



The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why

Jabari Asim

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A renowned cultural critic untangles the twisted history and future of racism through its most volatile word.

The N Word reveals how the term "nigger" has both reflected and spread the scourge of bigotry in America over the four hundred years since it was first spoken on our shores. Asim pinpoints Thomas Jefferson as the source of our enduring image of the "nigger." In a seminal but now obscure essay, Jefferson marshaled a welter of pseudoscience to define the stereotype of a shiftless child-man with huge appetites and stunted self control. Asim reveals how nineteenth-century "science" then colluded with popular culture to amplify this slander. What began as false generalizations became institutionalized in every corner of our society: the arts and sciences, sports, the law, and on the streets.

Asim's conclusion is as original as his premise. He argues that even when uttered with the opposite intent by hipsters and hip-hop icons, the slur helps keep blacks at the bottom of America's socioeconomic ladder. But Asim also proves there is a place for the word in the mouths and on the pens of those who truly understand its twisted history -- from Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle to Mos Def. Only when we know its legacy can we loosen this slur's grip on our national psyche.

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