

The Right Kind of White by Garrett Bucks

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. The book's title refers to White Americans' desire to distinguish themselves from one another. Where do you think this desire comes from? What, in your mind, draws a White person to want to define themselves as "the right kind of White"?
2. Bucks ends the introduction with an invitation, stating that while he focused on telling his own story in this book, he hopes that doing so would inspire White readers to tell their own version of attempting to stand out as "the right kind of White." If you identify as White, do you have your own story about this quest? Why or why not?
3. An early reviewer mentioned that this book could equally be called "The Right Kind of White Man" or "The Right Kind of Middle Class White." When were you most struck by the ways that Bucks' experiences in the book were shaped by his gender? His class? Other identity markers?
4. The first chapter begins with a scene where a group of college students discuss how they first became aware of their own racial identity. What do you remember about the moment you first became aware of your own race and ethnicity? What lesson did you learn in that moment? Was it an empowering moment? A painful moment? A confounding moment? Were there adults in your life who helped you make sense of it?
5. Bucks devotes an entire section to "what he learned in school," about how his educational experiences taught him explicitly or implicitly how to perform a racial, class and gender identity. When you think about your own school experience and how it shaped your identity, what lessons stand out? In what ways were those the lessons that the school was seeking to teach vs. lessons that you learned informally?
6. In the chapter about growing up in suburban Maryland, Bucks talks about that community's obsession with "sorting"—celebrating diversity, but maintaining a clear hierarchy between groups. In what ways did that depiction resonate or not with your experience, either growing up or now? Have you been conscious of moments when you were "sorted" in place, or when you sought to "sort" yourself?
7. Bucks was raised in a variety of majority White communities that are ostensibly very different from one another—a small, more conservative Montana town, an elite, diversity-celebrating Maryland suburb and a progressive college town? In what ways was Bucks' experience of each of these communities different? In what ways was there a shared throughline of his experience in each?"
8. Throughout the book, Bucks seeks out foils—be they the jocks with whom he argued in high school or the "Okie teachers" in New Mexico. What value did these foils provide Bucks, and what were the limits and risk of his addiction to these foils?



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9. The section “Church and State” ends with Bucks mourning the death of his one-time dream of being a small town Methodist pastor, even though he recognizes that dream would not have been as prosaic as he imagined. He writes “the road not taken wouldn’t have been perfect. It might even have been terrible. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t mourn it.” What do you think Bucks mourns about this path not taken? What would that choice represented for him?

10. Bucks frequently returns to the koan that his pastor gave his confirmation class, about how “there are two religions in the world—the religion of being right and the religion of being in love, and the only rule is you can’t be a member of both at the same time.” It’s obviously a resonant line in Bucks’ life, but how does it land with you? What does it mean to be in “the religion of being right” and “the religion of being in love?”

11. What is it about Bucks’ professional trajectory that makes him so eager for proof that he is still more enlightened by other White people? How did that impact his relationships with Black, Brown and Indigenous friends, colleagues and students?

12. In Chapter Seventeen, Bucks recounts a night out with work colleagues that turned unexpectedly emotional for him. On its surface, it could be considered an extremely basic anecdote: He wishes that his colleagues were more eager to spend social time with him. Why do you think that such a simple (and relatable) emotion carries so much weight for Bucks? What did that night out with colleagues represent for him? Have you ever had a moment like that—where a relatively banal stimulus becomes a stand-in for a broader realization?

13. Bucks spends multiple chapters discussing the 2016 election cycle, and Donald Trump in particular. On page 166, he writes, “Truth be told, I loved having Trump traveling around doing Trump-y things that summer. He was a never-ending fuel source for liberal consternation.” What do you think Bucks (who doesn’t support Trump or his policies) means by this quote? What value does a political figure like Trump have for White liberals?

14. When Bucks is seeking funding for The Barnraisers Project, he increasingly finds himself telling a tokenized, cartoonish story of Jefferson County, Montana, where he grew up. Have you ever found yourself in a similar position, where you find yourself warping your own story or the story of your home community to match the expectations of others?

15. As Bucks starts to reconsider his relationship to other White people, he also deepens his understanding of what it means to be in community with others. During the summer of 2020, for example, he realizes that it’s possible to both critique other White people’s actions while not separating himself from them. What does true community mean to you? When have you experienced it? When have you most noticed it lacking in your life?



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16. Bucks believes, by the end of the book, that it is possible to combat White supremacy while having curiosity for and even sympathy for both himself and other White people? Do you agree or would you challenge this belief? Why?

17. Bucks deliberately resists ending the book with a set of instructions for specifically what White people need to do with one another to fight racism without running away from one another. After reading the book, what does it make you want to do? What relationships do you want to strengthen? What more do you want to learn, and with whom? What kind of conversations does it inspire?

18. Bucks chose to dedicate the book to his grandparents, and describes it as “an intergenerational love story.” Why do you think he made that choice? What does that phrase, “intergenerational love story,” mean to you?

