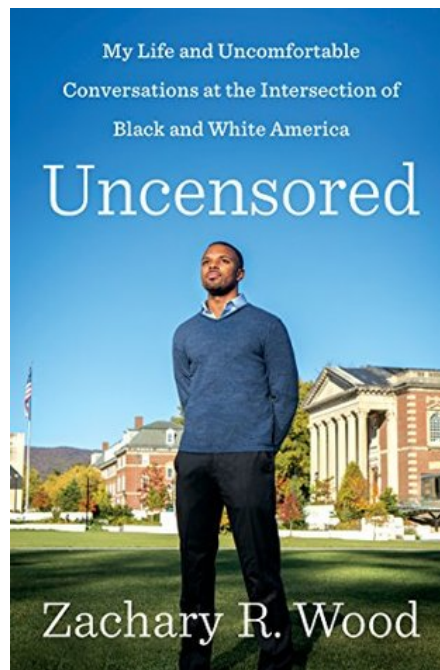




Uncensored: My Life and Uncomfortable Conversations at the Intersection of Black and White America

Zachary R. Wood

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Rooted in his own powerful personal story, twenty-one-year-old Zachary Wood shares his dynamic perspective on free speech, race, and dissenting opinions--in a world that sorely needs to learn to listen.

As the president of the student group Uncomfortable Learning at Williams College, Zachary Wood knows all about intellectual controversy. From John Derbyshire to Charles Murray, there's no one Zach refuses to debate or engage with simply because he disagrees with their beliefs--sometimes vehemently so--and this controversial view has given him a unique platform on college campuses and in the media.

But Zach has never shared the details of his own personal story, and how he came to be a crusader for open dialogue and free speech. In *Uncensored*, he reveals for the first time how he grew up poor and black in Washington, DC, in an environment where the only way to survive was to resist the urge to write people off because of their backgrounds and their perspectives.

By sharing his troubled upbringing--from a difficult early childhood filled with pain, uncertainty, and conflict to the struggles of code-switching between his home in a rough neighborhood and his elite private school--Zach makes a compelling argument for a new way of interacting with others, in a nation and a world that has never felt more polarized. In *Uncensored*, he hopes to foster a new outlook on society's most difficult conversations, both on campus and beyond.

Uncensored: My Life and Uncomfortable Conversations at the Intersection of Black and White America Details

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From Reader Review Uncensored: My Life and Uncomfortable Conversations at the Intersection of Black and White America for online ebook

Courtney Villa says

Just for some background, I am a woman of color who is pretty liberal and very interested in race issues in America. I have read many of this year's books focusing on these and related issues and loved them. This is by far my least favorite book by the most self-centered author that I have read on race. I hope that people who do not believe that race relations are a problem in America don't read this book. I think that it would actually cement any racist or negative views they may hold.

I have never written a review of a book on Goodreads, but my reaction to this book really made me feel like it was necessary to.

I have a number of problems with this book, but I will limit myself to four here:

1. Zachary holds an extremely high opinion of himself - both on his work ethic and viewpoints. Every person he encounters in the book is compared to him (and never measures up to him). Even his fellow high-achieving classmates fail to measure up. Even though they are smart and work hard, they are not nearly as intelligent or persistent as Zachary because they lead lives of privilege and don't face the same struggles that he does. I absolutely agree that students from low-income or marginalized backgrounds often have to work harder to achieve because they face different and often more obstacles. However, diminishing someone else's accomplishments does not build up your own.

2. He frequently cites times where people judge him based on his perceived background and criticizes these people. He, however, judges everyone he meets. Throughout the book, he expresses judgement on those whose views differ from his. One example is when he describes a friend he meets in college whom he described as "deeply religious, but practical and open-minded." Why is it okay for Zachary to make assumptions of people from different backgrounds? Furthermore, when he ascribes a positive feature on these people, he does so in a condescending manner like it is a gift he is bestowing on them. Why is he the judge? What makes him smarter than the rest of his classmates?

3. This book is a long "woe is me." He is deeply out of touch with reality. I agree that Zachary was underprivileged and encountered many struggles that others will never encounter. Despite his challenges, he was also quite privileged himself. He went to prestigious private schools on scholarships which enabled him to get to college. He talks about how despite these scholarships, his family struggled to meet the gap. However, his parents struggled to meet this gap, not Zachary. Even children from more privileged backgrounds have jobs in high school to help out their parents. Zachary (from the book anyway) never had a job to support his parents. He claims that he couldn't because he wanted to read more to delve more deeply into other academic topics. This is a luxury. It was not necessary to do well in school. Many wealthy adults don't have the luxury to read more just for extracurricular learning. Frankly, I think it is selfish given the conditions his family were living in that he didn't contribute financially. Furthermore, he even complains about the financial aid package he received from Williams College. It sounds like he expected a completely full ride. Again, he didn't get a job to meet the gap or even consider taking out student loans. He instead criticizes higher ed for not using their endowments to fully fund underprivileged students. As a fundraiser at an university, I can see that Zachary clearly does not understand how endowments work and how they are limited. Again, his father takes on yet another job to fund his education. Even students from more means take student loans, so this is another luxury that Zachary feels entitled to. Given the sacrifices his father made for

his education, it is a slap in the face, that his father only shows up in one line on the second page of acknowledgements proving that even those who come from oppressed backgrounds can have the sense of entitlement that he judges his white friends for.

