

Critical Book Review Examples

Title of the book: So you want to talk about race

Author: Ijeoma Oluo

Straight talk to blacks and whites about the realities of racism.

In her feisty debut book, Oluo, essayist, blogger, and editor at large at the Establishment magazine, writes from the perspective of a black, queer, middle-class, college-educated woman living in a “white supremacist country.” The daughter of a white single mother, brought up in largely white Seattle, she sees race as “one of the most defining forces” in her life. Throughout the book, Oluo responds to questions that she has often been asked, and others that she wishes were asked, about racism “in our workplace, our government, our homes, and ourselves.” “Is it really about race?” she is asked by whites who insist that class is a greater source of oppression. “Is police brutality really about race?” “What is cultural appropriation?” and “What is the model minority myth?” Her sharp, no-nonsense answers include talking points for both blacks and whites. She explains, for example, “when somebody asks you to ‘check your privilege’ they are asking you to pause and consider how the advantages you’ve had in life are contributing to your opinions and actions, and how the lack of disadvantages in certain areas is keeping you from fully understanding the struggles others are facing.” She unpacks the complicated term “intersectionality”: the idea that social justice must consider “a myriad of identities—our gender, class, race, sexuality, and so much more—that inform our experiences in life.” She asks whites to realize that when people of color talk about systemic racism, “they are opening up all of that pain and fear and anger to you” and are asking that they be heard. After devoting most of the book to talking, Oluo finishes with a chapter on action and its urgency. Action includes pressing for reform in schools, unions, and local governments; boycotting businesses that exploit people of color; contributing money to social justice organizations; and, most of all, voting for candidates who make “diversity, inclusion and racial justice a priority.”

A clear and candid contribution to an essential conversation.

Title of the book: Behind the Beautiful Forevers

Author: Katherine Boo

In her debut, Pulitzer Prize–winning New Yorker staff writer Boo creates an intimate, unforgettable portrait of India’s urban poor.

Mumbai’s sparkling new airport and surrounding luxury hotels welcome visitors to the globalized, privatized, competitive India. Across the highway, on top of tons of garbage and next to a vast pool of sewage, lies the slum of Annawadi, one of many such places that house the millions of poor of Mumbai. For more than three years, Boo lived among and learned from the residents, observing their struggles and quarrels, listening to their dreams and despair, recording it all. She came away with a detailed portrait of individuals daring to aspire but too often denied a chance—their lives viewed as an embarrassment to the modernized wealthy. The author poignantly details these many lives: Abdul, a quiet buyer of recyclable trash who wished for nothing more than what he had; Zehrunisa, Abdul’s mother, a Muslim matriarch among hostile Hindu neighbors; Asha, the ambitious slum leader who used her connections and body in a vain attempt to escape from Annawadi; Manju, her beautiful, intelligent daughter whose hopes lay in

the new India of opportunity; Sunil, the master scavenger, a little boy who would not grow; Meena, who drank rat poison rather than become a teenage bride in a remote village; Kalu, the charming garbage thief who was murdered and left by the side of the road. Boo brilliantly brings to life the residents of Annawadi, allowing the reader to know them and admire the fierce intelligence that allows them to survive in a world not made for them.

The best book yet written on India in the throes of a brutal transition.