



Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word

Randall Kennedy

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It's "the nuclear bomb of racial epithets," a word that whites have employed to wound and degrade African Americans for three centuries. Paradoxically, among many black people it has become a term of affection and even empowerment. The word, of course, is *nigger*, and in this candid, lucidly argued book the distinguished legal scholar Randall Kennedy traces its origins, maps its multifarious connotations, and explores the controversies that rage around it.

Should blacks be able to use *nigger* in ways forbidden to others? Should the law treat it as a provocation that reduces the culpability of those who respond to it violently? Should it cost a person his job, or a book like **Huckleberry Finn** its place on library shelves? With a range of reference that extends from the Jim Crow south to Chris Rock routines and the O. J. Simpson trial, Kennedy takes on not just a word, but our laws, attitudes, and culture with bracing courage and intelligence.

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Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word Details

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From Reader Review Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word for online ebook

Lance Eaton says

Kennedy's book is a fascinating look at the tricky and curious understanding of an infamous word. What is so strong about this book is that it traces out the word's complexity and provides a clear understanding that it is not a fixed word and yet there are core elements to it. Language is tricky and language that is deeply rooted in human degradation is even more challenging. He looks at the cultural and legal history of the word while also identifying the ways that both African Americans and non-African Americans use the word in modern times. It was clear prior to this book why it is such a powerful and troubling word, but now, I find myself with a richer understanding of how it happens and why it will be a long time before we have unpacked all the elements that comes with using the word.

If you enjoyed this review, feel free to check out my other reviews and writings at **By Any Other Nerd** /

MLB says

This book caught my eye again after the recent NAACP funeral for the euphemistic "N-word." I think they're ridiculous -- nigger is alive and well!

A WORD is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.
Emily Dickinson

Kennedy is obviously a law professor, drawing upon a plethora of legal cases to illustrate the history of the use, misuse and abuse of the word. He does a yeoman's job and, I think, rightly concludes that those who would eliminate the word are wrong.

I read with interest his elucidation of the brouhaha over the word "niggardly." Then I looked up the controversy on the internet:

On January 15, 1999, David Howard, a white aide to Anthony A. Williams, the black mayor of Washington, D.C., United States, used the word in reference to a budget. This apparently upset one of his black colleagues (identified by Howard as Marshall Brown)[no relation, I'm sure], who incorrectly interpreted it as a racial slur and lodged a complaint. As a result, on January 25 Howard tendered his resignation, and Williams accepted it.

* * *

Julian Bond, then chairman of the NAACP, deplored the offense that had been taken at Howard's use of the word. "You hate to think you have to censor your language to meet other people's lack of understanding", he said. "David Howard should not have quit. Mayor Williams should bring him back — and order dictionaries issued to all staff who need them."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controve...>

Those people who needed the dictionaries are the same kind of people who were in Hart Plaza the other day burying the word and missing the point. I mourn for them.

Sebastien says

I first heard about this book through an episode of Boston Public I watched when I was still in secondary school. A white English literature teacher, if I remember correctly, decided to have his students read this book. It was a controversial episode and I meant to read this book some day, and I finally did nearly 15 years later.

Having taught black students in a country where the word wasn't thought of as offensive, students laughed at my reaction to it being said. No matter how much I tried to explain it to them, I could never really show how powerful this word is. I wish I had had this book with me back then.

The word is so powerful that, as Randall Kennedy showcases, one can get fired from a job for saying it in a non-racist context - which incidentally is the reason why I'm not writing it here. Kennedy himself was blasted by his peers as a racial traitor for writing this book.

I expected this book to be pure sociology, and it sort of is, but at times it read as a criminal law case book, which isn't too surprising considering Kennedy taught law at Harvard. Kennedy goes over pertinent hate speech cases in the United States that spring up (and sprung up) a lot of debate. For example, is it ethical or reasonable to acquit someone of a crime if the word was used against them before the crime was committed? Many judges would say so and many others would disagree.

It was good and not very long. Read it.

Scott Rhee says

It is, inarguably, the most loathsome word in the English language. It has cost people jobs, sparked murders, and has been used to denigrate and oppress an entire race of people. Just seeing the word in print is enough to spark outrage in some people. Indeed, I am sure that some people will see the title of this book and refuse to even consider that it may contain anything of merit. How could it, after all, with a title like "Nigger"?

