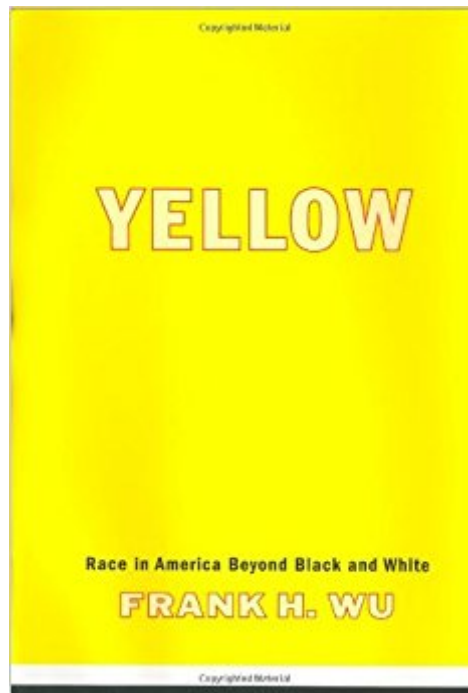




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Yellow: Race In America Beyond Black And White



Synopsis

In the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois, Cornel West, and other public intellectuals who confronted the "color line" of the twentieth century, journalist, law professor, and activist Frank H. Wu offers a unique perspective on how changing ideas of racial identity will affect race relations in the new century. Often provocative and always thoughtful, this book addresses some of the most controversial contemporary issues: discrimination, immigration, diversity, globalization, and the mixed-race movement, introducing the example of Asian Americans to shed new light on the current debates. Combining personal anecdotes, social-science research, legal cases, history, and original journalistic reporting, Wu discusses damaging Asian American stereotypes such as "the model minority" and "the perpetual foreigner." By offering new ways of thinking about race in American society, Wu's work challenges us to make good on our great democratic experiment.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have read most of Frank Wu's popular columns and legal articles over the years, so I thought I knew what to expect when I opened the covers of his new book, "Yellow." Instead of the lawyer, raconteur, social critic, and historian I had thought I knew, however, I met a philosopher poet on par with an Emerson or Thoreau. Weaving back and forth between legal decisions, Shakespearean dramas, SAT scores, and recollections from his childhood, he has produced a masterwork that will shape discussions of race for years to come. Right from the first chapter, Professor Wu lays out the dilemma of being Asian in America in terms that are spare but evocative: "I remain not only a

stranger in a familiar land, but also a sojourner through my own life....I alternate between being conspicuous and vanishing, being stared at or looked through. Although the conditions may seem contradictory, they have in common the loss of control. I am who others perceive me to be rather than how I perceive myself to be."Not content to be an idle observer or a pawn in someone else's social drama, however, he draws on a lifetime of involvement in the great issues of our times to write thought-provoking and well-researched analyses of affirmative action, racial profiling, immigration restrictions, anti-Asian violence, interracial marriage, and much more. The beauty of Wu's writing, like Stephen Jay Gould's celebrated "This View of Life" column in Natural History magazine, is that a person who is at once a leader in his field and a person with a strong point of view can take the time to explain how he got to his position by bringing in history, statistics, biography, current events, and popular culture.

I admit a love-hate relationship with books about Asian-American issues. Too often, they recycle the same points - the Yellow Peril, the Japanese-American internment, the Vincent Chin murder, the "model minority" myth, the L.A. riots - and, too often, they offer much discussion but little solution. Let's face it: we live in a nation founded by displaced Europeans and driven primarily by greed and marketplace. It's unlikely that anyone who doesn't fit easily into the mainstream can or will succeed fully, no matter having a claim to moral high ground. As a group, Asian Americans have done better than some others, but not without significant barriers, and in a country where the fire of national debate on black and white issues is stoked routinely by self-serving pundits, politicians, and pop stars, the tribulations of Asian Americans are considered trivial. The irony, of course, is that worldwide, Asians are the majority, and despite NASA's assertion on the Voyager probe that Earth men look like the da Vinci drawing, the reality is that most men look like Wu. Or me, half-Asian though I am. So, while there is a place for books like Wu's, I'm just not sure where it is. Wu is a good writer, even if many of his points are the same ones I've heard since entering college in 1986. His premise that Asian Americans historically and routinely face discrimination, even violence, is an important and all too real one. But I don't know who he's writing to. Is it other Asian Americans? Unless we're in denial or brain dead, we already know the score. Is it non-Asian Americans? Oddly enough, there's a similar problem. Those people thoughtful enough to care have probably heard the issues before. Those who aren't don't want to.

My only claim to understanding Asian-American racism in the US is being a victim of it. I am no scholastic expert in the field, not even a closet scholar. My father immigrated from Taiwan. My

mother suffered the indignity of the internment camps during WWII. But I didn't learn about my ethnicity, or racism, from them. Born in the US, I learned as many of my generation did- through experience. So from this perspective, Professor Wu has done a magnificent job of accomplishing two great tasks in a single, readable book: he has outlined a superb historical account of Asian-Americans in America with respect to racism, and effectively defined and explained the complex manifestation and quandaries of racial issues for Asian-Americans. There is, of course, an accounting of the most egregious cases of racial bias and outright bigotry in the history of our country. But even more importantly, Professor Wu effectively summarizes the history of Asians and Asian-Americans in the US to help explain how the model minority stereotype is a two-edged sword that actually in many ways exacerbates the problem and in some ways enables the problem to proliferate, particularly by playing such a stereotype off against the stereotype of Afro-Americans. Make no mistake, Professor Wu strongly espouses coalitions among not only Asian-Americans, not only all minorities, but all peoples. It is, he argues, the only way to bring resolution. But the conundrum of racism, as he effectively describes it, is truly one of color and the perception of color. Being white in America is perceived by many as the ideal, the epitome. For example, when the issue of my ethnicity came up in my office, recently, one of my staff, attempting to be gracious, remarked: "I never noticed you weren't white."

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