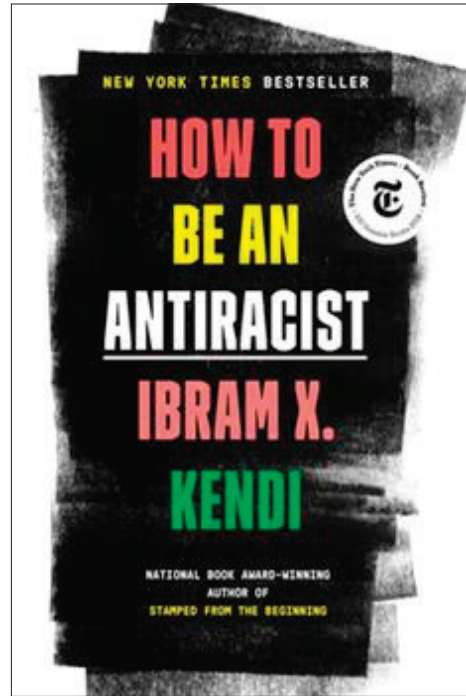


How to be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi. Random House, 238 pages. \$15.00.

Review by Ed Meek

FOLLOWING THE TRAGIC DEATH OF GEORGE FLOYD, Americans have been searching for an explanation for how we got to the point where a police officer feels he has to right to kneel on someone's neck until his life ends—a white police officer with his knee on the neck of a Black man in handcuffs—while he is being videotaped with three other police officers looking on. The image of Officer Chauvin with his knee on George Floyd's neck is so powerful because it makes the case that Floyd's Black life simply did not matter to Chauvin. Hence, it embodies the need for a Black Lives Matter movement. In addition, it functions as a racist symbol of the relationship of white America to Black Americans. In addition to gabbling with how we got here, Americans are asking themselves what they can do. Ibram X. Kendi attempts to provide us with a way to move forward in his engaging and compelling new book, *How to be an Antiracist*.



A more accurate title of Kendi's book might be: "How I learned to think like an antiracist and how you can too." The book traces Kendi's development from high school to college, and graduate school and up to the present (he'll be joining the faculty at Boston University this fall).

In telling his own story he draws from years of research.

One of the refreshing aspects of the book is that Kendi clearly defines his terms. A racist is "One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea." An antiracist on the other hand is "One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea." The key word is policy. A racist policy would be any policy that helps one race and hurts another. Practices like "stop and frisk" and racial profiling unfairly target African-Americans. Our justice system unjustly incarcerates too many Black males. Kendi is against any policy that maintains "racial inequities." Legacy admissions and merit scholarships, for instance, favor whites who go to the best schools, and graduate to the best jobs.

Overt acts of racism like a white person using the "N" word to insult a Black person, or joining a white supremacist group, or violently attacking someone based on race are the kinds of things we usually think of when we talk about racism and because of that, it makes it easy for many people to deny that they are racists. Kendi is saying that it is the unseen policies in housing, education, justice, and the distribution of wealth that hurt

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Blacks and help whites that are the real problems that we must address. In addition, he thinks that once we change the policies, people will adapt to the changes.

Kendi begins his book by talking about a speech he gave in high school in which he blames Black youth for their predicament: "They think it's ok not to think! They focus too much on sports. Too many get pregnant." Sound familiar? This is a stance taken by Paul Ryan, Bill Cosby and Barak Obama. Kendi realizes later that he is blaming Black people for problems that are not their own fault. The pandemic has exposed many of the issues Black Americans are faced with from low-paying jobs to inadequate healthcare to underfunded education to low rates of home ownership.

Kendi reviews the history of "whiteness" which seems to be contradicted in our Declaration of Independence: "all men are created equal." A more accurate statement at that time might have been "all white men are created equal." Two hundred and fifty years later, we still have what Isabel Wilkerson calls "America's Enduring Caste System" in a recent article in The New York Times. Kendi does not let himself or other African-Americans completely off the hook. He claims that any of us can be racist. Clarence Thomas, Kendi points out, in his treatment of Anita Hill, was both sexist and racist. Moreover, Kendi does not think it is useful to accuse one another of being racist (as the left is fond of doing). Rather he thinks we need to change those policies that result in racial inequities.

There are two criticisms I have of Kendi's book. First, although he makes the case for inequities between Blacks and whites, he doesn't propose how we go about closing those gaps or acknowledge that the bigger problem, as Adolph Reed would say, is the disparity of income and wealth between all Americans. Also, because this is a book about how we think about race, it is easy enough as a reader to agree with Kendi and identify as an antiracist without actually doing anything to change the problems facing black Americans.

The idea driving Kendi is, as Elizabeth Warren would say, to "level the playing field" and "provide opportunities" for everyone. But in order to level the playing field don't we have to overcompensate through some type of reparations? Affirmative Action was an attempt to level the playing field and it was successful, but the primary beneficiaries were white women and when jobs and admissions slots were given to African-American candidates, other groups objected. Lawsuits were filed. Although Ta-Nehisi Coates in The Atlantic and Nikole Hannah-Jones in the New York Times argue effectively for reparations, and Senator Markey is part of a group of Democrats studying the issue, most Americans are not there yet. We'll see what happens in the next few years. Meanwhile, How to be an Antiracist can help get us on track to overcoming America's racial divide.