Randall Kennedy, a legal expert and a Harvard professor, wrote this book in 2002. He confronts the word, in all its permutations, head-on in a short (176 pages) but engaging book about the etymology, historical definitions, legal ramifications, and negative and positive uses of the word "nigger". If one's sensibilities can allow one to get the past the ugly little word in the title, "Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome

Word” is actually a fascinating and educational read.

The word derives from the Latin word for “black”, niger. No one can adequately determine when or why Europeans started using it to designate dark-skinned Africans, but it became a popular and widespread term. Various spellings of the word (nigger, negar, neger) have been found in countless documents, but at some point the familiar spelling, nigger, became the acceptable spelling.

Historically, the word started out not as a derogatory term but simply a way to distinguish race, in the same way the words “Jew” or “Oriental” were used. Over time, the word gradually took on negative connotations, and by the 1800s, it was commonly used as an insult.

Here, in the United States, the word “nigger” quickly established itself as a highly-charged derogatory term, tied inextricably with the institution of slavery. “Nigger” was a word used by whites to keep blacks “in their place”, which was, more often than not, submissive, quiet, and completely obedient. Blacks who were not submissive, talked back, or disobeyed orders were labelled “uppity niggers” and were severely punished.

Even after the Civil War and through the Civil Rights Movement---and even to the present-day---the word has been a tool by racists and white supremacists as a way to continue to denigrate and dismiss black people and their contributions to society.

Strangely enough, though, the word has also been re-purposed, according to Kennedy, within the black community---especially young men and women---to be a term of empowerment. “My nigger” is often used as an expression of inclusion and acceptance among young black men and women, usually but not necessarily always within the context of gang camaraderie.

Legal Issues

A majority of Kennedy’s book is devoted to the legal uses and ramifications of the word. He talks about four specific types of litigation in which the word “nigger” has played a role.

The first type involves cases “in which a party seeks relief after it is revealed that officials within the criminal justice system---jurors, lawyers, or judges---have referred to blacks as niggers. (p.58)”

Kennedy admits that these cases are difficult to prosecute, primarily due to the federal protections given to jurors, judges, and lawyers, although there have been a few cases that it has been attempted. In one famous case, a district attorney was removed from his position by a judge after an altercation with a black man, who sued him for calling him a “nigger”. The DA appealed, but the Supreme Court upheld the decision, saying that his was a “classic” case of the fighting-words doctrine of the First Amendment, which allowed certain words, based on the context, to go unprotected, owing to the fact that the words were used to induce violence.

Interestingly, Kennedy agrees with the court’s ruling, but he criticizes the fighting words doctrine as sometimes enabling people to avoid showing self-restraint in situations in which people are confronted with violence-inducing insults. He writes, “[L]egal authority instructs everyone to exercise self-discipline even in the face of inflammatory taunts. The fighting words doctrine weakens that salutary message. (p.69)”

The second type “encompasses cases in which an individual who kills another seeks to have his culpability diminished on the grounds that he was provoked when the other party called him a nigger. (p. 58)”

It is, according to Kennedy, unlikely that a judge or jury would reduce a person’s punishment based on the provocation of the racially-charged word, but it is not impossible. He notes that some states allow juries to consider the provocation excuse as a basis for their judgment.

Again, Kennedy states that there are worthy arguments against this provocation excuse, chief among them is the fact that millions of black people have endured being called “nigger” without being induced or provoked to murder. To use the provocation excuse, some argue, would be an implicit acceptance of the racist notion that black people have no self-control and are easily induced to violence.

The third type “involves controversies surrounding targets of racial invective who sue for damages under tort law or antidiscrimination statutes. (p.58)”

Kennedy cites two well-known cases as examples of this. One case, *Nims v. Harrison*, involved a black schoolteacher who sued several graduating seniors for racist and hateful comments published in a newsletter about her. Some of the comments called her a “stupid bitch”, a “fucking whore”, and a “gigaboo [sic]”. Others included threats of rape and murder, and one simply said, “Die nigger”. She won the case in appellate court, only after her case was initially dismissed by a judge in trial court.

