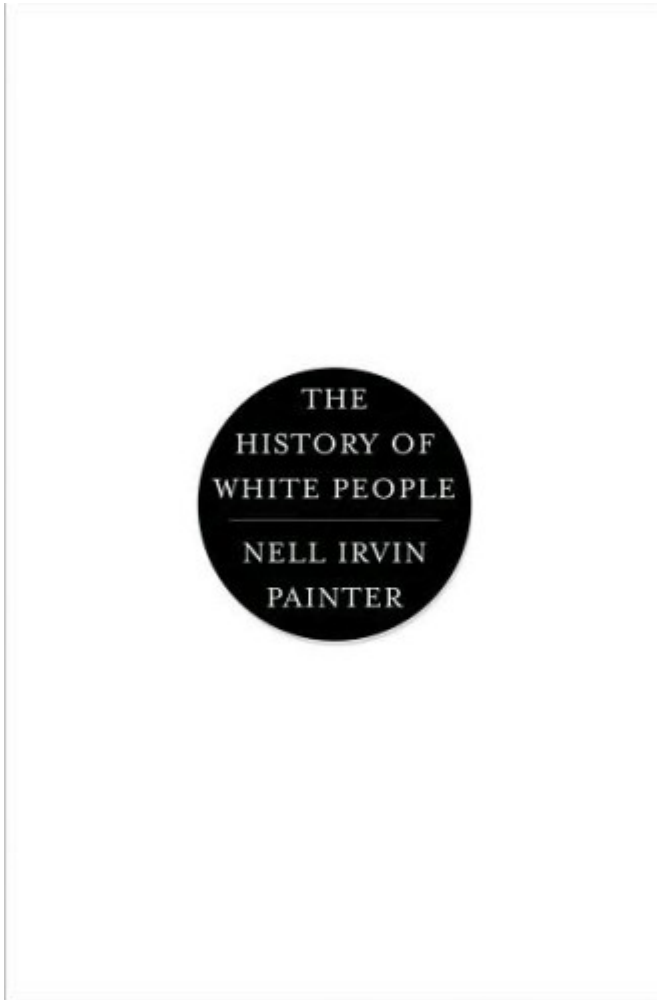


# A review of **The History of White People**

reviewed by [Edward J. Blum](#) in the [December 28, 2010](#) issue

## In Review



## **The History of White People**

By Nell Irvin Painter  
Norton

Have you ever wondered why there are so many terms for white people? *Caucasian* is often the designation on the census form. *Anglo-Saxon* has been attached to *white* and *Protestant* to give us the acronym WASP. Nazis and skinheads refer to whites as Aryans. Have you ever been curious about how certain groups, such as Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants, have been accepted into the race of white Americans over time? Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People* is an amazing work by one of the nation's finest historians. Weaving her way along from the ancient Greeks to the human genome project, Painter shows how whiteness has been a confusing racial category and how intellectuals have painstakingly defined an imaginary white race (or races).

Painter finds that in the time of the Greeks and Romans, skin color had little useful meaning. Europeans were not the world's dominant power, and many Europeans were enslaved. They were laborers who could be bought and bartered, raped and ripped off. (Britain's most famous slave was Succat, better known as Patrick, who became the patron saint of Ireland.) It is within this history of white slavery that Painter finds the first claims of the supremacy of whiteness—in the sex trade. Enslaved eastern European women became symbols of beauty. By 1864, America's own P. T. Barnum asked his European agent to locate a "beautiful Circassian girl" to exhibit "the purest example of the white race." The profound irony of the emergence of whiteness is that it was packaged in the beauty of a slave.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, a host of intellectuals, novelists and artists gave the names *Caucasian* and *Anglo-Saxon* to whites. European scholars such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach identified Caucasian people as white and beautiful. Caucasia is a mountainous area just north of Turkey. For some of these race scientists, Caucasia extended into northern Africa and India. But all of them agreed that the Caucasians were at the top of the human pyramid.

In the United States, slavery helped define whiteness. In this case, the white race was linked to freedom, whereas blackness was tied to enslavement. Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson gravitated to the idea that Anglo-Saxons were at the top of the human pyramid. Jefferson admired the myth of Saxon love for liberty and of Americans as the true heirs of the Saxons' political virtue. He admired it so much, in fact, that his University of Virginia had classes in the Anglo-Saxon language. Emerson, according to Painter, became the "philosopher king of American white race theory" because of his undying love for Anglo-Saxonism. Emerson saluted

the Saxons for embodying manliness, beauty, liberty and individualism.

Whiteness was complicated and expanded by waves of immigrants who came to the U.S. throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. First the Irish, then Jewish, Italian, Russian and Polish immigrants flocked to the United States. The Irish case was emblematic. At first considered nonwhite, or at least below other whites, in racial hierarchies, they became fully white in comparison to African Americans through their own efforts, and especially when other immigrant groups were judged to fit the nonwhite category. In the late 19th century, immigration fears reached such a climax that politicians, lawmakers and scholars called for immigration restriction and the sterilization of supposedly feeble-minded whites.

The expansion of whiteness in the 20th century resulted from various developments. Immigrants and their children actively attempted to situate themselves within the nation as "true" Americans. Fighting in World War II in mixed regiments led various whites to break down previous barriers, and a group of anthropologists began pointing out that race is a superstition, not a biological reality. By the end of the 20th century, ethnic consciousness replaced notions of white racial difference, new biological sciences demonstrated the genetic similarities of all humans, and "critical whiteness studies" revealed the historical and cultural construction of whiteness.

Painter renders intelligible the complicated narratives of racial categorizing. Traversing thousands of years and thousands of miles, she weaves together intellectual, cultural, social and legal history. She is as comfortable explaining notions of difference among the ancient Romans as she is exploring ethnicity narratives from the 1970s. And she brings the notion of beauty to the center of whiteness as no other scholar has. This is an amazing and unprecedented work.

Some readers may ask why Painter's work is so northeastern-centric and does not include the western United States. They may ask why she gives so little attention to the colonial period, when English settlers slowly defined blacks as slaves and whites as free. They may ask why she rarely mentions legal and judicial definitions of whiteness. However, these questions should lead them not to dismiss Painter's work, but to read more by authors such as Matthew Frye Jacobson, George Lipsitz and Ian Haney Lopez.

In one arena, however, Painter's account is too shallow. She never looks into the soul of whiteness—into its connections with religion or its links to the sacred. Perhaps the

first scholar of whiteness, the famous civil rights intellectual and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, saw the depth of whiteness in its proponents' attempt to make it a religious value. This is one reason his most famous book was titled *The Souls of Black Folk*. He also lamented in 1920, "Are we not coming more and more, day by day, to making the statement 'I am white,' the one fundamental tenet of our practical morality?" Richard Wright, the author of the best-selling novel *Native Son*, claimed in 1945: "The apex of white racial ideology was reached when it was assumed that white domination was a God-given right."

The link between whiteness and morality is an important one. It may explain the tenacity with which whiteness has remained an arbiter of all that is good and right. Painter wonders why Americans hold onto the "superstition" of whiteness. Perhaps the history of links between whiteness and godliness is a key to solving that puzzle.