



# Jodi Picoult

Possible reader questions for  
*Small Great Things*

## SOCIAL JUSTICE QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUBS —from Debby Irving's *Waking Up White*:

**A note from Jodi:**

For book clubs interested in exploring racism, I highly recommend reading Debby Irving's **WAKING UP WHITE** and having a discussion in conjunction with **SMALL GREAT THINGS**.

1. What stereotypes about people of another race do you remember hearing and believing as a child? Were you ever encouraged to question stereotypes? (WUW p. 6)
2. How have you understood racial difference? In terms of biology? Culture? Have you given it much thought? Why or why not? (WUW p. 41)
3. Think of a time you grossly misinterpreted a person (of any race) or situation. What information was missing that allowed you to draw the incorrect conclusion? What in your belief system contributed to your misinterpretation? (WUW p 68)

4. What have you filed away? Create a column that contains these labels: African Americans, Asian Americans, Jews, Latinos, Muslims, Whites. Next to each, quickly write at least five stereotypes that come to mind for each. Do not pause, censor, or correct — rather, let emerge what will. Now look at what you've written. Does it surprise you? If you are white, do you have any stereotypes for whites? Why do you think this is? (WUW p. 91)
5. Have you tried to form relationships across racial lines? How have they worked out? If they didn't get very far, how did you explain that to yourself? (WUW, p. 123)

## BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### —for *Small Great Things*

- ❖ The title alludes to a quote attributed often to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “If I cannot do great things, I can do small things that are great.” In what ways do the actions of each of the narrators support this statement?
- ❖ Do you think legal action would have been brought against Ruth if she were white? How far back in the story do you need to go to consider this outcome?
- ❖ Turk's ideology targets black people, people of Jewish heritage, and queer people.\* With that in mind, consider the below three questions:
  - Do you think legal action would have been brought against Ruth if she was of Eastern European Jewish heritage?
  - Do you think legal action would have been brought against Ruth if her sexual orientation were other than heterosexual?
  - What are the similarities and differences between these three identities in terms of navigating hate groups? Everyday life in America?

- ❖ Of the three main characters, Ruth, Kennedy, and Turk, who do you most relate to? Why?
- ❖ Were there moments in each of the three characters' stories that you could relate to and/or feel compassion for?
- ❖ How do each of the below systems contribute to Ruth's sense of place as a Black woman in America?
  - Transportation
  - Education
  - Health care
  - Housing
  - Lending
  - Food supply
  - Human Resources
  - Policing
  - Judicial
  - Media
- ❖ White people have a historical habit of 'helping' and 'fixing' people whom they deem 'other' and inferior. This damaging pattern even has a name: "White Savior Syndrome." The ultimate, and deadly, irony is that it serves mostly to reinforce ideas about white superiority and white goodness. Can you give three historical examples of this? Can you find three moments in this story where Kennedy falls into that inherited behavioral pattern?
- ❖ What do you think Kennedy learns in this story about the ways being white has shielded her from racial discrimination? Did you feel she was open to learning? If yes, how did she demonstrate that? If no, how did she demonstrate that?
- ❖ Can white nationalists such as Turk and Brittney perpetuate racism? How?
- ❖ Can people such as the hospital lawyer, the judge, Kennedy, or the police perpetuate racism? How?

- ❖ We see Kennedy wrestling with her own inner bias and racial conditioning. (add some examples here) Are you in touch with your inner bias and racial conditioning? Can you list five moments over the course of your life when you were taught – through language or silence – what to think and feel about race in America?
  
- ❖ How often do you speak about racism with your closest friends and family?
  - daily
  - weekly
  - monthly
  - twice a year
  - less than once a year
  
- ❖ What do you think the impact is on a person who engages infrequently in conversations about a given topic? What about frequently? How does this differential play out when it comes to racism?

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\* As of this writing, queer is the preferred term by the [majority of people](https://www.glaad.org/reference/lgb) who do not identify within the strict confines of heterosexual and/or the gender binary. <https://www.glaad.org/reference/lgb>

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## Words Matter – Definitions to Consider

### **Racial Stereotype**

An image, attitude or judgment, applied to an entire group of people.

### **Race**

A social construct (with no biological validity) that divides people into distinct groups by categorizing them based on arbitrary elements of physical appearance, particularly skin color.

### **Power**

Access to individuals, social groups, and institutions that own and/or control the majority of a community's resources, as well the ability to define norms and standards of behavior.

**Prejudice**

An attitude or opinion—usually negative—about socially defined group (racial, religious, national, etc.) or any person perceived to be a member of that group, formed with insufficient knowledge, reason, or deliberation.

