becomes obsolete because people have moved on to books that address how we actually dismantle this system. And two, I think that everyone who does this kind of work hopes it will be obsolete because the hope is

that future generations have bigger, grander ideas. I hope that with them, we see some resolution. I hope that we move on to tackle other issues as well.

Q. You wrote this book about race, and it's fantastically popular and important. But do you ever feel like, "There's other work I want to be doing that isn't this"?

A. Unfortunately, right now as a writer, this is literally all I am doing. It's all that I can do. I just finished writing a book on histories of white supremacy in America, and I had been very excited about the thought of not doing this, of not being steeped in violent white supremacy and anti blackness, but here we are. Just a couple of weeks after turning it in, this is my life again. And I would love for it not to be.

As a writer and as someone who loves writing, I would love for writing to not be a traumatic experience for me. I am hoping one day to be able to devote my time to fiction. There are some bad mysteries in my brain that I would love to get out there to the public! I would love to experiment. I would love to be a creative writer. And right now this is really where I am, and it's painful and it hurts.

When we talk about race in America, it's important to recognize how much energy is stolen from people of color, especially Black and indigenous people in this country, in dealing with racism. I constantly think of what could we be if this wasn't determining so much of our lives. What could we do if that energy was freed up? What could I write if that energy was freed up?

There are different ways to die in this country. You can die physically on the street being shot by our police officers or choked to death by our police officers. You can also die the slow death of watching all of your potential, and time, and energy being drained away, trying to survive a brutal system.

Q. I'm always conscious of overemphasizing self-care, but I also know that if you don't find a way to keep going, if you don't find a way to take care of yourself, you can't keep doing this work. How have you been managing?

A. It's really tough. For me right now, it's about community, and it's about my family. My partner is really great at creating space for me to grieve and to relax and to rest. And we're checking in with each other. We've been coming together and checking on each other, and saying, "How are you? Are you okay? Are you hanging in there?"

At the same time, it's important that people understand the magnitude of the risk that we're taking. And people of color and Black and indigenous people in particular, are

already at extreme risk from COVID-19. George Floyd in fact had survived COVID-19; he had been infected and pulled through, only to be killed by police. Breonna Taylor was a first responder and an essential worker, who was putting her life on the line in this pandemic, and she was killed by police. Even when we survive one issue, there's another one there waiting for us.

Still, I've been making time to find some joy, which I think is important. It's hard to prioritize it, because everything else seems so urgent. But we have to, because we're fighting for our civil rights. It's not just "Can we not be shot by cops?" We want more than that. We're fighting for us to be whole.

Retrieved from: <https://www.glamour.com/story/so-you-want-to-talk-about-race-ijeoma-oluo-interview>

Other Links and Resources

Ijeoma Oluo | So You Want to Talk About Race | Talks at Google:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnybJZRWipg>

UPLIFT Black Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion in Barrie:

<https://upliftblack.org/>

Making Change – a local, not-for-profit organization started by a group of passionate volunteers, led by a community of Black women:

<https://makingchangesc.com/>

Making Change – Learning Resources:

<https://makingchangesc.com/resources/>

Parents Against Racism Simcoe County:

<https://parsc.ca/>

#ITSTARTS With: A Conversation, a Movement, a Change!:

<https://www.simcoe.ca/dpt/ccs/lip/itstarts>

Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!	It was OK...		Loved it!	

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: