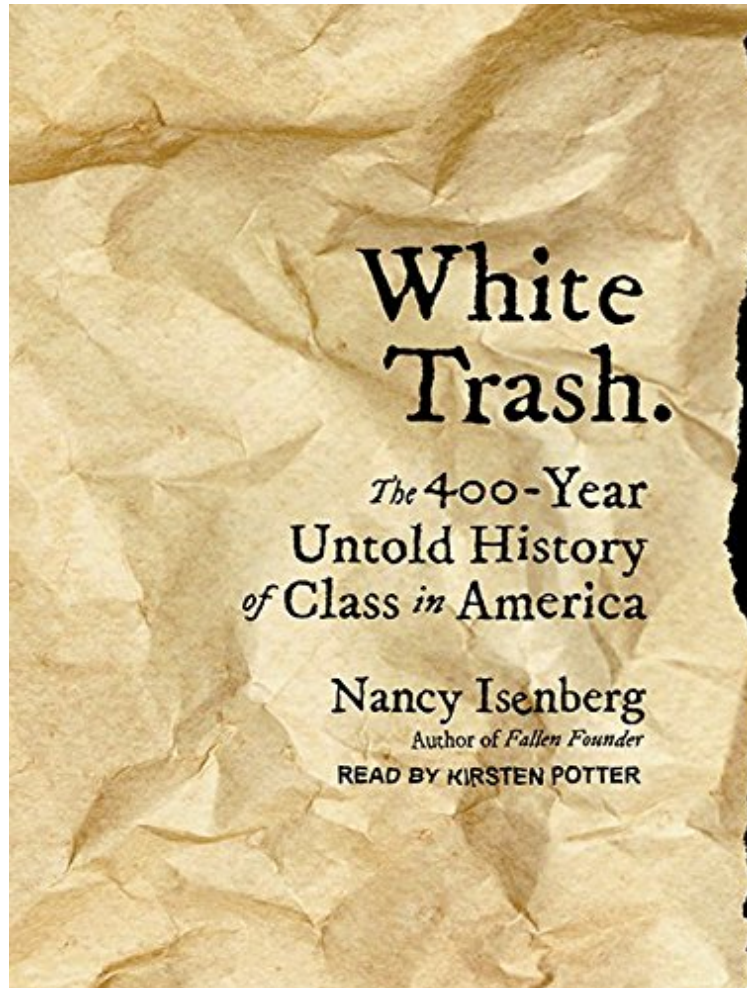


(Read now) White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America

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Nancy Isenberg

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Nancy Isenberg : White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America:

1211 of 1278 people found the following review helpful. The Hidden Aspects of Race and Class in American History By Herbert L Calhoun This book explains the unsavory fine points of our national identity by probing and then exposing the not so well hidden loose ends that tie the bottom half of America's social hierarchy to the top half. It reveals that there is much much more to race and class than what we see at eye level. We learn here that the colonists who came to the Americas were very much a mixed bag. Initially, the upper classes were investor friends of the British Crown, given concessions to search for gold and to find a non-existent water passage across North America to India. Later, they were made up of political and religious enemies of the beheaded King Charles I. Jamestown was one of the many failures at finding gold or the non-existent passage to the East. And thus, only as an afterthought did the leaders

