

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Isabel Wilkerson

Caste

The Origins
of Our
Discontents

Adapted for
Young Adults

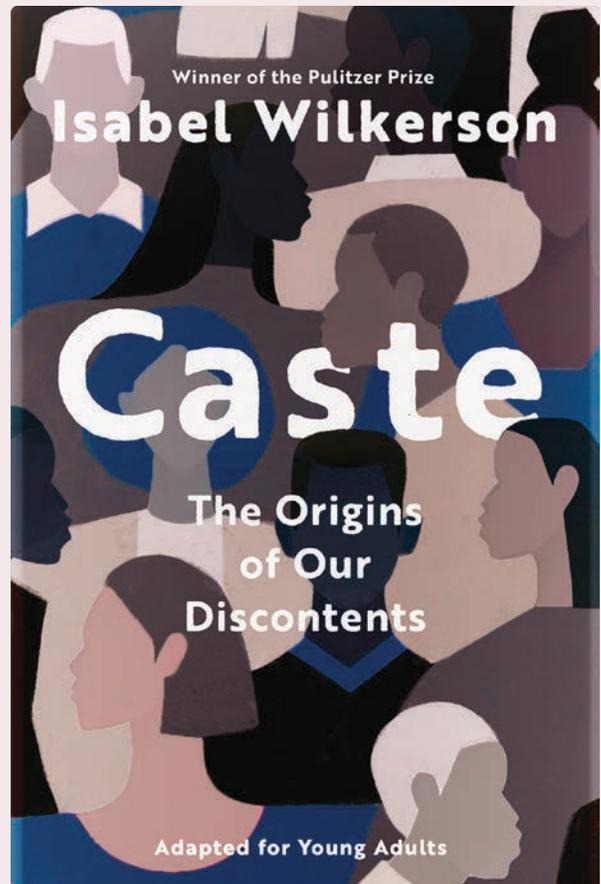
EDUCATORS' GUIDE & ACTIVITIES

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About the Book

This young adult adaptation by Pulitzer Prize–winning author Isabel Wilkerson explores the unspoken hierarchies that divide us along lines of race and class. Revealing and timely, this work speaks to young people who engage with the world around them, or to anyone who believes in a more just existence for all.

Masterful narratives about real people reveal an insidious phenomenon in the United States: a hidden caste system. *Caste* is not only about race or class; it is about power—which groups have it and which do not. Isabel Wilkerson explores historical social hierarchies, including those in India and Nazi Germany, and explains how perpetuating these rankings dehumanizes vast sections of society. Once we learn the reasons behind caste and see the heartbreaking effects, Wilkerson says, we can bridge the divides and make way for an inclusive future where people are equal.



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Grades 7 & Up

Themes: History, Class Differences, Prejudice & Racism, Social Justice, Systemic Change



Photo credit: Joe Henson

About the Author

Isabel Wilkerson, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Humanities Medal, is the author of the bestsellers *The Warmth of Other Suns* and *Caste*. She has taught at Princeton, Emory, and Boston universities and has lectured at more than two hundred other colleges and universities across the United States and in Europe and Asia. Visit her online at IsabelWilkerson.com and follow her on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

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Pre-Reading Questions

1. Castes are permanent societal structures, and no one chooses their rank in that hierarchy. Consider how you might feel and how others might react to you dating outside of your race or economic or educational class or attending an all Black, all Asian American, or all white religious center that is outside your own race or ethnicity. Consider how might you feel, how others might react, and how you might feel about how others react.
2. Race is a made-up concept, but it's been used to define and separate us. Why do you think that is? How do we keep track of who belongs to which racial or ethnic group? What do you think would happen if we stopped using these things to categorize people?
3. Can you think of any regimes or systems outside the United States that worked to oppress a group of people? What do you know about it? How successful was or is it?
4. Discuss the meanings of the following terms. Think about whether you've heard them before and in what contexts, as well as how they've been used and their historic significance. Students may want to work in small groups to discuss the words and agree on a meaning. Each of the words will be used in the book. Clarify the terms when you encounter them in the text.
 - anti-racism
 - caste
 - Caucasian
 - eugenics
 - Holocaust
 - hierarchies
 - narcissism
 - pogroms
 - racism
 - racialized economics
 - Stockholm syndrome
 - Untouchables (Dalits)

Discussion Questions While Reading

1. Discuss the difference between race and caste. Why is it important to distinguish between the two? How can this distinction inform anti-racist work?
2. "A scapegoat caste has become necessary for the collective well-being of the castes above it and the smooth functioning of the caste system. The dominant groups can look to those cast out as the cause of any fate or misfortune, as representing the worst aspects of society." (p. 168)
 - What is *scapegoating*?
 - Do you know another name for it?
 - Have you ever seen someone being scapegoated, or maybe even been part of scapegoating someone? If so, explain.
 - How can we protect ourselves or someone else from being scapegoated? Consider how your position in society may affect your ability to protect others.
3. How did learning that the Nazis used practices from the United States which they took to plan the Holocaust make you feel?
4. What ideas does Wilkerson offer to disrupt the caste systems? Can you list any other disruptive work that can be done?
5. Wilkerson uses many of her own experiences throughout the book. What do you learn about her background? Does learning this influence you?
6. Bhimrao Ambedkar wrote that "there is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary." (pp. 20–21) What do you think he meant by this? Why does he think comparison between the two is beneficial?

Extension Activities

1. How does Wilkerson's analysis of caste systems inform and expand your thoughts about oppression? Consider what you've learned about racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and other forms of hatred and discrimination.
2. There are examples of what members of the lower caste have done to survive or even resist the caste system throughout the book. What are some of these examples? Have they been effective? Why or why not? What could be done differently?
3. What are the long-term consequences of surviving caste systems on society as a whole? On individuals? What about the economy or our education systems?

