

THE BLACK FRIEND

ON BEING A BETTER WHITE PERSON

by **FREDERICK JOSEPH**

ABOUT THE BOOK

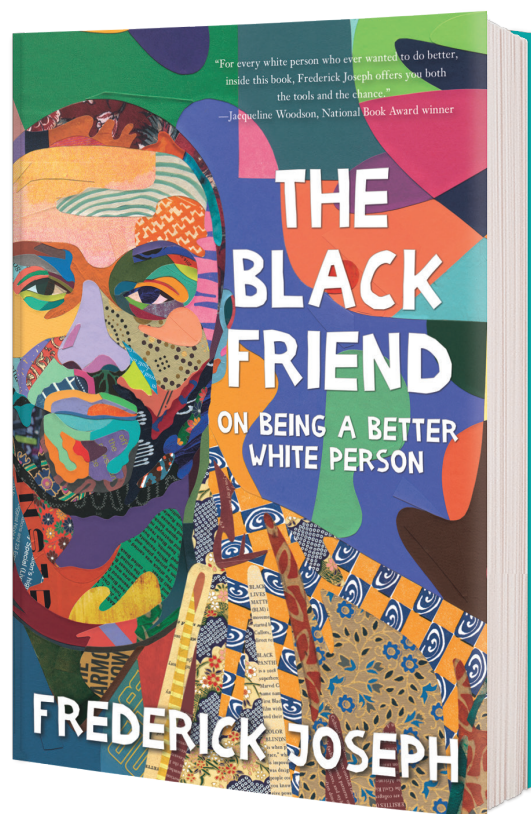
Speaking directly to the reader, *The Black Friend* calls up race-related anecdotes from the author's past, weaving in his thoughts on why they were hurtful and how he might handle things differently now. Each chapter features the voice of at least one artist or activist, including Angie Thomas, author of *The Hate U Give*; April Reign, creator of #OscarsSoWhite; Jemele Hill, sports journalist and podcast host; and eleven others. Touching on everything from cultural appropriation to power dynamics, "reverse racism" to white privilege, microaggressions to the tragic results of overt racism, this book serves as conversation starter, tool kit, and invaluable window into the life of a former "token Black kid" who now presents himself as the friend many readers need. Back matter includes an encyclopedia of racism, providing details on relevant historical events, terminology, and more.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frederick Joseph is an award-winning marketing professional, media representation advocate, and writer who was selected for the 2019 *Forbes* 30

Under 30 list. He's also the winner of the 2018 Bob Clampett Humanitarian Award, given by Comic-Con International: San Diego, and he was selected for the 2018 Root 100, an annual list of the most influential African Americans. He lives in New York City.



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TEACHER PREPARATION

EXCAVATING AND INTERROGATING

In *The Black Friend*, Frederick Joseph writes that the purpose of this book is to help white people actively work to solve “problems created and perpetuated by white people” (p. 2). Therefore, this book doesn’t just benefit white students. It is also beneficial for white educators. In the United States, about 80 percent of educators are white. And with such an overwhelmingly white teaching force, one way that conversations about race and racism are silenced in classrooms is by white teachers’ discomfort. This book is particularly informative for white educators who grew up not having substantive discussions about race and racism at home, in their K–12 schools, and in their teacher education programs, which often position such learning as optional, not required. Before assigning this book to students to read, before engaging in conversations with students about race and racism, consider this book as a precursor to such discussions, especially if you have not participated in professional development or have not read and done extensive work to become racially literate. It is also important to recognize that one book is insufficient and to plan for continued reading and reflection.

As students read this book, they will engage in a process of learning and unlearning about race and racism. It is essential for educators to engage in this process as well and recognize that it is a lifelong journey of excavating, as educator, author, and racial-literacy development expert [Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz](#) describes. To engage in excavating, educators must be willing to recognize and interrogate their own biases. This involves an ongoing process of examining their personal histories in order to develop and deepen their racial consciousness.

RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO THE RACIAL IDENTITIES OF STUDENTS

Another reason that silences about race and racism occur in classrooms is because educators are concerned about how students may experience these discussions. A few common concerns among educators include *What if all of my students are Black and brown? What if all of my students are white? What if there are mostly white students and a few students of color?* Careful consideration of these questions matters, because the racial identities, lived experiences, and well-being of students matter.