decide to salvage their costly expeditions by killing two birds with one stone: England's horrendous social problems of crime, poverty and street violence would be solved by shipping the poor off to America and Australia. Then tracts of Indian lands would be sold off to entice the many lost souls hoping to make a life in the New World. These lost souls thus mostly were tricked onto ships in large numbers under a number of unsavory land contract schemes, the most prominent of which was called the "head-right system," in which those who did the tricking were paid in 50-acre land parcels, and in which the contractees thought they would all end up as rich English gentlemen, with free land, slaves and tools, living a life of leisure. Of course, it was all a lie, for most of them ended up as slaves. Most of the founding fathers became rich by acquiring large parcels of land through land scams of the head-right variation. At the bottom of the heap were those of the poor and criminal classes, including children sold off by their parents, or shipped off for petty crimes, or just kidnapped off the streets. But they also included roguish highwaymen or pirates, vagrants, Irish rebels, whores, and convicts shipped to the colonies for a variety of crimes, such as refusing to be impressed into the army, being in debt, etc. The progeny of these groups are today's poor white trash. The majority of those brought to America's shores came as indentured servants, a British euphemism for "slaves." And even the few that did later manage to either escape slavery, or win their freedom outright after long periods of indentureship, seldom owned more than just token amounts of the least productive and most remote land. Most ended up as "squatters" forced into the outer rims of the Western territories to "squat" on Indian lands in violation of the Treaty of Paris. The power of land, for most of American history, lay in being able to get married, "put down roots," breed a large family of field hands, and then work the land with as many hands as possible. "Squatters," despised by all sides, typically had none of these. Being the 17th through the 19th centuries' version of transients, they were young, virile, aimless and restless single white men, ineligible for marriage and forced to keep moving West in search of better and freer land. These unattached single men, wanderers and squatters, were the "free radicals" of the American heartland. In 1676, a petite English Gentleman, Nathaniel Bacon, in what was called the Bacon Rebellion, along with a contingent of a few dozen single white men, plus an assortment of an equal number of red, white and black slaves, rebelled against being pushed to the outer edges of the colonies, left in hostile Indian territories to fend for themselves. They tried to burn down Virginia. It was the only time in American history when the lower classes have combined to rebel against the upper class. With lop-sided gender demographics favoring single white men 10 to 1 (in the Caribbean, the male slave ratio alone was sometimes as much as 100-1), minimally marriageable women became a scarce resource. As the author notes, "women went to market with their virginity;" and marriage and fertility played a critical role in defining the shape of early American society. Any woman under 50, no matter how unattractive, could find a husband in the top tier of colonial American society. "Breeding capacity became a calculable natural resource -- commodified and exploited in the marriage exchange." For slave women, the womb became an article of commerce; and slave children, like cattle, were transactional property. In Virginia their "natural increase," literally would become a cottage industry, making it one of the world's leaders in the export of slaves. James Cartwright has written a wonderfully important book, called "Violent Lands," on the meaning of these lopsided gender demographics in which large numbers of virile young white men were unable to find wives or become stakeholders in frontier American society. He claims this is why America became, and remains even today, one of the most "Violent Lands" in the world. Thus, added to the staid and highly sensitive class hierarchy inherited from class conscious Britain, the reader can see why America became an incubator for deep race and class sensitivities, divisions and resentments. This "witches brew" of breeding, biology, race, backed up by Christian biblical text, seamlessly turned into an ideology of white supremacy, still the most enduring instrument on the palette used to shape the American social order. Put more directly, America's founding generations saw good breeding and race as God's way of establishing white supremacy as nature's "taken for granted" class hierarchy; and ever since the days of the Puritans, American elite have frowned upon both race-mixing and upward mobility for the poorer classes. Both have been seen as threats, either to the menial labor force, which the plantation owning elite depended upon for their very existence; or, to the white supremacist social order, underwritten and mandated by the biblical story of ham, which simply meant that blacks would remain slaves at the bottom of the pecking order, in perpetuity. Imported slaves and immigrants, either through indentureship, apprenticeships, debtors prisons, or due to indictment on criminal charges, prison-work release programs, etc., have all been forced into long-term arrangements for free, or nearly free, and always grossly unfair wages. These discrepancies between "fair" and "grossly unfair" wages have always rebounded back to land owners, or to big businesses' bottom line as obscene and unsavory profits. Inequality, denial of the right to vote or to own land, all followed logically from assumptions of superior breeding and race superiority assumptions. Submission to those at the top of the societal hierarchy was regarded as a natural condition of humankind in early America. The Christian Bible was the final authority that reinforced these notions, pouring them into the mainstream. By teaching that some were born to rule, while others were born to submit and obey, breeding, and the biblical story of ham, had placed poor whites, as well as those with black skin, at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy. Arkansas White Trash: A True Story At the age of nine, I learned about this bottom-most tier of our society first hand a block from the Arkansas River where I grew up in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Just below us -- both figuratively and literally -- down the sloping banks that slid right into the water, lived poisoned snakes, eels, gar and cat fish, turtles, bullfrogs, and an odd assortment of white people, who, though it was

