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Between the eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, countless African Americans passed as white, leaving behind families and friends, roots and community. It was, as Allyson Hobbs writes, a chosen exile, a separation from one racial identity and the leap into another. This revelatory history of passing explores the possibilities and challenges that racial indeterminacy presented to men and women living in a country obsessed with racial distinctions. It also tells a tale of loss.

As racial relations in America have evolved so has the significance of passing. To pass as white in the antebellum South was to escape the shackles of slavery. After emancipation, many African Americans came to regard passing as a form of betrayal, a selling of one's birthright. When the initially hopeful period of Reconstruction proved short-lived, passing became an opportunity to defy Jim Crow and strike out on one's own.

Although black Americans who adopted white identities reaped benefits of expanded opportunity and mobility, Hobbs helps us to recognize and understand the grief, loneliness, and isolation that accompanied—and often outweighed—these rewards. By the dawning of the civil rights era, more and more racially mixed Americans felt the loss of kin and community was too much to bear, that it was time to “pass out” and embrace a black identity. Although recent decades have witnessed an increasingly multiracial society and a growing acceptance of hybridity, the problem of race and identity remains at the center of public debate and emotionally fraught personal decisions.

A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in America Details

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Ij says

A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life

Author: Allyson Hobbs

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382 pages.

The author has written a scholarly book about a subject that has often been misunderstood or not discussed, in our American history. The term passing as discussed in this book is a mixed race African-American (a black and a white parent) whose appearance is not consistent with black physical characteristics (skin color, hair, facial features, etc.), choosing to live as a white person. The term used in the book is racially ambiguous.

While most people think of the gains of passing, there were losses at the same time. Depending on the era which the passing occurs different gains were realized. For example, during the era where slavery was legal, freedom was the potential gain. After the emancipation education, employment, housing, etc. were the potential gains. Losses in all eras were loss of contact with black family members (loneliness, grief, etc.), loss of identity, etc.

The author hopes that the book will explain the gains and losses which occur in passing.

During slavery freedom was the main reason from passing. If a slave looked white they could move freely. Whether going from plantation to plantation, traveling from town to town, or state to state they were not questioned or asked for a pass. This ability could also assist the mobility of other slaves. The author provided examples of passing used to facilitate escapes to freedom.

During the Jim Crow era passing could facilitate a better live. Simple things like drinking fountains, restaurants, restrooms, shopping, theatre seating, etc. became available by passing. Education, housing, employment, and other gains could also be realized.

Author and activist Charles Waddell Chesnutt could have passed for white, but for the most part preferred to be recognized as an African-American. The author discusses his activism and choices. Also, the author cover the reconstruction era and its impact on racially ambiguous persons and society.

The loneliness and grief due to the loss of one's family was a major impact on those who chose to pass. It is hard to imagine leaving home never to return. The fear of being found out led most to severing all contact with their black family and friends.

Racial integration opened the door to a more equal society. One no longer needed to pass for equal education, equal housing, and equal employment, theoretically anyways.

This is a well-researched scholarly work. I recommend this book to anyone interested in topic of passing.

About the Author

Allyson Hobbs is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Stanford University.

Allyson's first book, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, published by Harvard University Press in October 2014, examines the phenomenon of racial passing in the United States from the late eighteenth century to the present.

A Chosen Exile won the Frederick Jackson Turner Award for best first book in American History and the Lawrence Levine Award for best book in American cultural history.

A Chosen Exile has been featured on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, C-SPAN's *Book TV*, the *Tavis Smiley Show* on Public Radio International, the *Madison Show* on SiriusXM, and *TV News One* with Roland Martin. *A Chosen Exile* has been reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Harper's*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the *Boston Globe*. The book was selected as a *New York Times Book Review* Editor's Choice, a "Best Book of 2014" by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and a "Book of the Week" by the *Times Higher Education* in London. *The Root* named *A Chosen Exile* as one of the "Best 15 Nonfiction Books by Black Authors in 2014."

Allyson graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University and she received a Ph.D. with distinction from the University of Chicago. She has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research, and the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity at Stanford. Allyson teaches courses on American identity, African American history, African American women's history, and twentieth century American history. She has won numerous teaching awards including the Phi Beta Kappa Teaching Prize, the Graves Award in the Humanities, and the St. Clair Drake Teaching Award. She gave a TEDx talk at Stanford, she has appeared on C-Span and National Public Radio, and her work has been featured on *cnn.com*, *slate.com*, and in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

She lives in Atherton, California with her labradoodle, Clover.

Source: Author's Website

Shawna says

This could have been a much better book. There is such a thing as too many notes!

Angela says

"*A Chosen Exile*" is a history of light-skinned African Americans (basically, mixed-race and racially ambiguous people) "passing" as White throughout history, with a focus primarily on the mid-19th through mid-20th centuries. A fascinating look at how context drives our perception of race underlies the history presented. As opportunities ebbed and flowed during this period for African Americans, passing became more or less lucrative: first as an attempt to escape slavery plausibly, then later as a way around restrictive

work opportunities in the Jim Crow era (when Blacks were prevented categorically from joining many professions and more lucrative forms of employment and even very talented graduates of prestigious universities found doors shut to them because of race).