Schools have often not been safe places for students of color. From omissions and distortions in curriculum to teaching practices that fail to recognize the humanity of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color (BIPOC), students of color experience educational violence in myriad ways. To avoid this, it is essential for educators to anticipate the ways discussions they facilitate have the potential to cause further harm to BIPOC students through actions and inactions—through their remarks and those of white peers as well as silences in response to racism. Such

consideration should galvanize educators to think beyond intentions and focus instead on the potential impact of this work.

One important step to take prior to, as well as during, reading and discussing *The Black Friend* is deep reflection on this question: *How will I create conditions in my classroom that help me to mitigate the retraumatization of BIPOC students during discussions about race and racism?* Educators can emphasize the importance of white students assuming a listening stance when in interracial dialogue with peers. Educators might engage white students in reflection and discussion of the following: *What does it mean to truly listen? Whose voices do I need to listen to? Whose voices and experiences have been and continue to be silenced?* Taking a listening stance during interracial dialogue can help white students to learn and unlearn about race and racism in ways that position them to be allies and then move beyond this to become accomplices working to disrupt racism.

The following two actions can also support educators in safeguarding the well-being of BIPOC students and creating a community of respect and care for all students.

1. Establishing Community Agreements and Guidelines

Because there has been a legacy of not discussing race and racism in K–12 schooling beyond superficial ways that are often limited to canned narratives, educators can anticipate that they, as well as their students, will benefit from putting supports in place for having challenging and courageous conversations about race.

Establishing community agreements and guidelines is one powerful way to provide such supports as you and students discuss *The Black Friend*. Here are several resources with options for putting these supports in place.

- From Teaching Tolerance: [“Let’s Talk! Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students”](#)
- From Facing History and Ourselves: Tips for developing classroom [contracts and norms](#)
- From the Anti-Defamation League: [“Can We Talk? Tips for Respectful Conversations in Schools, Workplaces, and Communities”](#)

You might decide to co-construct classroom community agreements with your students, reminding them that a shorter and meaningful set of norms will be easier to remember and commit to than a long list of ideas. You might also consider the power and purpose of creating a professional learning community that reads a text like *Courageous Conversations About Race* by Glenn Singleton. A commitment of this nature can help an entire school have productive conversations about race.

2. Creating Affinity Groups

Conversations about race and racism are inherently difficult and emotional. There are times when having interracial discussions is important and beneficial. And there are times when having conversations in an affinity group can make it possible for racialized groups to further their racial awareness and development. An affinity group is a safe space where all participants share a particular identity. Creating affinity groups is a powerful way to provide the kinds of spaces that help students thrive as they discuss the topics raised and experiences shared in *The Black Friend*.

Teaching Tolerance's [Toolkit for Making Space](#) provides further information on creating affinity groups and facilitating these spaces.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

Each chapter of *The Black Friend* provides opportunities for students to self-reflect, engage in discussions with peers, or both.

Reflection questions and activities are designed to help students work on their own racial development and growth by noticing patterns and reflecting on their own lives. Students should not be forced to share their responses with their teachers or peers. In fact, because students will be processing and studying their inner dialogue, which requires honesty as they write about their own truths, sharing these thoughts can be detrimental and cause harm. Provide students with time to respond to reflection work in a journal and be in dialogue with themselves as they process what they're reading.

Discussion questions are invitations for students to talk about an important issue raised in the book with peers and their teachers. Students might engage in discussions with a partner or in small groups. There may also be times when a conversation involving the whole class is preferable. Be sure to remind students of and to review the community agreements established in your classroom prior to these discussions. Making these agreements accessible by posting them in an area of your physical or digital classroom can be a helpful reminder to students about productive ways to talk about race and racism.

PREFACE

Reflection

When was the first time you understood that race matters? Not simply that there are racial differences in terms of skin color, but that something about those differences matters.

INTRODUCTION

Discussion

Who benefits and how from distorted narratives taught about topics such as the first Thanksgiving and Christopher Columbus as well as the silencing and erasure of BIPOC? How does this play a role in conditioning and socializing young people into racism?