never said so openly, frightfully were the true wretched of the earth: These were Pine Bluff's "poor white trash:" authentic rednecks in the flesh. The shanty town of jerry-rigged huts made of corrugated tin, cardboard and scrap wood, that they had fashioned as homes, had sprung up over night. It was a racially homogenous tribe of "bruised fruit" and "day old" bread peddling white folks. Daily, in push carts and horse drawn wagons, they sold to us, nearby blacks who lived just up the hill, food-stuffs that had been savaged from grocery store dump bins. These "petite entrepreneurs" were a curious and motley sort, having to defer to blacks -- if for no more reason than to encourage us, their only customers, to buy their "rank" produce. But here's the catch: Whenever we bought it, they surely knew that we did so only out of pity for their dismal plight. Yet, curiously, other than interacting at their peddler's stations, and playing ball with two brothers around my age, who would occasionally come up the hill, we maintained a silent *modus vivendi* that served as an invisible shield between our two radically distinct subcultures. While most of my neighbors were working class blacks, sprinkled with a few college educated professionals, like my stepfather, Carl Redus, the white tribes that lived under the hill, were barely literate, and by anyone's social reckoning, had fallen well off the deep end of America's socio-economic grid.... That is except for two things that I still vividly remember: First, during the school year, a school bus headed down King Street, would disappear beneath the sloping hill stopping just short of sliding into the water to pick up a handful of shanty town redneck kids. It would then proceed clear across town past several black schools to the nearest white school to deposit them. Second, and this came as quite a shock to a nine-year old black kid, almost without fail on the weekends, noisy redneck parties would ensue down under the hill. Rival redneck tribes living farther around the river bend, would come to party, and invariably before Sunday morning rolled around, a humongous fight would break out, and things would turn very violent and ugly indeed. Somewhere in the wee hours of Saturday night, I would be awoken by ear-shattering noises, when literally all hell broke loose in shanty town. The sky would light up like Roman candles on the Fourth of July. Bullets would be flying every which way. Shanty town huts would go up in flames, and residents would be running up the hill and screaming as they fanned-out in every direction. It was like a mini race riot, but involving only one race, the white race. And then, over the flaming carnage and the war-like din, one could hear puffing up the hill, a loud desperate banging on our neighbor Mr. Harris' backdoor. In a blood-curling southern drawl that is still unforgettable -- literally a life-and-death scream -- I could hear an older white man say: "Harris! Harris! Oooh lord Mr. Harris, please Harris, call the law! Call the law Harris! Please call the law! As multiple sirens howled in the distance, headed in our direction, soon everything would go completely silent, as the paddy wagons, fire trucks, ambulances and stretchers would arrive. Through my bedroom blinds, I could see parties alien to us, bleeding profusely being carried away on stretchers or handcuffed, being hauled off to hospitals and jails. Altogether it was a sight to behold! The only way we found out what happened in the dark down that hill, is the next day, Marshall and Leonard, the two brothers who occasionally played baseball with us, shamelessly would arrive at our backdoor, in search of food, clothing, bandages, medication, etc. And in exchange for a free breakfast, and a "care package," we would invite them in to give us the low-down on the fighting that had just taken place. They never came to our front door and never had enough racial pride to turn down our breakfast invitation, or the "care package" containing black hand-me-down clothes and assorted goods that we invariably gave them. And thus, the brothers, bruised and scraped, seemed to find it cathartic to be able to unload the gory details of the "redneck wars" of the previous night. What they told us was unsurprising. Invariably the wars were about personal slights, turf encroachments, being "dissed," and men from the wrong side of the river banks "hitting on" women from the right side. Add to this, the occasional hell-raising redneck males, armed and liquored-up, and generally on edge -- disgusted with not having a secure and respected place in society -- and the tableau of causes of the redneck wars is complete. This book, "White Trash," is the first time I have ever seen in print the whole story of people like my river bank redneck friends, Marshall and Leonard, who I later learned both ended up in Reform School, which in Arkansas was the expressway for ending up on Cummings State prison farm. The themes exposed here by this author, run true, and vector directly from the banks of the Arkansas River straight through American history like the jagged edges of the St. Andreas fault. What this author has uncovered, is that, like race, class too is an unacknowledged independent variable that runs straight through American History, and is also America's most enduring fault line. One that when taken together with race, creates a reality coterminous with American culture itself. How she was able to skillfully separate race from class, and then stitch them back together again, when clearly they seem virtually inseparable, is part of the beauty of this fine treatment of both subjects. In short, throughout American history, (including today's race to the bottom of the global labor pool), America's social pecking order has depended on maintaining in a steady-state, two racially separated poorer working classes at the very bottom rung of the social ladder. Since Bacon's rebellion of 1676, rationalizing these two groups as inferior, and pitting them against one another, has proven quite sufficient to keep the ideology of white supremacy in place, and the price of labor at rock bottom. Ten stars