Unfortunately for those researching the topic, the story of these individuals is not well documented. Hobbs relies mostly on interviews, biographies of prominent families, popular fiction and nonfiction accounts, and a couple of research theses conducted during the Jim Crow era. The point that passing took a huge psychological toll on those who left behind their families and communities for the opportunities living as white provided is heavily belabored. When Hobbs is talking about history, the book is a page turner; when she lapses into liberal arts graduate school jargon it's less so. Overall, though, an interesting look at the "boundary cases" of race for those interested in the Reconstruction and Jim Crow periods of US history.

Julieann Wielga says

A Chosen Exile begins with an excerpt from a poem by Langston Hughes. The poem was written about a Sunday in Harlem: grandma, parents and kids. One has the deep sense that one wants to be there. Then the poem ends with "the one who have crossed the line to downtown miss you, Harlem of the bitter dream, since the dream has come true. That is what this book is about: the large group of people who could "pass" and yet never quite belonged. On page 14, the author, Allyson Hobbs writes succinctly about this: To pass as white meant to lose a sense of embeddedness within. Passing reveals that the essence of identity is not found in an individual's qualities, but rather in the ways that one recognizes oneself and is recognized as kindred. These forms of recognition may begin with superficial markers such as skin color, speech and dress, but those are only indicators of associative relations, ways of being in the world, and an imagined sharing of a common origin and iconic experience."

Now to be politically correct, we glibly say that race is a social construct, but on page 17, more circumspect the author writes: I join scholars who have argued that race is socially constructed and performative, but I keep my eye on what race and racial identity mean to those who are racialized... The line between black and white was by no means imaginary; crossing it had profound, life-changing consequences.

The author follows the sources in a mostly historical time line of countless people who "passed". What it meant to pass at differed at different moments in history. During harder times, it was better to pass. During slavery it was worth one's life to pass. During reconstruction, many mixed race individuals created a new black elite in hopefulness for a permanent future that was a mirage. Astonishingly between 1867 and 1876, in S. Carolina alone of the 487 elected to public office were black. 2000 African Americans held public office. Blanche Bruce was the first Republican Senator who served a full term. The overturning of the Civil Rights act in 1875 and Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 issued in a new era of lost black freedoms.

Post World War One, as the South tightened its control on racial lines, Harken expanded its notions of racial identity and flowered. Post World War 2 brought a second loosening. With the coming of the Civil Rights era passing no longer was a noted phenomena, but the path was ahead was still long. The author ends with "Each generation must navigate the social currents and racial realities of its own making."

Alessandra says

Hobbs does a remarkable job of weaving individual stories of passing (from roughly the early 19th century through to postwar America) into larger historical frames. This is a difficult history to uncover, given that

most people who passed left little to no record of their activity. Beginning with passing in pre-Civil War America, where racially indeterminate Americans passed for white ("the color of freedom"), through to the postwar cry that passing had "passed out," Hobbs charts the myriad motivations behind the decision to pass. Passing points to the subjective, relational nature of race in this country, as Hobbs makes clear. Yet Hobbs is at her best when excavating the emotional costs associated with passing--the anguish of leaving a black family and life to pass as white, the anxiety associated with maintaining a falsehood in a community that might otherwise be openly hostile. Hobbs, with moving prose, reminds us that we cannot understand passing without accounting for both the historic context and the emotional and familial sacrifices.

Vivian says

This is an eye opening book for anyone who is not familiar with "passing". It sheds a light on some mixed race people who chose self-preservation above all else to escape the bondage of slavery or racial discrimination.

It also expresses the complexity of some mixed race people who opted to stay true to their African American bloodlines and the effect this decision had on their lives.

I would recommend this book to anyone that is interested in the subject of "passing".

Ahf says

This was more of a dry academic tome than lets say Dorris Kearns Goodwin writing. I learned a lot, but I can't really recommend it, despite the deep interest the topic holds for me. I particularly liked the discussion of the topic in terms of what was left behind, the loss of culture. It is a backward looking book, not about some march to progress of being more affluent through passing. I liked that focus.

***Dee's Reading Time Matters says**

After Rachel Doležal's race was called into question, this book was a must read for me. Although written in a scholarly fashion, "A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in America" focuses on racial passing in America from the 18th century to present.

Accordingly, Wikipedia denotes racial passing is " when a person classified as a member of one racial group is also accepted as a member of a different racial group. The term was used especially in the United States to describe a person of multiracial ancestry assimilating into the white majority during times when legal and social conventions of hypodescent classified the person as a minority, subject to racial segregation and discrimination."

With loads of painstaking research and a passion for the subject at hand, Allyson Hobbs was able to get her points across while uncovering the detailed cultural histories of Americans of African descent who disconnected all family ties by passing into a society where they would be giving some of the privileges of whites as white. Parts of the cultural histories are morose, while others truly inspiring. This is a candid book well worth it merit!