Resources for Further Learning

Movies (intended for older teens)

- **BlacKkKlansman.** Directed by Spike Lee. Blumhouse Productions, Monkeypaw Productions, 2018
- **A Class Divided.** Frontline, 2019
- **The Last Days.** Directed by James Moll. Shoah Foundation, 1998; remastered in 2021
- **Slumdog Millionaire.** Directed by D. Boyle and L. Tandan. Celador Films, Film4 Productions, 2008
- **12 Years a Slave.** Directed by Steve McQueen. Regency Enterprises, 2013
- **The Wave.** Directed by Roar Uthaug. Fantefilm, 2015.



Additional Reading

- **Callender, Kacen. *King and the Dragonflies*. Scholastic, 2020**

Twelve-year-old Kingston James is sure his brother Khalid has turned into a dragonfly. When Khalid unexpectedly passed away, he shed what was his first skin for another to live down by the bayou in their small Louisiana town. Khalid still visits in dreams, but King must keep these secrets to himself as he watches grief transform his family.

- **Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Dover, 2016**

In this, the first and most frequently read of his three autobiographies, Douglass provides graphic descriptions of his childhood and horrifying experiences as a slave as well as a harrowing record of his dramatic escape to the North and eventual freedom.

- **Kelkar, Supriya. *Ahimsa*. Tu Books, 2017**

In 1942, after Mahatma Gandhi asks Indians to give one family member to the freedom movement, ten-year-old Anjali is devastated to think of her father risking his life for the freedom struggle. But it turns out he isn't the one joining. Anjali's mother is. And with this change comes many more adjustments designed to improve their country and use "ahimsa"—non-violent resistance—to stand up to the British government. First the family must trade their fine foreign-made clothes for homespun cotton, so Anjali has to give up her prettiest belongings. Then her mother decides to reach out to the Dalit community. Anjali is forced to get over her past prejudices as her family becomes increasingly involved in the movement.

- **Natarajan, Srividya; Anand, S.; Vyam, Subhash; Vyam, Durgabai. *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*. Navayana, On the life and achievements of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, 1891–1956, Indian statesman and social reformer.**

- **Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Pantheon, 1996**

A brutally moving work of art—widely hailed as the greatest graphic novel ever written—*Maus* recounts the chilling experiences of the author's father during the Holocaust, with Jews drawn as wide-eyed mice and Nazis as menacing cats."

- **Weimer, Lisa. *The Assignment*, 2020**

A Sydney Taylor Notable Book

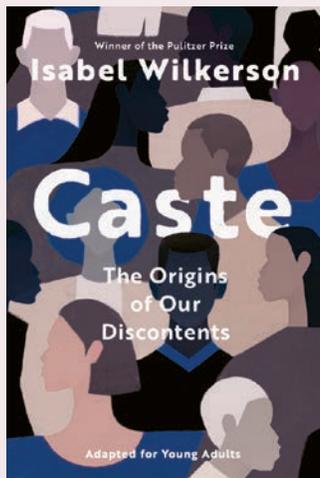
Inspired by a real-life incident, this riveting novel explores discrimination and antisemitism and reveals their dangerous impact. Would you defend the indefensible?

- **Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Hill and Wang, 2006**

Night offers much more than a litany of the daily terrors, everyday perversions, and rampant sadism at Auschwitz and Buchenwald; it also eloquently addresses many of the philosophical as well as personal questions implicit in any serious consideration of what the Holocaust was, what it meant, and what its legacy is and will be.

Additional Resources

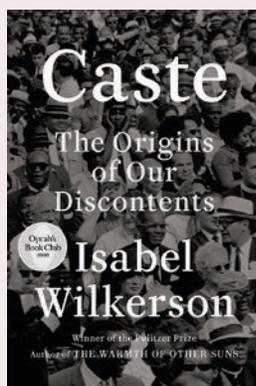
- **#FightRacism** fosters a global culture of tolerance, equity, and anti-discrimination by working to tackle hate speech, create awareness of all forms of racial discrimination, create empathy, and empower communities.
- **International Dalit Solidarity Network: Caste Discrimination**
- **Prevent Antisemitism** The Anti-Defamation League provides expert information to empower individuals and communities to address and eliminate antisemitism.
- **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Holocaust Encyclopedia**



Praise for Caste (Adaption)

"With easy-to-digest storytelling and elaborate metaphors embedded in extensive research, Wilkerson challenges readers to resist validating any semblance of hierarchy and to refer to history as a pathway for eradicating its stronghold. Compelling and accessible for a younger generation energized to build a better world."
—*Kirkus Reviews*

"This in-depth exploration pulls ugly secrets out of the shadows and gives name and shape to the 'caste pyramid.' Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson's groundbreaking work is enlighteningly and accessibly adapted for young adult readers." —*Shelf Awareness*



Praise for Caste (Adult)

★ "This enthralling exposé deserves a wide and impassioned readership."
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ "Similar to her previous book, the latest by Wilkerson is destined to become a classic, and is urgent, essential reading for all." —*Library Journal*, starred review

★ "This is a brilliant book, well timed in the face of a pandemic and police brutality that cleave along the lines of a caste system." —*Booklist*, starred review

GUIDE WRITER: **Edith Campbell** is an associate librarian in the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University. Edith has served on selection committees for the Printz Award, Sibert Informational Text Award, and the Walter Award. In 2016, she served as a faculty fellow to the ISU Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence's Multicultural Curriculum Learning Community. Edith blogs to promote literacy and social justice in young adult literature at [CrazyQuiltsEdi](http://CrazyQuiltsEdi.com).



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