129 of 136 people found the following review helpful. HATED IT, BUT THANKS, NANCY, FOR WRITING IT. YOU ROCK! By L. E. Roberts I gave this book five stars, which according to the website means, "I love it." I did not love it. In fact, I disliked the book in many ways. At the same time, I could not put it down. As a career military person, I had always regarded myself as mostly conservative (even while attending UC Berkeley in the 1970's). I retired from the military around the turn of the century (or millennium, whichever you prefer), and, at around 45 years old, started attempting to live an

"examined life." I stopped regarding myself as a "non-partizan conservative," and felt that I was more of a "traditional semi-progressive." If that sounds stupid and naive, that is because I was stupid and naive. I was a middle-aged white man who thought that racism was behind us (except for some tiny lunatic fringe in some "Dogpatch" ultra-rural area). I also believed, buckle and thong, in our judicial system, and truly believed that a black man could get as fair a trial as a white man throughout the United States. In the last two years of turmoil, I started reading more news online than just the BBC. I discovered Slate and The Economist, and my world view started changing. I ran across a review of this book on Slate.com. I bought it on . I started reading it early last summer, and couldn't put it down. It is meticulously researched and extremely well-written. I hated it, mainly because of how stupid it told me I was, but also for how it made me almost physically ill about how people, especially those in power with vested interests, think about and manipulate others, and about how the manipulated people are brought to commit heinous acts that are ultimately against their own interests. During a week surveying railroad in the Mojave Desert, I finished the book and then read it again. It made me understand a lot of things that seemed kind of muddled before, like what my black friends in the military had told me, and where some of the redneck adults from my lower middle class childhood were coming from, and also what a lot of "trouble-making activists" from the 1960's to now were really saying. While definitely lower middle class on the economic scale, my family has always put huge stock in reading and education. We were raised to never look down on others for their social and economic status. I was taught to look down upon self-proclaimed "elites", and yet to have tastes and education that were usually available only to elites. I later learned that "elites" is a term with a lot of vagueness about it. Academics and elites are definitely two different things, culturally, socially, and economically. Culturally, most "elites" wouldn't know Anatole France from the Tour de France, if they had, in fact, heard of either. Having a college degree (and I DO NOT disparage the accomplishment) does not confer upon the graduate any real claim to academia or even literacy. Often, it seems to be a hurdle that has to be taken and suffered due to family expectations. As a former military officer, I knew fellow officers who were college graduates who were yet barely literate. However unbelievably ignorant they were, they were acceptable, having come from the "right" background. Thanks to Nancy Isenberg's book, my seventh decade (I recently turned 60) has become far more complex for me. While having been taught NOT to ever despise people of lower social/economic standing, I have to despise many of their prejudices and beliefs. While disliking elites and elitism, I find that many of them share beliefs and tastes with me (although definitely not most of them). Trying (and hopefully achieving at least a fraction) to live an "examined life" has been far more difficult after reading Ms. Isenberg's words. To say the least, learning that Locke was a major shareholder in a slave trade company makes for a certain piquancy while reading his philosophy. My semi-retired life might have been emotionally easier had I not read her book, but I will always be grateful (however annoyed) that I'm less of a stooge of politically acceptable history (not to be confused with the partizan/political battle cry of "politically correct"). In this case, "correct" and truth are two very different things. Thanks, Nancy, for bringing me the truth. 644 of 716 people found the following review helpful. The Snobs Among Us By takingadayoff White Trash is a massive social history of class in America, starting with the European settlers up to the present day. Despite the provocative title, it's not just about white people -- after all, the fact that there's a phrase that specifies color means the default must be not white, which is rather a disturbing thought. And it isn't so much about what life was like for poor people, it's about attitudes of the middle class and upper class toward working class and poor people. Again, the title says a lot about that. My interest was more with 20th century than with the settlers and 18th and 19th century Americans. That's almost half the book and it is outstanding. Isenberg talks about eugenics and veterans and the Depression and war. The pop culture portrayals are fascinating and she goes into some depth about the movie Deliverance and about politics in the late 20th century. It's all quite thought provoking, especially as the 2016 Presidential election plays out around us. Pundits and politicians are playing the class game but this time they have divided America into college graduates and those who have no degree. The feeling among some people seems to be that "uneducated" voters or "poorly educated" voters are wreaking havoc on the race with their "uninformed" opinions. It's an interesting and timely book, check it out.