The fourth type “consists of situations in which a judge must decide whether or not to permit jurors to be told about the linguistic habits of witnesses or litigants. (p.58)”

The most famous example of this type was during the O.J. Simpson trial. L.A.P.D. homicide detective Mark Fuhrman had a reputation for loosely using the word “nigger” in casual references to black people. Prosecution asked Judge Lance Ito to prevent the defense from asking questions about Fuhrman’s history and past use of the word “nigger”, claiming that it would clearly hurt their case. Judge Ito allowed the defense to question Fuhrman. When asked if he ever used the word in his everyday speech, Fuhrman vehemently denied ever using the word. Months later, of course, audiotape was presented in which Fuhrman was caught repeatedly using the word. The prosecution was right: it hurt their case. Simpson was acquitted.

Nigger v. Niggardly: Is it possible to be racially oversensitive?

Thankfully, the use of the word “nigger” as an insult is on the wane, but it has raised many new questions on how to best combat racism. Can people be too sensitive when it comes to hearing the word? Is a zero-tolerance policy acceptable? How do you explain predominantly black genres of music such as hip-hop, in which black rappers repeatedly use the word?

Kennedy touches on some of these issues at length. He writes that, with progress, problems have arisen in regards to how people overreact to the word. There are, according to him, four major ways that people can overreact and/or negatively capitalize on racial sensitivity.

One way is through unjustified deception. Kennedy cites several case examples in which people have falsely claimed to be the victims of racism in order to receive attention or some kind of gain, financial or otherwise. For example, in 1995, a black woman and her white boyfriend claimed to be the victims of racism. Someone had vandalized their apartment building by spraying hateful messages (“Niggers live here”) on their walls. It was later proven that they, themselves, had graffitied their own apartment building in order to escape lease payments.

A second way is through overeagerness to detect insult. The more well-known example of this is David Howard, a Washington, D.C. city employee who was fired for using the word “niggardly”, a completely innocuous word meaning “miserly or frugal” and nothing whatsoever to do with the word “nigger”. Regardless of this fact, several black employees took offense to it. In the end, Howard was forced to resign.

A third way is an attempt to repress “good” uses of the word “nigger”; for example, the repeated attempts by parents across the country who, yearly, petition to have Mark Twain’s classic novel “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” removed from school reading lists and library book shelves. More often than not, these people have labelled the book “racist” without actually having read it. This is a sore subject for me, as “Huck Finn” is one of my favorite novels of all time. It is absolutely NOT racist, and it is, in fact, Twain’s

excoriation of racism, especially in regards to Southern society.

The fourth way is overly harsh punishment of those who use the word indiscreetly. Kennedy looks at two types of this kind of overreaction: regulationist and eradicationists.

Regulationists are those who would institute policies and create more laws that would prevent a problem that isn't really a problem. As an example, Kennedy cited a college that instituted a zero-tolerance policy of the use of the N-word after an isolated incident involving a stupid and misguided student prank. The policy has never been taken to task, namely because the problem of the overuse of the N-word on campus was never an issue before or after the incident.

Eradicationists are simply those who believe that all uses of the n-word are wrong and should be punished. These types of people would call for the publishers of Kennedy's book to be fired and that the book should be immediately removed from shelves, regardless of the content. Thusly, my review would probably be attacked for its flagrant use of the word throughout, and they would probably attempt to petition Goodreads to have me removed from the site.

In the end, Kennedy admits that the word "nigger" is a conundrum, a word which no one can adequately tame or control. It is, he writes, "destined to remain with us for many years to come---a reminder of the ironies and dilemmas, the tragedies and glories, of the American experience. (p.176)"

Jakub says

I started reading this book while cleaning out my house. I was captured by the title and the fact that the authors name is Kennedy, I assumed it was the president. False. When I started reading the book, however, I was quickly pulled into it and finished this Sunday when I was home alone sick. Very rewarding.

This book takes a look at the word nigger from its inception to its many uses throughout history to the present day. This book does a really good job presenting the word from multiple angles. Some people think that it is the worst word in the world and others use it daily and causally. I found this book especially instructional and interesting since at Music Changing Lives where I work, being called nigger is not too uncommon, which I found very interesting, especially when directed toward me. (I must admit that I found some pleasure in being referred to in this way as it made me feel accepted by the kids on a deeper level.)

