

6-2018

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Recommended Citation

Paul, Crystal. "18 Books Every White Ally Should Read." *Bustle, Bustle*, 8 Mar. 2016, www.bustle.com/articles/144531-18-books-every-white-ally-should-read.

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18 Books Every White Ally Should Read

By [Crystal Paul](#), Mar 8, 2016

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So, you're here for the Black Lives Matter movement, you protest alongside your friends of color, and you're ready to call out racist, non-inclusive systems, institutions and people like it's your job. You're a [white ally](#) and you want to make sure you're the best darn ally you can be. And, since you're clearly a book nerd, you're looking to books that might help you do that.

Well, these books are great for *anyone* who wants to understand the state of the U.S. today, the history that's made it so, and the great diversity of experiences and issues that we should all give a damn about. Still, being a good ally to any movement means knowing your stuff about whatever movement you're supporting. [Being a white ally](#) to movements concerning race means having to also look at issues around being white, issues like privilege and the legacy of racism in the U.S. and European colonization... issues that, admittedly, might sting a little. But no one ever said this ally business would be easy.

If you really want support the cause, it's time check your privilege and get a better idea of where both you and the people you support are coming from, now and historically. Books are only one part of the equation, of course, but they're an important part. So, keep outraged and read on.

- 1) *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* by Eduardo Galeano
 - Roanoke University Library; can be requested (HC125 .G25313 1997); **\$14**, [Amazon](#)
 - The issues and impacts of this country do not end at its contested borders. Not at all. In fact, the history, wealth, and issues of the U.S. so tied up in the history of other countries that one can hardly claim a true understanding of U.S. history without taking a global view. Reading [Open Veins of Latin America](#) is a great start toward understanding the European influence on the Americas as a whole and many of the issues around immigration, underdevelopment, and the Latino experience in the U.S. It doesn't hurt that Galeano is a beautiful writer, so as devastating as much of the history presented here is, it's also a beautiful read.
- 2) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* by Walter Rodney
 - Roanoke University Library; can be requested (HC800 .R62 1981); **\$19**, [Amazon](#)
 - Speaking of a global view, the title says a great deal. However, it might also interest you to know that Walter Rodney was an important activist in his native Guyana and globally as he stood up for working class rights all over the world before he was assassinated in Guyana in 1980, only eight years after the publication of this controversial book.
- 3) *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* by Roger Daniels
 - Available at both Hollins and Roanoke (E184.A1 D26 1991); **\$13**, [Amazon](#)
 - While it doesn't feature Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall, [this Coming to America](#) does give a ridiculously interesting overview of the history of immigration to America starting from the colonial era and leading all the way up to today. It isn't just a listing of the different waves of immigration though; it also offers up a look at how the country has changed with each wave of newcomers and the recurrent trend of anti-immigration sentiment throughout history, even from those who were part of previous waves.
- 4) *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
 - At Hollins; listed as unavailable (E76.8 .D86 2014); **\$11**, [Amazon](#)
 - Of course, if you're going to look at the immigrant foundations of what we know today as the United States, you absolutely have to get a solid understanding and appreciation for the history of the people who were first displaced on this continent. In the tradition of Howard Zinn's famously revisionist history, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz offers up a history of the U.S. as told from the perspective of the original

inhabitants. She tells the story of persistent Native American resistance that you've likely never heard before.

- 5) *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland* by Ishmael Reed
 - At Hollins; listed as available (F869.O2 R44 2003); **\$8**, [Amazon](#)
 - Reed's [Blues City](#) is one part love letter to one of the most culturally diverse, historically complicated cities in the U.S., and one part scathing indictment of the policies and politics today and yesterday that threaten the bluesy soul of Oakland, California. You don't have to be from Oakland to appreciate it though. [Blues City](#) is a portrait of the complex histories of displacement, migration, adaptation, and struggle that make any American city, dating all the way back to the first inhabitants of these lands. It'll make you think twice about the history of your own city before you go staking your own claims in it.

- 6) *How the Irish Became White* by Noel Ignatiev
 - At Hollins; listed as available (E184.I6 I36 2009); **\$18**, [Amazon](#)
 - No one ever said it would be easy to be a white ally, and if you have a particular tie to Irish heritage, this book certainly will not be easy to read. After reading up on the long history of different waves of immigration that have made the U.S. what it is today, you'll want to dig into this book to see how, despite being initially rejected in much the same way as other immigrants, the Irish (and other "ethnic" groups) eventually achieved membership in that cherished category of "white." It's not a pretty picture, but it's an important part of history to understand for anyone.

- 7) *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie* by Michael Patrick MacDonald
 - At Hollins; listed as available (F73.68.S7 M33 2000); **\$9**, [Amazon](#)
 - If Ignatiev was a little too harsh for you, [Michael Patrick MacDonald's personal story](#) of growing up in the Irish American neighborhood of Boston, in the midst of a great deal of racial tensions, will be a bit more heartening. MacDonald's story is ultimately one of overcoming the racist, classist ideology he was born into. It's also a searing portrayal of life in a poor, white neighborhood plagued by violence and crime and deeply in denial about it.

- 8) *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* by Amy Sonnie and James Tracy
 - At Hollins; listed as available (HN90.C6 S66 2011); **\$15**, [Amazon](#)
 - Now, now, before we go any further let's go ahead and debunk the too-convenient, too-often-used myth that racism is only some plague that afflicts the POOR white contingent of the U.S. It doesn't. In fact, despite decades of intentional propaganda meant to divide working class POC and working class whites, many many white and black working class folk were all about rebellion, organizing, and tearing down oppressive, racist, classist institutions. [Hillbilly Nationalists](#) give due to these often-overlooked activists.