The wretched and landless poor have existed from the time of the earliest British colonial settlement. They were alternately known as "waste people," "offals," "rubbish," "lazy lubbers," and "crackers." By the 1850s, the downtrodden included so-called "clay eaters" and "sandhillers," known for prematurely aged children distinguished by their yellowish skin, ragged clothing, and listless minds. In *White Trash*, Nancy Isenberg upends assumptions about America's supposedly class-free society. Poor whites were central to the rise of the Republican Party in the early nineteenth century, and the Civil War itself was fought over class issues nearly as much as it was fought over slavery. Reconstruction pitted poor white trash against newly freed slaves, which factored in the rise of eugenics. These poor were at the heart of New Deal reforms and LBJ's Great Society; they haunt us in reality TV shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*. We acknowledge racial injustice as an ugly stain on our nation's history. With Isenberg's landmark book, we will have to face the truth about the enduring, malevolent nature of class as well.

"This is breathtaking social history and dazzling cultural analysis at its best." ---Michael Eric Dyson, author of *Holler*

if You Hear Me About the Author Nancy Isenberg is the author of *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr*, which was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Biography and won the Oklahoma Book Award for best book in nonfiction. She is also coauthor, with Andrew Burstein, of *Madison and Jefferson*. Actress Kirsten Potter has performed on stage, film, and television, including roles on *Medium*, *Bones*, and *Judging Amy*. Her narrations have won AudioFile Earphones Awards, and she earned an Audie nomination for her reading of *Rise Again* by Ben Tripp. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Clintons embarrassing second term didnt seem to provide lessons, insofar as the Republicans plunged ahead with their own (effectively) white trash candidate in 2008, Alaska governor Sarah Palin. The devastatingly direct Frank Rich of the New York Times referred to the Republican ticket as Palin and McCains Shotgun Marriage. Did the venerable John McCain of Arizona, ordinarily a savvy politician, have a lapse in judgment here? Slate produced an online video of Palins hometown of Wasilla, painting it as a forgettable wasteland, a place to get gas and pee before getting back on the road. Wasilla was elsewhere described as the punch line for most redneck jokes told in Anchorage. Erica Jong wrote in the Huffington Post, White trash America certainly has allure for voters, which explains the photoshopped image of Palin that appeared on the Internet days after her nomination. In a stars-and-stripes bikini, holding an assault rifle and wearing her signature black-rimmed glasses, Palin was one-half hockey mom and one-half hot militia babe. News of the pregnancy of Palins teenage daughter Bristol led to a shotgun engagement to Levi Johnston, which was arranged in time for the Republican National Convention. *Us Weekly* featured Palin on the cover, with the provocative title, *Babies, Lies, and Scandal*. Maureen Dowd compared Palin to Eliza Doolittle of *My Fair Lady* fame, in getting prepped for her first off-script television interview. Could there be any more direct allusion to her questionable class origins? The Palin melodrama led one journalist to associate the Alaska clan with the plot of a Lifetime television feature. The joke was proven true to life two years later, when the backwoods candidate gave up her gig as governor and starred in her own reality TV show, titled *Sarah Palins Alaska*. Palins candidacy was a remarkable event on all accounts. She was only the second female of any kind and the first female redneck to appear on a presidential ticket. John McCains advisers admitted that she had been selected purely for image purposes, and they joined the chorus trashing the flawed candidate after Obamas historic victory. Leaks triggered a media firestorm over Palins wardrobe expense account. An angry aide categorized the Palins shopping spree as Wasilla hillbillies looting Neiman Marcus from coast to coast. The