



## Isabel Wilkerson | Notebook

### The Warmth of Other Suns, Isabel Wilkerson (2010).

Paperback. [Book website](#). The story of the “great migration” in the first half of C20.

| The book is essentially three projects in one. The first was a collection of oral histories from around the country. The second was the distillation of those oral histories into a narrative of three protagonists, each of whom led a sufficiently full life to merit a book in his or her own right. The third was an examination of newspaper accounts and scholarly and literary works of the era and more recent analyses of the Migration to recount the motivations, circumstances, and perceptions of the Migration as it was in progress and to put the subjects’ actions into historical context. (540)

In five parts:

1. In the Land of the Forefathers
2. Beginnings
3. Exodus
4. The Kinder Mistress
5. Aftermath, followed by an epilogue

#### Notes from reading

| The actions of the people in this book were both universal and distinctly American. Their migration was a response to an economic and social structure not of their making. They did what humans have done for centuries when life became untenable — what the pilgrims did under the tyranny of British rule what the Scots-Irish did in Oklahoma when the land turned to dust, what the Irish did when there was nothing to eat, what the European Jews did during the spread of Nazism ... What binds these stories together was the back-against-the-wall, reluctant yet hopeful search for something better, any place but where they were. They did what human beings looking for freedom, throughout history, have often done. / They left. (15)

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney in Chickasaw County, MS, and Chicago  
George Swanson Starling: Eustis, FL, and New York City  
Robert Joseph Pershing Foster in Monroe, LA, and Los Angeles

| Pershing ... looked at the man. “A nice, clean colored girl,” he said, calculating the risks of what he might say next. “Let me see. I tell you what. You get your mama for me, and I’ll get you one.” (88)

| Miss Theenie had not wanted them [Ida Mae and her husband] to go and prayed over them and with them and then watched as her second-born daughter left the rutted land of the ancestors. “*May the Lord be the first one in the car,*” Miss Theenie had whispered about the train they were hoping to catch, “*and the last out.*” (184)

“You don’t owe me,” George tells them. “‘Cause I don’t want to get mad with you when you don’t pay me back.” (493)

| Newly available census records suggest the opposite to be true. According to a growing body of research, the migrants were, it turns out, better educated than those they left behind in the South and, on the whole, had nearly as many years of schooling as those they encountered in the North. Compared to the northern blacks already there, the migrants were more likely to be married, more likely raise their children in two-parent households, and more likely to be employed. The migrants as a group

managed to earn higher incomes than northern-born blacks even though they were relegated to the lowest-paying positions. They were less likely to be on welfare than the blacks they encountered in the North, partly because they had come so far, had experienced such hard times, and were willing to work longer hours or second jobs in positions that few northern blacks, or hardly anyone else for that matter, wanted, as was the case with Ida Mae Gladney, George Swanson Starling, Robert Foster, and millions of others like them. (528)

In closing Wilkerson quotes from a 672-page report on the 1919 Chicago Riots: "Our Negro problem, therefore, is not of the Negro's making. No group in our population is less responsible for its existence. But every group is responsible for its continuance.... Both races need to understand that their rights and duties are mutual and equal and their interests in the common good are identical.... There is no help or healing in appraising past responsibilities or in present apportioning of praise or blame. The past is of value only as it aids in understanding the present; and an understanding of the facts of the problem — a magnanimous understanding by both races — is the first step toward its solution." (543)

For further reference, and coincidentally, an exhibit at the Met of Harlem Renaissance artwork. [NYT story](#). And [this review of the exhibit](#).

## Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, Isabel Wilkerson (2020).

Hardcover.

[Author website](#).

Notes from reading

One of the most striking images she offers comes very early in the book when she likens racism in America to buying and living in an old house: *America is an old house. We can never declare the work over.... When you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have wrought. Choose not to look, however, at your own peril. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction.* (16)

To continue with Wilkerson's metaphor:

*Many people may rightly say, "I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked indigenous people, never owned slaves." And, yes. Not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have had nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now. And with any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.*

| In the American caste system, the signal of rank is what we call race, the division of humans on the basis of their appearance. In America race is the primary tool and the visible decoy, the front man, for caste. (18)

| ... in the same way that individuals cannot move forward, become whole and healthy, unless they examine the domestic violence they witnessed as children or the alcoholism that runs in their family, the country cannot become whole until it confronts what was not a chapter in its history, but the basis of its economic and social order. For a quarter millennium, slavery was the country. (43)

| [In Nazi Germany] the old guard did not foresee, or chose not to see, that [Hitler's] actual mission was "to exploit the methods of democracy to

destroy democracy.” (82)

Hollywood often portrayed the “Mammy character” as “more devoted to our white family than to her own, willing to fight black soldiers to protect her white enslaver.”

| That trope became a comforting staple in film portrayals of slavery, but it was an ahistorical figment of caste imagination. Under slavery, most black women were think gaunt even, due to the meager rations provided them, and few worked inside a house, as they were considered more valuable in the field. Yet the rotund and cheerful slave or maidservant was what the dominant caste preferred to see ... (138)

| These women alone could ride in the whites-only section of a train or bus if they were out taking care of a white child. This exception served several purposes: It enshrined the white child as the ticket to a first-class seat for a black person. It reinforced the servile role, the natural place, of the subordinate caste. It elevated the black nursemaid by fiat of the dominant caste. It made domestics superior to even the elites of the great orator Frederick Douglass, who was once reduced to sitting on top of cargo on a train journey. It protected the children of the dominant caste from enduring for a single trip the taint and discomforts of the colored car. And it reminded everyone in the subordinated caste that they would only rise with the permission of the dominant caste, and on its terms, and only as long as they kept to the role assigned to them. (233)

Trump supporters “were willing to lose health insurance now, risk White House instability and government shutdowns, external threats from faraway lands, in order to preserve what their actions say they value most — the benefits they had grown accustomed to as member of the historically ruling caste in America.” (325) Taylor Branch: “If people were given the choice between democracy and whiteness, how many would choose whiteness?” (352)

[Obama in Charleston](#) leading the AME sanctuary through the refrain of “Amazing Grace,” “the song itself a quest for absolution by the captain of a slaving ship.” (350)

| A caste system persists in part because we, each and every one of us, allow it to exist — in large and small ways, in our everyday actions, in how we elevate or demean, embrace or exclude, on the basis of the meaning attached to people’s physical traits. If enough people buy into the lie of natural hierarchy, then it becomes the truth or is assumed to be. (380)

[Tags](#) [Archive](#) [RSS feed](#) [QR Code](#)

Made with [Montaigne](#) and [bigmission](#) 