4. Lastly, Zachary only graduated in May of this year. I agree that graduating from college is an accomplishment given the challenges he faced. But, what has he achieved or contributed to the world that requires a book to be written? Students of color struggle every day and still graduate and find careers (not enough yet), but do they all write books about it? I think this is the biggest illustration of Zachary's ego.

A says

Great story and some excellent points in the last chapter about free speech and engaging with and confronting opposing views and ideas. This book and other of Zach's writing should be assigned reading material for today's youth and anybody who wants to make a difference in the world. One word summation: Inspiring.

Mary says

Zachary Wood first came to public attention as the Williams College leader of Uncomfortable Learning, a student group that invited controversial, highly divisive speakers to Williams in an effort to promote free speech on campus. The author did this, he says, because "intellectual integrity consists of the willingness to be self-critical and think as hard as one can about counterarguments out of the understanding that each of us can and should try to learn from those with whom we vociferously disagree." Seizing his moment in the national spotlight, and in view of our nation's chronic racial divide and horrifying ongoing violence, the 21-year-old author felt compelled to write a memoir now. And it's quite an amazing story, detailing soul-crushing abuse and poverty that easily could have hardened Wood instead of shaping him into the compassionate, determined, and admirable young man he is today.

Wood vividly describes not only his tumultuous upbringing by a mentally ill mother in the environs of Washington, D.C., but also the widespread yet subtle racism he experienced. Many of his encounters are eye opening, especially for readers who might think that the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and the Obama Administration years had cleared the path for promising young people of color. We learn just how difficult and often terrifying life today remains for young black men and women, as we watch even the high-achieving, intellectually gifted author dragged down by debilitating circumstances time and again.

Mostly, though, this bravely candid memoir seeks to explain Wood's continuing efforts on behalf of diversity in all its forms, especially "diversity of thought and personality." He writes, "people [need to] make an effort to use dialogue and disagreement to test their assumptions, to build understanding, and hopefully to cultivate greater empathy." At times he belabors this point, becoming repetitive and bogging down the flow of his life story. At other points, he introduces friends and mentors in almost list-like fashion, as though entering facts about his daily routine in a diary. But despite these flaws, Wood packs a tremendous amount of insights into a memoir written by someone still so young. Now a Fellow at the Wall Street Journal and a sought-after speaker, Wood makes clear that he has political ambitions. Hold onto this memoir, for in years to come, it may become an important artifact in tracing the rise of a significant political figure.

This review is based on a hardcover copy provided for free by the publisher.

Beth Meyers says

This young man is going places. Excellent book, very insightful.

Diane Busch says

I believe the subtitle of this book should have ended at “my life”, as the rest of the subtitle does not really apply and this book was not about race relations. The biography was heavy on his childhood and his relationship to his mother, who was a whacked social justice warrior with a PHD. She had mental health issues and treated him quite strangely. She did try to prepare him as a minority black male growing up in a majority white culture. Although his parents were divorced, his dad was involved in his life and provided financial support but not emotional support.

Zach was a voracious reader and had a thirst for knowledge. He put on a well-constructed facade, being obsessed with how he presented himself to others.

As a young adult Zach was very ethically disciplined, not participating in sex, drugs, or alcohol and he was a top academic performer. He was a strong self-educator, well-read and well-rounded. But he always depended on other people to support him instead of getting a job to support himself.

As he moved into his college years, he became a free speech activist, bringing nationally recognizable controversial speakers to campuses, to force conversations on both sides of an issue. The main point of the book seems to be that he is advocating that controversial people should not be censored.

I believe the audience for this book would be 17-37 year olds.

Lesley says

You may have heard of black student Zachary Wood’s battle to bring climate change denying, anti-feminist, and racist speakers to Williams College, challenging the liberal echo chamber on campus by forcing students to grapple with deeply disturbing ideologies.

Yet Wood is no Ben Carson, (he blogs about race for the Nation as well as the Wall Street Journal) and his memoir is hardly a conservative call to arms. The child of a mentally unstable mother and a hard working but overwhelmed father, Wood writes movingly about the debilitating effects of racism and poverty: damp, vermin filled housing; haphazard dental care, and a constant need to disprove stereotypes.

To cope as a scholarship student at elite private schools, Wood relentlessly drove himself to the point of hospitalization for exhaustion. Yet he never felt he belonged in the world of wealthy white friends, whose parents patronized him and encouraged him to “impersonate a thug” for their dinner time entertainment. Reasoned, well-informed argument became his most effective weapon, a gift he was determined to share with fellow students at Williams, whatever the cost. A singular voice;. as Wood himself would say, you may not agree, but you at least have to listen.