Alaskan made an easy and attractive target. Journalists were flabbergasted when she showed no shame in displaying astounding lapses in knowledge. Her bungled interview with NBC host Katie Couric represented more than gotcha journalism: Palin didnt just misconstrue facts; she came across as a woman who was unable to articulate a single complex idea. (The old cracker slur as idle-headed seemed to fit.) But neither did Andrew Jackson run as an idea man in an earlier century, and it was his style of backcountry hubris that McCains staffers had been hoping to revive. Shooting wolves from a small plane, bragging about her love of moose meat, Sarah from Alaska positioned herself as a regular Annie Oakley on the campaign trail. It was not enough to rescue her from the mainstream (what she self-protectively called lamestream) media. Sarah Palin did not have a self-made womans rsum. She could not offset the white trash label as the Rhodes Scholar Bill Clinton could. She had attended six unremarkable colleges. She had no military experience (la navy veteran Jimmy Carter), though she did send one son off to Iraq. Writing in the *New Yorker*, Sam Tanenhaus was struck by Palins self-satisfied manner: the certitude of being herself, in whatever unfinished condition, will always be good enough. Maureen Dowd quipped that Palin was a country-music queen without the music. She lacked the self-deprecating humor of Dolly Parton not to mention the natural talent. The real conundrum was why, even more than how, she was chosen: the white trash Barbie was at once visually appealing and disruptive, and she came from a state whose motto on license plates read, *The Last Frontier*. The job was to package the roguish side of Palin alongside a comfortable, conventional female script. In the hit country single *Redneck Woman* (2004), Gretchen Wilson rejected Barbie as an unreal middle-class symbol candidate Palins wardrobe bingeing was her Barbie moment. Her Eliza Doolittle grand entrance came during the televised debate with Senator Joe Biden of Delaware. As the nation waited to see what she looked like and how she performed, Palin came onstage in a little black dress, wearing heels and pearls, and winked at the camera. From the neck down she looked like a Washington socialite, but the wink faintly suggested a gum-chewing waitress at a small-town diner. Embodying these two extremes, the fetching hockey mom image ultimately lost out to what McCain staffers identified as both hillbilly and prima donna. Sex formed a meaningful subtext throughout Palins time of national exposure. In terms of trash talk, daughter Bristol Palins outofwedlock pregnancy was handled rather differently from Bill Clintons legendary philandering. Bloggers muddied the waters by spreading rumors about Sarahs Down syndrome child, Trig: Was he really Bristols? they asked. A tale of baby swapping was meant to suggest a new twist on the backwoods immorality of inbred illegitimacy. Recall that it was Bill Clintons mother, Virginia, whose pedigree most troubled the critics. The legacy held: the rhetoric supporting eugenics (and the sterilization laws that followed) mainly targeted women as tainted breeders. Sarah Palins Fargo-esque accent made her tortured speech patterns sound even worse. Former TV talk show host Dick Cavett wrote a scathing satirical piece in which he dubbed her a serial syntax killer whose high school English department deserved to be draped in black. He wanted to know how her swooning fans, who adored her for being a mom like me, or were impressed to see her shooting wolves, could explain how any of those traits would help her to govern. We had been down this road

before as citizens and voters. Honest Abe Lincoln was called an ape, a mudsill, and Kentucky white trash. Andrew Jackson was a rude, ill-tempered cracker. (And like Palin, his grammar was nothing to brag about.) The question loomed: At what point does commonness cease to be an asset, as a viable form of populism, and become a liability for a political actor? And should anyone be shocked when voters are swept up in an almost Elvis-sized following, as Cavett said Palins were? When you turn an election into a three-ring circus, theres always a chance that the dancing bear will win.