CHAPTER 1

We Want You to See Race

Discussion

In what ways have you noticed a color-blind approach taken toward race? Who benefits from color blindness and in what ways? How are BIPOC harmed when white people suggest it's better to be color-blind?

CHAPTER 2

We Can Enjoy Ed Sheeran, BTS, and Cardi B

Reflection

Identifying patterns connected to race is an important process of becoming racially conscious. Consider how you might respond to the following questions:

- How racially diverse is your neighborhood?
- How racially diverse is your school?
- How often have you had a teacher of the same race(s) as yourself?
- Do you have friends from a variety of racial groups?

What racial patterns are you able to recognize in your own life? What can you do to disrupt a pattern that reveals a lack of inclusivity?

Discussion

Identifying patterns connected to race in institutions such as education, media, health care, jobs, and housing can help you to understand how systemic racism works. Explore movements that leverage social media to promote activism, such as #OscarsSoWhite, #RepresentationMatters, #BlackLivesMatter, #ownvoices, and #weneeddiversebooks. How do they work to disrupt racism and bring awareness to the importance of inclusivity? How can you use your power and influence to advance the work of anti-racism?

CHAPTER 3

Certain Things Are Racist, Even If You Don't Know It

Reflection

Joseph writes, “We all live in some sort of bubble, whether of race, gender, sexuality, religion, or other aspects of our identities or lived experience” (p. 73). Reflect on this as you respond to the following.

WHO'S IN YOUR BUBBLE?

Name the last three . . .

- friends you spent time/communicated with
- movies/television shows you've watched
- books you've read
- albums you've downloaded/listened to

How inclusive or exclusive is your bubble? What steps can you take to be more inclusive?

Discussion

How and when can bubbles be dangerous? How and when can they be restorative?

CHAPTER 4

You Could at Least Try to Pronounce My Name Correctly

Reflection

Joseph defines white standards as the “beauty and cultural norms typically associated with white people” (p. 236), and he describes the ways all racial and cultural groups are expected to aspire to these standards. The National Museum of African American History and Culture defines whiteness as “the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared.” Learn more about whiteness, white privilege, white supremacy, and internalized racism on the [NMAAHC website](#).

Discussion

In what ways does whiteness show up in school and in other parts of your life? Consider:

- books/texts read
- curriculum
- school structures (schedules, assemblies, honors classes, etc.)
- procedures and routines

How is disrupting whiteness essential to dismantling racism?

CHAPTER 5

This Isn't a Fad; This Is My Culture

Reflection

Joseph shares an experience that demonstrates how, for many people, Halloween can be a real-life nightmare due to the racist actions of others. Racist costumes and behavior lead to desensitization and dehumanization. Where have you witnessed instances of cultural appropriation in your life?

Discussion

What distinctions can you make between cultural exchange, cultural appreciation, and cultural appropriation? Give an example of each. You might consider examples from your lived experiences, the media, and school. How might Joseph's tips on pages 107 and 108 help you to live your life differently?

CHAPTER 6

So Your Friend Is Racist. What Should You Do?

Reflection

Joseph writes, "Some people think they can be an ally while also letting the people close to them continue to be comfortable in their racism" (p. 120). Do you think it's truly possible to be an anti-racist *and* associate with racist people? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 7

No, You Can't. No, You Shouldn't. And Don't Ask That.

Reflection

Joseph writes, "Having the ability to survive without having to know or develop a level of respect for groups of people is part of the legacy of American racism and white privilege." In what ways might you interrupt this pattern in your own life?

Discussion

There has been a legacy of whiteness being used as a weapon against Black people in the United States. Amy Cooper's false accusation of Black birdwatcher Christian Cooper is one example of this. In what ways have Black people had to navigate and work to safeguard themselves from white privilege and the power white people hold within the justice system?

CHAPTER 8

No, I Didn't Get Here by Affirmative Action (And If I Did, So What?)

