

Working Group on Racism
One-Book Project by WGR for BYM
CASTE: The Origins of our Discontents, by Isabel Wilkerson

The Working Group on Racism plans to host a one-book reading program throughout the Yearly Meeting. We would be delighted if the Yearly Meeting would endorse or co-host this reading group as a one-book project and confirm its help in outreach and hosting a web landing page.

How the BYM-wide book group will go:

- Meet every other week, on Zoom; 90 minutes sessions
- Beginning ~ April 2022 and running for 8 weeks
- At two different times running concurrently, one a weekday evening, the second on the weekend
- Offering an affinity group for Black and people of color
- Begin with centering silence; incorporate some body work; two levels of discussion: the large group, then in smaller groups
- Tech coordination team (help wanted here)

Why this book: This is a more intermediate reading in reckoning about race and racism, than some others. Many people across the Yearly Meeting have been reading and working in anti-racism for some years. We think it is timely to go deeper together. **Individuals are welcome to self-select for this series.**

About the book: Isabel Wilkerson is a Pulitzer-award winning reporter, and this book presents racism both as the abiding American original sin, and in fresh and enlightening ways that serve up history, reporting, sociology, with the skills of essayist and critic. The book avoids words like “white” and “race” and “racism” in favor of terms like “dominant caste,” “favored caste,” “upper caste” and “lower caste,” compares caste systems of the US to India’s and to Nazi Germany’s, treating race as the visible indicator of caste in America. Caste is obviously an artificial construction that purports to establish a fixed ranking of human value. By pushing caste to be considered alongside race in the US, the book offers a way to look at presumed supremacy and presumed inferiority and the life and death consequences of this domination, in ways that can lift white Americans out of the usual ruts of resistance. It is a marvel of accessible writing. It also presents in stunning detail, the case that the ideology and practices of US racism are designed, built, protected, resurrected, and updated, continually. For a book that hardly uses the word ‘racism,’ her book stares it down with more humanity and rigor than most.

The objectives are:

- For BYM Quakers to educate ourselves together on the historical facts; importantly, to understand that what we have in US racism is just as bad/worse as German Nazism and the Indian caste system; and

- To offer white Friends an opportunity for self-transformation, spiritual searching and growth: processing this information as white people; understanding and hearing the pain of Black people reading this in addition to living with it
- We also want the series to be conducted so as to offer an on-going space for BYM Quakers to engage these ideas, and practice having difficult conversations
- To offer a place to practice how to approach difficult readings and conversations aided by doing body work and supporting each other, especially when making mistakes and taking risks
- Finally, to be intentional about this Caste series as a follow-up to the first One-Book project, to go further with the anti-racism declaration to make BYM an anti-racist Yearly Meeting

Facilitation; Reading Questions; Queries; Discussion.

- We are united in thinking that the discussions should be grounded in the themes as presented by the author in the book. We propose to hold out the expectation that participants will do their best to read the assigned pages; and yet we acknowledge that there will always be individuals who have not read the entire assignment and the session may need to fill in.
- Facilitators: the facilitator role we have in mind is to 'hold the space' and keep conversation going, aided by reading questions and a list of possible discussion questions circulated in advance of each session. ASK: who would WGR members recommend? We should have a standing team that can consult with each other.
- We have a preliminary list of reading/reflection/discussion questions for each Part of the book, and are developing queries.

Supporting Reading Groups at local Meetings. It is our hope also to provide some structure and support to local worship communities who want to engage in their own study, perhaps through their own established study group channels. For example, Meeting-based groups can sign up for occasional emails from us with tips about studying the book, or doing the emotional and spiritual work; WGR members would be available to make a presentation.

Planning group: Donna Kolaetis, Kris Lotkin, Mary Dadone, Peirce Hammond, Barbara Bezdek, Better Hoover, Ellen Cronin.