This book has countless examples of famous people who were either affected by the word nigger and political figures who have publicly used this work. These sections are written very much in a research paper style as the author is a professor and lawyer, but he still managed to be very engaging. It also references books and movies and songs in history that have been famous for using the N-work. I would now really like to read these books, listen to these songs, and watch these movies having a new understanding of the word and how it is intentionally used for both "good" and "evil."

Over all I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who is at all interested in race and ethnic studies or is interested in language in any way.

Morgan Dhu says

Randall Kennedy (an African-American professor at Harvard Law School who specialises in, among other

things, race relations law) has written a very interesting book about the word that no white person can say without risking denunciation as a racist of the very worst kind - even though, as Kennedy notes in the book, racism can do as much, or more harm, when clothed in polite condescension or specious arguments pretending to quote scientific or historical "fact" as it can when broadcast through an aggressively abusive epithet.

He examines the range of cultural meanings of the word, depending on who is using it, and when, and to whom, and for what purpose, the legal ramifications of using it in various circumstances, and shares his own opinions on the question of whether a white person can use the word in a non-racist way.

My only complaint is that I wanted more discussion of all of these things.... The book seemed too brief to adequately examine the vast impact of the word it tries to look at.

Andy Nguyen says

Because half-star rating is not allowed, I gave this book 4 stars whereas I would rate this three-and-a-half. "Nigger" is an informative book: it tells the many outrageous stories that African Americans have suffered from racial slurs, in which the n-word plays a central point. The stories, many of them happened not so long ago, serve as a good reminder to non-black audience why their black friends react the way they do to the n-word. Given his legal background, Kennedy also writes extensively about the way the n-word has been used in courts. While this may be interesting to some people (myself included), his over-emphasis on the legal front, especially his use of many legal jargons (probative vs. prejudicial evidence, predicate, evidentiary, etc.), can put off a lot of readers, who may want to learn more about the cultural and historical evolution of the term. Kennedy does touch on some philosophical and moral underpinnings of the various camps with regard to the use of the n-word, but his observations and arguments, though insightful, are too brief and cursory to be satisfying.

Talking about the n-word debate, Kennedy is quite even-handed. On one hand he reserves his harshest judgement to those who use the n-word as insult, and as he clearly states, he believes "people who use nigger in their speech should bear the risk that listeners overhearing them will misunderstand their intentions." On the other hand he cautions against the excessive regulations and even eradication of the n-word in American's vernacular, with example ranging from ambiguous to absurd. He believes the n-word is not and should not be bound in its conventional use as an insult, but instead a multi-faceted and fluid term that has vastly different meanings in different contexts. Thus, Kennedy is hardly a politically-correct word police, nor a white apologist so many critics have painted him, many of whom, I suspect, have not even read the book in the first place.

In short, Nigger is a good read, especially if you want a brief introduction to the controversies surrounding it. My reasons for not rating the book higher is mentioned above: there's too little discussion about the historical and cultural aspects of the word, especially in how no whites are comfortable or advised to use the word, even in ways that are affectionate and admiring. Another reason is his prose, those well-written, is not particularly sharp nor eloquent, and the arguments tend to get repeated towards the end of the book.

Chris says

I read this book while I was teaching in the Bronx and I remember becoming incredibly interested in the use of the word. For some time, I had been discouraging (ie. banning) its use in the classroom, but I had to

question my reasons for doing so a little more after reading this. It sparked off a project that I did with my students to try and assess people's comfort level with language, and come to a consensus about what we were okay with.

I have to say, though, reading this book on the subway while riding the 5 train through the South Bronx did make me uncomfortable.

Chris says

I found the first part of this book very depressing as it presented account after account, some quite recent, of the use of "nigger" to defame a people.

Originally, in the sentence above, I was going "to denigrate a people". I looked up the origins of "denigrate" and found its roots in Latin, "nigrare", niger".

It is directly related to the "nuclear bomb of racial epithets". I use "denigrate", or used to use it, all the time. I don't think "denigrate" has received the same censure that other words suspected of carrying intolerance and provocation have.

