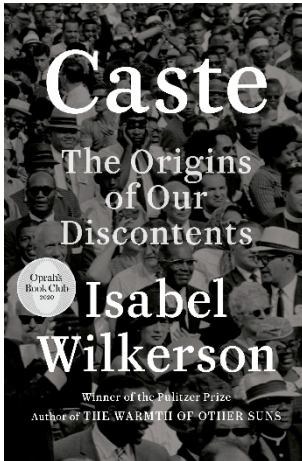


Caste by Isabel Wilkerson – RJBG 13 Jan 2024



A banned book but a great book. In fact, this is one that should be required reading!

Wilkerson has produced a masterpiece that is well worth reading. More than that, it is a book that should be read by as many people as possible and then discussed. In seeking to understand the origins and evolution of the hierarchies that persist in which one group of people is elevated above another – the subordinated group – she examines the parallels, overlaps and contrasts of the world's most recognized caste system in India, with that imposed in Nazi Germany, and the system in the United States.

There is a strong academic base and it is possible to feel tied up with some of the analysis and language, yet the message is crystal clear. "A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups." It is "the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in place. Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial, subject to periodic redefinition to meet the needs of the dominant caste." Caste is about structural power and Institutionalized inequality that provides the context in which dehumanizing treatment is accepted and ignored.

Our Racial Justice Book Group discussion was extensive and collectively we viewed the book very positively. We found many things that were familiar, well known to us, but also much that was new and insightful. Perhaps one major benefit of the book comes from the way in which the author pulls together many strands so that they can be considered alongside each other and that a large number of stories are used to explain particular aspects of the caste system. These bring the subject to life and makes the theory much more approachable.

Acknowledging that a lot of the history and current manifestations of caste are bleak, we asked ourselves "where is there hope?" We concluded that there is hope! The fact that Isabel Wilkerson took the time and effort to produce a remarkable book that has been published, has been widely well-received, and is out there being discussed as we have done in the RJBG, is hopeful.

As the author states in the Afterword (written in Berlin), "If we truly want to end caste, each of us, every single one of us, needs to search our souls for the ways in which we may be complicit in upholding caste and stereotype and hierarchy, as our society has so cleverly trained us to do, and to consciously work against this programming in our everyday lives if we are ever to overcome it. ... I pray that, for the sake of succeeding generations, we will find the collective will to repair and rebuild this old house that we ourselves did not build but for which we alive today are responsible as the current stewards and occupants."

Get the book. Read it. Discuss it. And act upon it!