5 sensitive stars for thought-provoking subject *****

Darlene says

Movies like "Imitation of Life" and "Pinky" opened up a new world to White Americans, the world of African-Americans who were "passing", living as white people and hiding their African roots.

This fascinating history explores 200 years of passing in America, what it meant to the people who made these choices, their families, and to society as a whole. It's a sad and important story that's neglected in American history classes, and Hobbs' excellent book brings these tales to life for a generation that wishes to view itself, and the country, as post-racial.

Mississippi Library Commission says

The cover and the title grabbed our attention and lured us in. *A Chosen Exile* is well researched and provides insight into the myriad of reasons pro and con of passing as white in America. Ms. Hobbs explores the history surrounding this choice, what was gained, and what was lost. Most of all, *A Chosen Exile* explores the psychological and social impact of identity and the personal consequences of denying a part of oneself and the toll that is exacted on the individual, friends, and family. It's a good read!

Anna Amato says

This is book for a person who doesn't have a clue about this history of passing. Having grown up in a small city that was truly bi-racial none of this was a surprise to me, so I just skimmed through it. Fortunately I learned about this early on in my life from people who knew people.

Jeanette says

Good look at the past's color line by law within certain states that caused interfamily turmoil and absurd labeling. Labeling that carried differences to most levels of interactions both within their own families and within the greater society. And the writing style is as good as the research too.

My main reason for reading this though was never really addressed in any category but vaguely. That is for the young person who is NOT passing but who appears White and is rejected by their siblings or extended family because of it. Reading about multiracial ancestry answered some of the issues of perception and self-identity- yet it didn't really focus upon or name this condition that I've come across within my student worker population- twice in severe situations. Once with dire psychological outcome over time. Trying to help her, I think it did help within her college years and with her son's perceptions, but eventually she also relocated and cut many contacts of her origins and immediate family. She never considered herself as passing, but her siblings thought otherwise just from her education and life choices.

So the legacy of labeling can remain still horrendous in some cultural nuance or location, of that I am completely sure. Marrying into another race (not the one self-identified by this birth family) can also intensify the birth family's disdain too for those with mixed race appearance.

It's extremely hard on Black children and young adults who have freckles, green eyes, and Caucasian features who do not want to be anything other than themselves. Even now, it still is. They are sometimes accused of being favorites, having advantages and trying to pass when they are just being themselves.

Adira says

I gave this book 3.5 stars.

Update: *I talked about this book in a video for the **Beyoncé Book Tag** I filmed on my BookTube channel.*

I randomly found this book through an Amazon book search and knew I had to have it immediately. Allyson Hobbs' book looks at the history of racial "passing," which is the shedding of the one's black identity by a racially ambiguous (i.e., light-skin African-American) person lieu of being "white" so that you can better navigate through life during historical times of high racial conflict (i.e., Jim Crow, Restoration, etc.). This book covered the history of passing from American Slavery all the way until the present day.

While it was obvious that Allyson Hobbs did her research to the best of her ability, I did feel that the narrative and points of her thesis were somewhat repetitive in places. Yet, I did give her leeway on some accounts since it is natural that if a black person was constantly in danger of being discovered to be lying about their race in previous times, there is no way to accurately track how many people passed or what their true experiences were so the book itself is built on a uneven cornerstone, but Hobbs makes it work by using well-known political and historical African-American figures and drawing on the works of other sociologist and anthropologist who have studied this same topic. That being said, I thoroughly enjoyed the book in terms of learning about black historical figures I didn't know of before, finding books to read from the ones Hobbs quoted in her research, and just learning about how the psyche of those who passed worked. Yet, I must point out that my mediocre rating of this book is spurred on by the fact that I do think that Hobbs reiterated her points too often and seemed to go in a circular tangent to present the books ideas to readers.

If you enjoyed Isabel Wilkerson's book, The Warmth of Other Suns, you'll more than likely love this book as well since Hobbs' book focuses on the scant few who chose to seek their freedom by going one step further than their brethren who migrated North during the Great Migration.

Emily says

It bothers me that the author would refer to someone who is 1/8th black as an African American. He's a white man who has a great grand parent who is black, or at the very least biracial. It seems like she is continuing the one drop rule of characterizing biracial people by their minority race. How often have we heard Obama be referred to as African American, when he is really only half and that is just as ridiculous as calling him Caucasian, which no one would do. I understand the prejudice/racism that has existed and still exists that has caused biracial people to be treated as the minority race and thus identify as that, but as a country we should aim to move past these strict racial lines, and to change the language we use to describe people. The majority of us are probably mixed to some extent. I'm sure there are many many Americans who identify as white and have ancestors who were Native American or African American.

Whitney says

Very interesting book that covered passing in the US from the 17(?)18th century to the eve of the civil rights era. This was a subject about which I knew almost nothing, and I appreciated learning about the experiences and sacrifices of people who passed.

I only gave three stars because the intro and the first chapter felt like they kept repeating the same ideas over and over -- I wanted to shorten them. I was also disappointed that there were not more stories of those who passed, particularly in the 20th century. The author noted that there was an outpouring of published stories of people who gave up passing in the 1950s, but we only really got one story (although it was an in-depth view).
