

17 books by black authors that are shaping our conversation about race

That's certainly true of race and power in America. Whether it's through thoughtful essays, gripping fiction, or haunting poems, contemporary black authors have been publishing a number of books that are shaping our conversations about race for readers of all ages. Some books tackle larger issues like mass incarceration and police violence. Others offer intimate portraits of individual characters to showcase the world as experienced through different perspectives. But no matter the scope, black writers are using literature as a way to explore race and the effects of racism on the world around us.

How to Be An Antiracist

by Ibram X. Kendi

Ibram X. Kendi is a black man and an award-winning scholar who's studied the history of racist ideas. In his 2019 book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi arguably takes a risky self-critical approach by looking at how racist thoughts took root in his own life. Kendi argues that without the capacity for honest self-reflection and critical thinking, we'll remain a nation of Americans who swear they're not racist but nevertheless continue to hold racist views and support racist policies. The book effectively weaves together memoir and analysis while showing readers specifically how to become the antiracists this country needs them to be.

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You

by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

Ibram Kendi and young adult author Jason Reynolds teamed up to write *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*. The book, written in Reynolds' fresh voice, condenses Kendi's expansive non-fiction masterpiece ***Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*** for youth and beginner audiences. The book plows through centuries of history in a snappy 246 pages. Chapters are typically no longer than 10 pages. Sometimes the font is bolded and enlarged to drive home a point, and numbered lists

frequently break down complex ideas. The book is full of Reynolds' rhetorical flourishes and asides, which are at turns entertaining and devastating.

The Nickel Boys

by Colson Whitehead

Colson Whitehead based this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel on a real-life [reform school](#) in Florida where boys were regularly beaten and dozens were killed over the course of a century. His story focuses on Elwood Curtis, a black teen who wrongly ends up in the fictional Nickel Academy, and Curtis' friendship with another black student, Jack Turner. Set in the 1960s, the pair confront the tragic reality of what it means to be a black boy in America. Whitehead's masterful narrative forces the reader to contemplate why and how certain stories are wiped from our history and collective memory.

Black Fortunes: The Story of the First Six African Americans Who Escaped Slavery and Became Millionaires

by Shomari Wills

Annie Turnbo Malone created the largest hair care brand in the country. Robert Reed Church was, at one point, one of the largest landowners in Memphis. Turnbo Malone was the daughter of slaves and Church escaped slavery, but both went on to become entrepreneurs and millionaires. Author Shomari Wills details those and other similar improbable success stories in *Black Fortunes*.

Thick: And Other Essays

by Tressie McMillan Cottom

In this collection of essays, Cottom discusses her life experiences in the context of social and political theories she's studied in order to explore different facets of the black female experience in the U.S. It's the perfect blend of scholarly writing and personal anecdote. She touches on race, beauty, and even [BBQ Becky](#).

Ghost Boys

by Jewell Parker Rhodes

Jerome, the protagonist of this young adult novel, shares a fate similar to that of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy [killed](#) in Cleveland, in 2014. Jerome is shot to death by an officer who confuses his toy gun for the real thing. Jerome lives on as a ghost and meets [Emmett Till](#), the 14-year-old black teenager who was tortured and murdered in 1955. Jerome also meets Sarah, the police officer's daughter. Together, they'll try to confront and understand why Jerome was killed.

They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South

by Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers

In this book, historian Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers makes the case that white women benefited just as much from the American slave system as white men — and she has the sources to prove it. She focuses on testimonies of formerly enslaved people to illustrate how white female slave owners punished slaves, and used them to gain wealth, status, and independence from men. Jones-Rogers' findings will force many readers to confront the fact that white women who owned slaves could be just as brutal as male slaveowners.

Don't Call Us Dead

by Danez Smith

Danez Smith's poetry collection *Don't Call Us Dead* is a breathtaking look at being black, being queer, and living with HIV, when the world seems hostile to those very identities. The opening poem, "summer, somewhere," is a 25-page-long elegy that imagines paradise for black boys killed by police violence, and will leave readers vibrating with anger, sadness and resolve as a result of Smith's haunting prose.

The Hate U Give

by Angie Thomas

The Hate U Give has been a *New York Times* best seller since it debuted a year ago, and for good reason. The novel tells the tale of Starr Carter, a 16-year-old who is trying to reconcile going to a predominantly white high school without feeling like she is abandoning her friends and family in her predominantly black

neighborhood. But when Starr is the sole witness to a police shooting of an unarmed black teen, she must develop the courage to find her voice and speak out against injustice. What makes *The Hate U Give* so brilliant is the seamless way that it blends a stirring and universal coming-of-age story with an important lesson about standing up against institutional corruption.