The author, Randall Kennedy writes of an instance where the use of the word "niggardly" provokes outrage and censure. That word only looks and sounds similar to "nigger", the roots and meaning are different. I think the point of the book is the word exists and has a history. We can't use language without bearing a responsibility for its meaning and history and concern for how it will effect the people who hear us.

Kennedy writes about one word, but we could probably use a book on other words, perhaps every word so we could communicate more clearly.

I found the second half of the book more useful as Kennedy focussed on legal aspects of "nigger", its use, effects, and responses to its use.

Kennedy also discusses the debate regarding the use of "nigger" within the African-American population. There is a wide range of opinions.

I originally picked up this book because I noticed that my nephew, white and suburban, on his facebook page, was referring to himself and his mostly white skinned friends as "niggas". Kennedy doesn't say much about this trend, only that it is the influence and attractive character of popular rappers and hip-hop artists.

So, I found the book depressing for its chronicle of human ignorance and the slow, uneven pace of evolution. I found it enlightening for its discussion of the many nuances this word and its use.

Emily Koopmann says

A book you're embarrassed to read in public:

What could someone infer about me should they see me on a city bus reading a book with this title? Even as I write this review I'm trying to avoid referencing the title because I don't want to write out the word and I don't want to soften the intentions of the author in using it so brashly as the title.

I would be interested in hearing from the black community their thoughts on the book. I agree with the sentiment Kennedy writes in the afterword about one of the most critiqued parts of the book being, "...what some see as an egregious toleration for the intolerable." At one point he was defending white people who had

used the word and I found myself vehemently shaking my head and mouthing, "No thank you sir."

I imagine this book (and other narratives) will serve me well as I walk with my biracial son through his grappling with a word that splits his DNA and cultural history right down the middle.

Dylan says

"Nigger" is one of the most interesting words in our society, so fraught with controversy that simply saying it out loud could get you killed in the right context. The labyrinthine societal rules surrounding "nigger" have always confused and frustrated me. When is it socially-acceptable to use "nigger"? Black people can use it as they please; white people certainly can't use it as an insult, but what about in other circumstances? Can I say it when talking about the word itself? What about satirically? What about when repeating something someone else said? Can I even write "nigger" in this review or should I always opt for that euphemism, the "n-word"? White people are generally not supposed to say it, but what about Asians and South Americans, whom don't have the same history of abuse whites have had with blacks? Why is "nigger" any worse than "chink", "spic", "wop", "wetback" or "Indian"?

Randall Kennedy is someone who has grappled with similar quandaries, and as a black man, has experienced what it's like to be on the receiving end of such a hateful word. As author of *"Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word"*, Kennedy explores the history of the "n-word" and the various controversies involving it. Kennedy does a great job of framing the various debates surrounding the word and providing a context for the word, using his own childhood experiences to demonstrate the hurtfulness and maliciousness of the "n-word". It was a dehumanizing word – which I'm sure most non-black people already understand on some level, but which is really made more palpable through Kennedy's extensive accounts and case studies, particularly those of small children on the receiving end.

However, while Kennedy explores the many questions surrounding the word, he rarely comes up with many satisfying answers. The conclusions Kennedy reaches are mostly reasonable, but aren't particularly well thought-out, consistent or realistic. Kennedy supports instances where white people use the "n-word" in educational settings, but then goes as far as to suggest the "n-word" should be a mitigating factor in cases of murder. As offensive as any word is, it should never lessen the severity of retaliatory violent crime. He also justifies his use of *"Nigger"* as the title for the book by saying he knew it would generate controversy and increase his sales, which isn't much of a moral justification at all. Most of the time I agreed with his conclusions – he believes that you cannot eradicate a word and that the offensiveness of the word depends on the context it is used in – but they simply appear as single-sentence afterthoughts following pages upon pages of case studies.

Kennedy does a great job of framing the debate – he does a worse job of coming up with answers. *"Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word"* is more of a collection of case studies than an extensive analysis and Kennedy's approach is often problematic in itself. Ultimately I feel like Kennedy misses the mark by going with the assumption that the "n-word" has some sort of inherent power above that of other derogatory and demeaning language. Is saying the "n-word" really worse than something like denying the holocaust? Why does the former cause so much public uproar while the latter is typically simply dismissed without much fanfare? In the end, all the rules and debates and stigmatization surrounding the word – which Kennedy's book feeds into – may be what lend the word its immense power and continued use. Maybe the best way to end this hateful word is to simply ignore it.