**Racism**

Most people use the word "racism" the way they used the term "prejudice." But anti-racist activists see racism as "race prejudice PLUS power," in other words, discrimination based on racial stereotyping (conscious or unconscious, active or passive) that is backed by significant institutional power (race prejudice + power = racism).

**Institutional Racism**

The ways in which institutions—social, political, educational, financial, religious, medical, housing, jobs, criminal justice—create and/or perpetuate systems that advantage white people at the expense of people of color.

**White Privilege**

Unearned advantages that benefit whites (whether they seek such benefits or not) by virtue of their skin color in a racist society.

**White Supremacy**

Once used only by racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the word is also used in anti-racism work to describe the historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of domination and exploitation of people of color by white people, and which maintains white peoples' position of relative wealth, power, and privilege.

**"Reverse Racism"**

A term commonly used by white people to equate instances of hostile behavior toward them by people of color with the racism people of color face. This is a way of ignoring the issue of who has the power.

**Internalized Racism**

The conscious or subconscious acceptance of the dominant society's racist views, stereotypes and biases of one's ethnic group, leading to finding fault with oneself or members of one's own group, while valuing the dominant culture (internalized inferiority). Another form of internalized racism is when a white person mistakenly

believes s/he is better than people of color ( internalized superiority).

### **"Non-racist"**

Term used by those who consider themselves "color-blind," a claim that in effect, denies any role in perpetuation systemic racism, or any responsibility to act to dismantle it. Institutional racism is perpetuated not only by those who actively discriminate, but also by those who fail to challenge it (silence = consent).

### **Anti-racist**

An anti-racist is someone who makes a conscious choice and persistent effort to challenge white supremacy, including her/his own white privilege, and to actively oppose forms of discrimination against people of color.

*These definitions are based on definitions originally created by the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop - <http://cwsworkshop.org>.*

## **Ten Things Everyone Should Know About Race**

Our eyes tell us that people look different. No one has trouble distinguishing a Czech from a Chinese. But what do those differences mean? Are they biological? Has race always been with us? How does race affect people today? **There's less - and more - to race than meets the eye:**

### **1. Race is a modern idea**

Ancient societies, like the Greeks, did not divide people according to physical distinctions, but according to religion, status, class, even language. The English language didn't even have the word 'race' until it turns up in 1508 in a poem by William Dunbar referring to a line of kings.

### **2. Race has no genetic basis**

Not one characteristic, trait or even gene distinguishes all the members of one so-called race from all the members of another so-called race.

### **3. Human subspecies don't exist**

Unlike many animals, modern humans simply haven't been around long enough or isolated enough to evolve into separate subspecies or races. Despite surface appearances, we are one of the most similar of all species.

4. **Skin color really is only skin deep**

Most traits are inherited independently from one another. The genes influencing skin color have nothing to do with the genes influencing hair form, eye shape, blood type, musical talent, athletic ability or forms of intelligence. Knowing someone's skin color doesn't necessarily tell you anything else about him or her.

5. **Most variation is within, not between, "races"**

Of the small amount of total human variation, 85% exists within any local population, be they Italians, Kurds, Koreans or Cherokees. About 94% can be found within any continent. That means two random Koreans may be as genetically different as a Korean and an Italian.

6. **Slavery predates race**

Throughout much of human history, societies have enslaved others, often as a result of conquest or war, even debt, but not because of physical characteristics or a belief in natural inferiority. Due to a unique set of historical circumstances, ours was the first slave system where all the slaves shared similar physical characteristics.

7. **Race and freedom evolved together**

The U.S. was founded on the radical new principle that "All men are created equal." But our early economy was based largely on slavery. How could this anomaly be rationalized? The new idea of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted.

8. **Race justified social inequalities as natural**

As the race idea evolved, white superiority became "common sense" in America. It justified not only slavery but also the extermination of Indians, exclusion of Asian immigrants, and the taking of Mexican lands by a nation that professed a belief in democracy. Racial practices were institutionalized within American government, laws, and society.

9. **Race isn't biological, but racism is still real**

Race is a powerful social idea that gives people different access to opportunities and resources. Our government and social institutions have created advantages that disproportionately channel wealth, power, and resources to white people. This affects everyone, whether we are aware of it or not.

## **10. Colorblindness will not end racism**

Pretending race doesn't exist is not the same as creating equality. Race is more than stereotypes and individual prejudice. To combat racism, we need to identify and remedy social policies and institutional practices that advantage some groups at the expense of others.

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