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# Waking Up White, And Finding Myself In The Story Of Race



## Synopsis

For 25 years, Debby Irving sensed inexplicable racial tensions in her personal and professional relationships. As a colleague and neighbor, she worried about offending people she dearly wanted to befriend. As an arts administrator, she didn't understand why her diversity efforts lacked traction. As a teacher, she found her best efforts to reach out to students and families of color left her wondering what she was missing. Then, in 2009, one "aha!" moment launched an adventure of discovery and insight that drastically shifted her worldview and upended her life plan. In *Waking up White*, Irving tells her often cringe-worthy story with such openness that listeners will be rooting for her - and ultimately for all of us.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Yes, "white privilege" is a real thing. Yes, Black Lives Matter. Yes, we all need to do much more to understand why life is very different for white and black (and brown and Latino and Asian and...) in America. Still, this book is such an unrealistic portrayal of life for most white people in the US that it is likely to exacerbate tensions rather than help resolve them. As other reviewers have pointed out, Ms. Irving has conflated much of her economic privilege into her white privilege. She readily admits to a very upper class (let's not even try for "upper middle class") background but then seems to think that this kind of upbringing has given her the same experiences as the "rest of us," who have often had to deal with limited choices because of the less than affluent communities and schools we inhabit. Further, it is almost beyond belief that a person given the privileges she has had could be quite so uninformed about the real world. Are all white people as blind to reality as she seemed to

be before "waking up white?" I find that difficult to believe. Here, for example, is one of her early experiences in the real world of work. Irving completed four years of college at "very white" Kenyon college and then spent an extended time on a study abroad program in "also very white" Vienna. She then returned and used her father's extensive connections to get an internship at WGBH, Boston's premier public radio station. On her very first day at the station, this new intern with no job experience is approached by another staff person and is offered a position as managing director of a local dance company! Though she admits that she may not be well qualified, she still takes the job.

I thought I was further along in my journey of understanding racism after 15 years of work. This book opened my eyes to many more of my own behaviors that can be problematic for people of color. Debby Irving's descriptions of "not wanting to look stupid" or "not wanting to offend", so just avoiding or keeping quiet when uncomfortable was SO familiar. The thought that schools were a place of fear for many African American parents, such that they didn't feel comfortable advocating for their children was mind-blowing and disheartening, but upon reflection, totally reasonable. And the reality that black anger can easily be dismissed by white administrators who avoid conflict reduces their likelihood of success. How many times would I try before I gave up, given the same obstacles???

I appreciated the list of dominant white male culture behaviors, and the discussion of how they can be both good and bad, depending on the situation. For those who have read this far, the list follows: Conflict avoidance, Valuing formal education over life experience, Right to comfort/entitlement, Sense of urgency, Competitiveness, Emotional restraint, Judgementalness, Either/ Or thinking, Belief in one Right way, Defensiveness, Being status oriented. Personally, I would add one more, Seeing ourselves as Individuals more than members of a group. (the white group) This book made me think deeply about how these behaviors inhibit attempts to be more inclusive of folks who have different views, and how I can behave differently. If we white people continue to avoid honest discussions across the racial divide our forefathers erected, we will never benefit from the amazing gifts other cultures can offer, and we will stay in a fearful state.

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