



Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present

Nell Irvin Painter

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Here is a magnificent account of a past rich in beauty and creativity, but also in tragedy and trauma. Eminent historian Nell Irvin Painter blends a vivid narrative based on the latest research with a wonderful array of artwork by African American artists, works which add a new depth to our understanding of black history.

Painter offers a history written for a new generation of African Americans, stretching from life in Africa before slavery to today's hip-hop culture. The book describes the staggering number of Africans--over ten million--forcibly transported to the New World, most doomed to brutal servitude in Brazil and the Caribbean. Painter looks at the free black population, numbering close to half a million by 1860 (compared to almost four million slaves), and provides a gripping account of the horrible conditions of slavery itself. The book examines the Civil War, revealing that it only slowly became a war to end slavery, and shows how Reconstruction, after a promising start, was shut down by terrorism by white supremacists. Painter traces how through the long Jim Crow decades, blacks succeeded against enormous odds, creating schools and businesses and laying the foundations of our popular culture. We read about the glorious outburst of artistic creativity of the Harlem Renaissance, the courageous struggles for Civil Rights in the 1960s, the rise and fall of Black Power, the modern hip-hop movement, and two black Secretaries of State. Painter concludes that African Americans today are wealthier and better educated, but the disadvantaged are as vulnerable as ever.

Painter deeply enriches her narrative with a series of striking works of art--more than 150 in total, most in full color--works that profoundly engage with black history and that add a vital dimension to the story, a new form of witness that testifies to the passion and creativity of the African-American experience.

* Among the dozens of artists featured are Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Beauford Delaney, Jacob Lawrence, and Kara Walker

* Filled with sharp portraits of important African Americans, from Olaudah Equiano (one of the first African slaves to leave a record of his captivity) and Toussaint L'Ouverture (who led the Haitian revolution), to Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X

Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present Details

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Devoya says

Just saw this author on BookTV and now I have to get my hands on a copy of this book!

Eric Lopez says

An amazing text book introduction into "black" history in America from the beginning to now. There are, of course, some minor disputes that some historians can responsibly make, but it's a fantastic book overall. I would recommend this book for those needed an introduction to black American history. Highly recommended.

Cardyn Brooks says

This is a very detailed survey text about the manufacture of racial identity. Easier to digest the cultural, social, political, historical and economic implications by reading a section or chapter per reading session with a few days or a week between stints. It's a riveting non-fiction narrative.

Sonya says

The book is well written and the history is well captured and the artwork is Amazing; it sits on my art bookshelf in my studio as a reference point. I really love this book.

Jocelyn says

This was the right book to finish on July 4th, in order to remember some of the ways our nation's freedom has failed to be for everyone.

Francesca Calarco says

Nell Irvin Painter is masterful in framing thought-provoking explorations of identity within comprehensive historical research. Her book "The History of White People" was an excellent examination of race as a social construct, as well as the inherent fluidity of ethnic identity in relation to ingroups and outgroups throughout Western history. With "Creating Black Americans," she is able to convey a complex history of a diverse and heterogeneous group, illustrating the variability and dynamic nature of the black experience in the United States.

Each chapter punctuates key historic events and how they impacted peoples lives and identifies. She conveys the horrifying history of enslavement and Jim Crow with accounts of resistance and highlights the agency of African American figures. Additionally, Painter's treatment of people from differing time periods with equal respect allowed for interesting insights into the impact of social movements ranging from the Civil Rights era to hip-hop culture.

While textbooks are not popular go-to reading material, this one is definitely worth reading. The format allowed for a lengthy examination from the time of the first Africans arrival to the New World up until the time of the volume's publication (2006). Furthermore, each chapter contained ample imagery that helped to convey the tone of each section of history, which included both historical images as well as artistic interpretations from other time periods. The choice of including artwork also helped to bridge stretches of time and see the ripple effects of historic events.

If you are interested in American history, identity, or just really good non-fiction, do not let the textbook format deter you from giving this volume a chance.