New People

by Danzy Senna

New People is a sharp commentary on race disguised as a suspense thriller. The book follows Maria, a biracial New Yorker who seems to have the perfect life. She's a research scholar, she's engaged to an entrepreneur who's launching a new internet venture, and she's the star of a documentary about biracial Americans. However, when Maria becomes obsessed with a poet, she begins to question what it means to be black and what it means to be successful in a world where there seems to be defined expectations for both. "I'm interested in narratives with black protagonists that don't follow an expected script," [Senna told MashReads](#). This novel will leave you think about the plight of Maria long after you've turned the last page.

Sing, Unburied, Sing

by Jesmyn Ward

If there is one word that describes Jesmyn Ward's National Book Award winning novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* it's "haunting." The novel is a beautifully written portrait of a family navigating the embattled racial dynamics, past and present, of the American South, as 13-year-old Jojo and his mother Leonie road trip to pick up Jojo's father from prison in Mississippi. In her acceptance speech, Ward highlighted the importance of representation in literature. "“You looked at my poor, my black, my southern women, and you saw yourself. I am deeply honored to each and everyone of you who looks at my work and sees something in it. I hope to continue this conversation with you for all of our days.”"

We Were Eight Years In Power

by Ta-Nehisi Coates

We Were Eight Years In Power is a collection of Coates' essays written about race, history, and power during the eight years of Obama's presidency. Many of the essays were previously published in *The Atlantic*, and then Coates augmented the book with eight new essays, one written for each year of the Obama era. Put together, they provide an important element for processing modern day America: context. A critical look at race in the U.S., delivered with Coates' characteristic thoughtfulness and wisdom, *We Were Eight Years In Power* situates the current social, political, and cultural conversations we're having as a country within the larger web of history, making it a must-read. (Also, it goes without saying, read his award winning book *Between The World and Me*.)

When They Call You A Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir

by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele

When They Call You A Terrorist is a fact check of public record. The book tells the story of the creation of Black Lives Matter, the movement dedicated to fighting injustice that was subject of [a petition aiming to label it a terrorist organization](#). The book also details the coming of age story of the woman who co-created the movement, Patrisse Cullors. But the book is more than a recounting of the past. This memoir acts as a beacon of hope for readers — that community activism makes a difference, that it is possible to stand up to injustice, and that no matter who you are, you still get to tell your own story.

An American Marriage

by Tayari Jones

If there is one book that demonstrates that fiction can be as revealing as even the most grounded non-fiction, it's Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage*. The book, which was recently selected as [Oprah's Book Club pick for February](#), follows a newlywed couple, Celeste and Roy, who are trying to build a life together. But when Roy is arrested for a crime he didn't commit, Celeste and Roy's world is thrown into disarray, resulting in a gripping tale about race, love, and family, as well as the forces like incarceration that can disrupt them and what we will do to hold onto the future we want for ourselves.

This Will Be My Undoing

by Morgan Jerkins

In her debut book, writer and journalist Morgan Jerkins dives into what it means to a black woman in modern society. Through essays about everything from *Sailor Moon* to the "Black Girl Magic" movement, Jerkins outlines how race, womanhood and feminism intersect. It's all delivered with the sharp criticism that has made Jerkins a must-follow voice in today's media landscape.

Dear Martin

by Nic Stone

In her YA novel *Dear Martin*, debut author Nic Stone explores what it's like to come of age as a black boy in a white world. The story follows Justyce McAllister, a black boy attending a predominantly white prep school. When Justyce is handcuffed by a cop who wrongfully assumes he's attacking a drunk friend he's trying to help, his eyes are suddenly opened to the various racial dynamics at play around him. Drawing on the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., *Dear Martin* asks one resounding question: why should you try to be your best in a world that already assumes the worst of you?

Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race

by Reni Eddo-Lodge

Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race is an essay collection that examines structural racism. It was borne out of frustration about conversations about race. The book began as a 2014 [blog post by the same title](#), in which Eddo-Lodge wrote "I can no longer engage with the gulf of an emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour articulates our experiences." Throughout her collection Eddo-Lodge discusses class, race, gender and privilege, through the framework of British culture and history. But whether you're English or not, the book's exploration of inequality will echo with readers all over the world.