Reflection

Joseph writes, “We live in a country founded on land stolen from Native Americans and built by people stolen from Africa. A country that claims the value of ‘liberty and justice for all.’ But until ‘all’ stops being ‘some,’ the least America can do is have programs in place to give people a chance to make a shot” (p. 159). Slavery and continued racism have had a long-lasting effect on the economic status of Black people in the United States, while white people have had hundreds of years of a head start to accumulate and benefit from generational wealth and economic opportunities. Evidence that Black people have not had equal opportunity in employment is apparent in every institution of society. Why, then, do you think there is such pushback against programs like affirmative action?

Discussion

Joseph writes, “There are more white women and poor white people in America than there are Black or brown people combined, so these programs serve a great number of white people. Yet many white people who oppose the programs or use them as an example of a handout act as if only people of color are benefiting” (pp. 156–157). Who benefits and how from the false narratives told affirmative action and welfare programs?

CHAPTER 9

Let's Not Do Oppression Olympics

Reflection

When BIPOC speak about racism they've experienced, there can be a tendency for some white listeners to become defensive and conflate their own experiences. “All Lives Matter” is one example of this that Joseph shares. Consider why this is offensive. What does it mean to truly listen and learn during discussions about race and racism?

Discussion

Joseph explains, “Racism and racist systems in America *don't* adversely impact white people. This is because all aspects of racism in America are rooted in white supremacy and are designed to negatively impact everyone *except* white people” (p. 169). What, then, do you think is really behind the claim of reverse racism?

CHAPTER 10

We Don't Care What Your Black, Brown, or Asian Friend Said Was Okay (F.U.B.U.)

Reflection

Joseph writes, “It’s not just about disrespecting clothes or saying words that have a history of a community’s pain and struggle. Sometimes ‘some sh*t is for us’ is simply about reflecting, celebrating, hurting, and understanding staying within a community. Because not everything is meant to be shared, especially when some cultures haven’t even received the benefit or profits from their culture, while others have” (p. 186). What will it mean for you to know and appreciate that not everything is for you when it comes to cultures that are not your own? In what ways might you demonstrate this understanding in your life?

Discussion

Joseph helps readers to reflect on the importance of storytelling and how it can change the perspectives of young white people reading *The Black Friend*. What does it mean for white people to engage with stories that are not their own and to understand that they are not for them? What would reading and treating those stories with love and care involve? How is this different from what has typically occurred in the United States?

IN THE END

We Don't Need Allies: We Need Accomplices

Reflection

How do you define and differentiate between ally and accomplice? Where might you locate yourself on this continuum? Which actions of yours support this? What might you do to move from one level to the next?

Discussion

At the beginning of *The Black Friend*, Joseph defines anti-racists as “people who understand that white supremacy isn’t something to empathize with Black and brown people over. It’s a destructive system and existence that white people created, and anti-racists are actively trying to end it” (p. 3).

Why is allyship insufficient in the work of anti-racism? Now that you’ve read *The Black Friend*, what is something you’ve learned or unlearned about race, racism, and being anti-racist? In what ways will you commit and carry this with you? How will this help you to show up differently in the world?

FURTHER LISTENING, LEARNING, AND UNLEARNING

Dive into these digital resources to deepen your understanding of topics raised in *The Black Friend*.

Ally vs. Co-conspirator

[The Schomburg Center on Twitter: Dr. Bettina Love](#)

Color Blindness

[“Color Blind or Color Brave?” A TED Talk by Mellody Hobson](#)

Cultural Appropriation

[“7 Myths about Cultural Appropriation DEBUNKED!” from Decoded via MTV News](#)

Microaggressions and “The Talk”

[“The Talk”](#)

[“You Love Me”](#)

Racial Literacy

[“High School Students Write Racial Literacy Textbook” via Teen Vogue](#)

[“What It Takes to Be Racially Literate”: A TED Talk by Priya Vulchi and Winona Guo](#)

Social Media Movements and Hashtag Activism

[13 Twitter Hashtags That Made Identity Part of Everyone’s Conversation” via Mic](#)

This guide was prepared by Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul, an educator and author and the cofounder of the Institute for Racial Equity in Literacy. She is the Director of Diversity and Equity at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University. As a former middle school English teacher, she developed curriculum that centered the work of racial literacy in K–12 schools. She leads presentations at educational conferences and works with educators around the world providing professional development on anti-racist reading and writing instruction.

