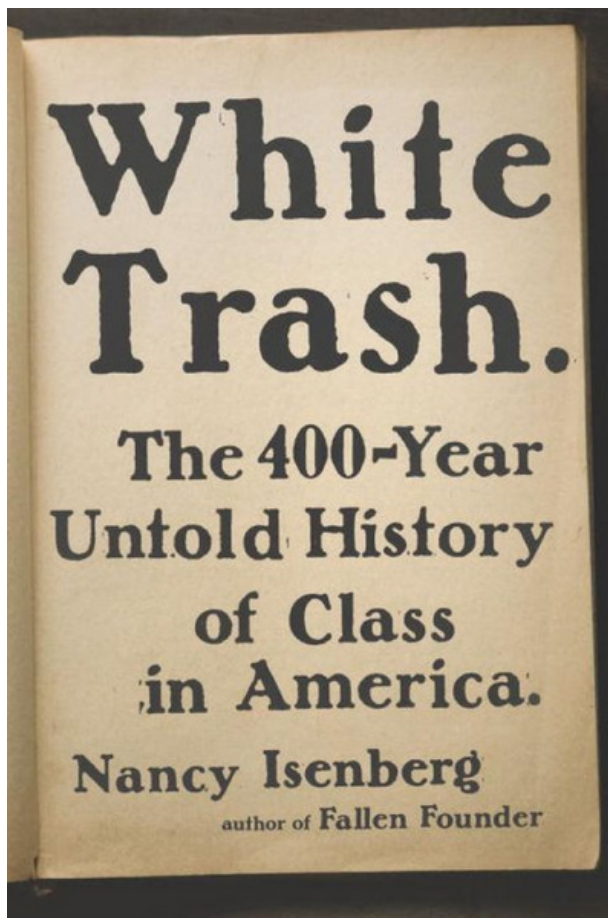


‘White Trash’ succeeds on many levels

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“*White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*” by Nancy Isenberg. New York: Viking (an imprint of Penguin Random House), 2016, 480 pages, \$28.



“Historical mythmaking is made possible only by forgetting,” Nancy Isenberg explains near the beginning of “White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America,” her meticulously-detailed story of the role social class has played in the United States since even before the country was founded. “We have to begin, then, with the first refusal to face reality: most colonizing schemes that took root in 17th- and 18th-century British America were built on privilege and subordination, not any kind of proto-democracy.”

“A past that relies exclusively on the storied Pilgrims, or the sainted generation of 1776, shortchanges us in more ways than one,” she continues. “We miss a crucial historical competition between northern and southern founding narratives and their distinctive parables minimizing the importance of class. The lesson is easy: then as now, origins are contested territory. What can’t be denied, however, are the class origins of the anointed leaders.”

As many readers know, I have long been fascinated by the role socioeconomic factors play in determining the quality of life experienced by

members of society. And although Isenberg is ostensibly focused on tracing the plight of the lower classes within American culture, it is important to remember that what she is describing is not unique to the Western Hemisphere. Human beings tend to be a comparison-based species; we are constantly evaluating where we are in the social order just as we are constantly striving to achieve a higher standard of living.

“White Trash” is one of the most extensively-researched volumes I have had occasion to read in quite some time, with 124 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, 12 chapters, and an epilogue that comprise the main text. Conceptually, the book is arranged in three major sections. Part I, “To Begin the World Anew,” consists of the first five chapters; Part II, “Degeneration of the American Breed,” is made up of chapters six through 10; and Part III, “The White Trash Makeover,” rounds out the narrative with chapters 11 and 12. The prose is augmented with a number of chronologically-arranged illustrations that serve to further clarify and reinforce the main points Isenberg is working hard to make throughout the manuscript.

I was impressed with the seamless approach she takes in exposing the hypocrisy that seems to be endemic to the human condition. If we take what the author is saying at face value, the inevitable

inference is that we all have a congenital need to be “better” than others in some way. Toward this end, equality is apparently an aspiration many find disconcerting even though they seldom voice their apprehensions publicly.

Isenberg is the T. Harry Williams Professor in the Department of History at Louisiana State University. She has a B.A. in history from Rutgers University in addition to a M.A. and a Ph.D. in American history from the University of Wisconsin. Her previous books include “Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr,” “Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America” and “Madison and Jefferson,” which she co-wrote with Andrew Burstein.

“White Trash” succeeds on many levels. First and foremost, it is a history lesson – a chronology of the caste system that has existed in our country since the first Europeans arrived on our eastern shores some five centuries ago. Second, it is an effort to explain why some of us seem hopelessly relegated to a lower rung on the economic ladder – a position that has as much to do with cultural heritage as it does with financial resources. Finally, the book is a cautionary tale. Isenberg spends a disproportionate number of pages describing how the poor are systematically and purposefully excluded from full participation in the society in which we live.

My only real criticism of Isenberg’s contribution to the ongoing dialogue on the relevance of social class in our nation’s development and current status is that she tends to be a little too “preachy” when advocating her particular political and philosophical ideology. Certainly, she presents ample empirical evidence and statistical justification for her explanations, arguments and conclusions, but she often moves beyond a purely objective posture in presenting her perspective. Although I tend to agree with many of her views, at several points I was taken aback by her obvious and borderline-loathsome subjective bias.

Still, the underlying truth of what Isenberg is saying in “White Trash” has unquestionable implications for much of the social unrest we are witnessing on our television screens each evening at a seemingly ever-increasing pace. Good, bad, right or wrong, inequality is at the heart of many of our societal ills. It is how we choose to respond to this reality that will determine whether what we are seeing in the streets intensifies or recedes over coming decades. As has been the case since the dawn of civilization, our future remains squarely within our own hands, individually as well as collectively.

“Location is everything,” Isenberg observes in “America’s Strange Breed: The Long Legacy of White Trash,” the epilogue. “Location determines access to a privileged school, a safe neighborhood, infrastructural improvements, the best hospitals, the best grocery stores. Upper- and middle-class parents instruct their children in surviving their particular class environment. They give them the appropriate material resources toward this end.”

“For the most part, daily injustices in average people’s lives go ignored,” she continues a little later. “But that does not mean that poor people are numb to the condition of their own lives. Politicians have been willfully blind to many social problems. Pretending that America has grown rich largely as a classless society is bad history, to say the least. The ‘1 percent’ is the most recently adopted shorthand for moneyed monopoly, bringing attention to the ills generated by consolidated power, but the phenomenon it describes is not new. Class separation is and has always been at the center of our political debates, despite every attempt to hide social reality with deceptive rhetoric.”

Bottom line: This one is worth the time it takes to read it. I recommend “White Trash” highly.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.