- 9) *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* by Tim Wise
 - Electronic Copy available through Hollins; **\$12**, [Amazon](#)
 - Speaking of the "it's only those ignorant poor white people" myth, Tim Wise's [White Like Me](#) is more-or-less a letter to the "good liberal," middle class white folk that asserts the need for some serious personal interrogation of white privilege and the more invisible particular ways that a self-denial of racism actually perpetuates it. Tim Wise has dedicated much of his life to anti-racism activism and to interrogating what it means to be white in a racist society. Honestly, his bibliography might just be a TBR list for the budding white ally.

- 10) *The History of White People* by Nell Irvin Painter
 - Available at both Hollins and Roanoke (E184.A1 P29 2010); **\$11**, [Amazon](#)
 - When one thinks of "race in America," you tend to think of black people or terms like "people of color" "minorities," etc. But race isn't just about people of color. In fact, the whole concept of race is a relatively new concept in history, and it can't really exist without the concept of "whiteness." Nell Irvin Painter takes a look at that history and the legacy of the invention of race.

- 11) *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* by Frank Wu
 - Available at both Hollins and Roanoke (E184.O6 W84 2002); **\$19, [Amazon](#)**
 - Speaking of overlooked issues in the often painted black-and-white conversations about race, Frank Wu's [Yellow](#) takes on issues that face Asian American communities in the U.S., including the overlooked history of Asian Americans, the "model minority" myth, discrimination, and the role of Asian Americans in the most pressing social issues in history and today.

- 12) *The Making of Asian America: A History* by Erika Lee
 - At Hollins; listed as available (E184.A75 L43 2015); **\$14, [Amazon](#)**
 - While Frank Wu offers up a contemporary look at the experience of Asian Americans in the Americas, Erika Lee's [The Making of Asian America](#) points to the history of Asian immigrants and American-born Asians in the Americas. Lee points to the fact that this history is not only a rich history, but also quite a long history, much longer than your high school textbooks might've led you to believe. And if you want more after devouring this book, then (yep, totally sneaking in an extra recommendation) [Strangers from a Different Shore](#) by Ronald Takaki is also a good look.

- 13) *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine
 - At both Hollins and Roanoke; not available at Hollins (PS3568.A572 C58 2014); **\$15, [Amazon](#)**
 - This is the book of the present moment, the book that so effectively captures how the microaggressions of racism on daily basis are intimately connected to the foundations and history of racism in the U.S.

- 14) *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
 - Within an anthology at Roanoke University Library (HQ1190 .F4633 2005); **\$14, [Amazon](#)**
 - [Coates' bestseller](#) is a short but potent testimony of the black male experience in an America that seems to be waking to the horrors of police brutality, mass incarceration, and a generally hostile environment for black youths. Beware, this book may have you ugly-crying in public, but that's part of the reason it's such a necessary read. It's so brutality honest and deeply personal that'll you'll really *feel* the shame, fear, and anger of being black in America.

- 15) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander
 - At both Hollins and Roanoke, neither are listed as available (HV9950 .A437 2010); **\$13, [Amazon](#)**
 - By now, it should be evident that [The New Jim Crow](#) is one of the most important books of our era. It's on this list for the same reason it's on so many other lists, it points in no uncertain terms to one of the biggest forms of oppression and injustice that is alive and well in the U.S. today. Heck, if you're an ally, you've probably already read it, but just in case you haven't, here's your reminder to get on that.

- 16) *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison
 - At Hollins; listed as available (PS3555.L625 I5 2002); **\$9, [Amazon](#)**
 - It may be fiction but [Invisible Man](#) is largely about the flaws of the white liberalism that used and ultimately ended up injuring the very black communities they supposedly sought to uplift. A beautiful book all around, it simultaneously highlights the life of one nameless black man navigating race and politics in the early 20th century in America, and the injurious denial and racism of the supposed white allies. It doesn't let black men and women off the hook either though; [Invisible Man](#) shows how corruption and injury can run deep in liberation movements, sometimes even where there is good intention. Yet another reason why it's so important to know your stuff!

- 17) *Colonize This: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* by Daisy Hernandez
 - At Hollins; listed as available (HQ1161 .C65 2002); **\$17, [Amazon](#)**
 - Lest we all get too mired in history and policy that we forget about the actual people we're supposed to be allies to... [Colonize This!](#) and [How Does It Feel To Be A Problem](#) (below) are both great anthologies that will take all the history you, as a woke white ally, have studiously interrogated and help put it in a personal and present context. After all, hearing young people speak on the issues of today from a place of hope and budding rebelliousness is just what you need to keep your own eyes on the prize, isn't it?

18) *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* by Moustafa Bayoumi

- At Hollins, listed as available (E184.A65 B35 2008); **\$14**, [Amazon](#)
- (From Amazon) An eye-opening look at how young Arab- and Muslim- Americans are forging lives for themselves in a country that often mistakes them for the enemy. Just over a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois posed a probing question in his classic *The Souls of Black Folk*: How does it feel to be a problem? Now, Moustafa Bayoumi asks the same about America's new "problem"-Arab- and Muslim-Americans. Bayoumi takes readers into the lives of seven twenty-somethings living in Brooklyn, home to the largest Arab-American population in the United States. He moves beyond stereotypes and clichés to reveal their often unseen struggles, from being subjected to government surveillance to the indignities of workplace discrimination. Through it all, these young men and women persevere through triumphs and setbacks as they help weave the tapestry of a new society that is, at its heart, purely American.

Edited/Reorganized by I. Glenn, June 2018.