



Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word

By Randall Kennedy

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It's "the nuclear bomb of racial epithets," a word that whites have employed to wound and degrade African Americans for three centuries. Paradoxically, among many black people it has become a term of affection and even empowerment. The word, of course, is *nigger*, and in this candid, lucidly argued book the distinguished legal scholar Randall Kennedy traces its origins, maps its multifarious connotations, and explores the controversies that rage around it.

Should blacks be able to use *nigger* in ways forbidden to others? Should the law treat it as a provocation that reduces the culpability of those who respond to it violently? Should it cost a person his job, or a book like *Huckleberry Finn* its place on library shelves? With a range of reference that extends from the Jim Crow south to Chris Rock routines and the O. J. Simpson trial, Kennedy takes on not just a word, but our laws, attitudes, and culture with bracing courage and intelligence.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Nigger is Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy's ornate, lively monograph on what he calls the "paradigmatic" racial slur in the English language. A neutral noun in the 17th century, *nigger* had, by 1830, become an "influential" insult. Kennedy traces the word's history in literature, song, film, politics, sports, everyday speech, and the courtroom. He also discusses its plastic, contradictory, and volatile place in contemporary American society. Should it be eradicated from dictionaries and the language? Should it be, somehow, regulated? What is the significance of its emergence among some blacks as a term with "undertones of warmth and good will"? Do blacks have a historical right to its use or does that place the term under a "protectionist pall"? With courage and grave measure Kennedy has, in effect, created a forum for discussion of the word he calls a "reminder of the ironies and dilemmas, the tragedies and glories, of the American experience." --H. O'Billovitch

From Publishers Weekly

The word is paradigmatically ugly, racist and inflammatory. But is it different when Ice Cube uses it in a song than when, during the O.J. Simpson trial, Mark Fuhrman was accused of saying it? What about when Lenny Bruce uses it to "defang" it by sheer repetition? Or when Mark Twain uses it in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to make an antiracist statement? Kennedy, a professor at Harvard Law School and noted legal scholar, has produced an insightful and highly provocative book that raises vital questions about the relationship between language, politics, social norms and how society and culture confront racism. Drawing on a wide range of historical, legal and cultural instances Harry S. Truman calling Adam Clayton Powell "that damned nigger preacher"; Title VII court cases in which the use of the word was proof of condoning a "racially hostile work environment"; Quentin Tarantino's liberal use of the word in his films Kennedy repeatedly shows not only the complicated cultural history of the word, but how its meaning, intent and even substance change in context. Smart, well argued and never afraid of facing serious, difficult and painful questions in an unflinching and unsentimental manner, this is an important work of cultural and political criticism. As Kennedy notes in closing: "For bad or for good, nigger is... destined to remain with us for the foreseeable future a reminder of the ironies and dilemmas, the tragedies and glories, of the American experience." (Jan. 22) Forecast: This may be the book that reignites larger debates over race eclipsed by September 11. Look for a bestselling run and huge talk show and magazine coverage as the Afghanistan news cycle continues to slow; the book had already been the subject of two New York Times stories by early January.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-A well-written and researched book that traces the history of the N word and various races' use of and reaction to it. Kennedy begins with how the word should be defined, and why it generates such strong reactions. He explores its etymology and looks at the various ways the word has been used throughout America's history, citing court cases and legal battles involving the word from slavery times to the present. The last chapters look at the pitfalls in fighting the use of the word and at how the term is currently used in our society. This unique work will spark discussion among students interested in the history of this familiar term. Kennedy includes many contemporary references from comedians, rappers, athletes, movie stars, and other famous and not so famous African Americans.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

William Lee:

Now a day those who Living in the era wherever everything reachable by connect to the internet and the resources included can be true or not require people to be aware of each information they get. How people have to be smart in acquiring any information nowadays? Of course the reply is reading a book. Examining a book can help people out of this uncertainty Information mainly this Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word book because this book offers you rich details and knowledge. Of course the details in this book hundred per cent guarantees there is no doubt in it everybody knows.

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Carol Rosborough:

Is it a person who having spare time in that case spend it whole day simply by watching television programs or just lying down on the bed? Do you need something new? This Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word can be the reply, oh how comes? A book you know. You are therefore out of date, spending your free time by reading in this new era is common not a nerd activity. So what these publications have than the others?

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