Books Ring Mah Bell says

If you happen to have a book club with balls, I'd like to suggest this book for your next read.

This slim volume is filled with the controversy surrounding the use of the word n... uh, you know. THAT word. I'd say it, but, I believe the word was buried a few years ago. (WHOA. Found this article while searching for pictures for the N word funeral. The article alone needs its own review: <http://www.nathanielturner.com/justan...>)

Here they are having a funeral for the word:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwMwpl...>

Yeah. That worked.

Back to the book.

After giving the reader the grim history of the word, the author gets into current use and abuse of it. Let's face it, the word packs a powerful punch. (as do other words considered "hate" speech: fag, queer, retard,

When is a word just a word? Why is it okay for some people to say it and not others? Or is it never okay?

Thousands of court cases revolve around that word. It is used to intimidate, discriminate, and cheat the system.

Many of the court cases were compelling. In one instance, a high school teacher was the topic of an informal student "newsletter", stating the teacher in question was a "dumb black bitch" and that her children should be raped and the article ended with an eloquent, "die, nigger". Wow. So the teacher took the writer of said article to court and initially the court threw it out, stating the case did not meet the level of obnoxiousness (!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!) and was not threatening enough. (!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!) It was appealed and she later won her case.

Another court case was about an interracial couple who tried to say they were being threatened. Their property was vandalized and there were racial slurs included in the vandalism. Turns out they were looking for cash and had done the damage themselves. Playing the victim of racial intimidation/violence trying to get a damned free ride, a handout, some sort of settlement. Assholes.

I believe they should be executed.

Is that harsh? At the very least there should be some sort of hellish island where we can ship these dillholes. (along with pedophile priests.)

After the legal stuff, we get into the use of the word for entertainment purposes. For example, people have been frothing at the mouth over Huck Finn for years. Never you mind that the use of the word fits in with the period of time in which the story takes place. No, dear god, that would require a few things that are lacking in this world, some brains (think about the context) and some common sense. (Will reading Huck Finn turn our kids into KKK members?)

Let us not forget the brewhaha caused by David Howard's use of the word Niggardly. Let us sue the makers of flame retardant fabrics, because the word sounds like retard and that is hurtful and insulting.

Look, I think the world has become overly sensitive. We have become ninnies about a lot of things. We are way too p.c. (I think my breaking point came several years ago when Katie Couric was commenting on a

snowy scene in New York and she stated, "Look at the children building snowpeople!" SNOWPEOPLE?!?! SHUT UP, TWAT!)

But the N word... There is so much hatred, violence, and horrid history tied to it, I can't really say that its use, particularly by us white folk, is ever okay.

What remains unclear is... can I laugh at this:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcZ9ku...>

Or does that make me Trent Lott?

I'd also like to mention that white guilt is really nagging at me for not giving this book 5 stars.

:(

Wendell says

If the question is scholarship and clarity, no fault can be found with Randall Kennedy's *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. And if that is so, what makes Kennedy's book so ultimately unsatisfying? Perhaps it is the sense that Kennedy, who is eternally fair-minded (at times, perhaps, even to a fault), never quite seems to get his arms entirely around his topic. Indeed, if Kennedy is always rational in pronouncing his phlegmatic judgments on various famous and infamous uses of the "troublesome" word, the fact is that his reasons for considering one episode defensible and identifying another as certifiably hateful and racist are not entirely coherent. To say it another way, if the reader were to ask Kennedy to define when, by whom, and under what circumstances "nigger" can be deployed legitimately, it is doubtful that he could express a practical philosophy, even in the broadest of terms. Or to put the matter in still other words, Kennedy is just like many of the rest of us: appalled by the use of the word in contexts in which it is clearly intended to injure, more than occasionally troubled by its prevalence in everyday discourse, ambivalent about its modern-day dispersal as a (quite literal) shibboleth, and intellectually muddled over how to confront the word in its undeniable position as both linguistic fingerprint and American literary instrument. But if that is the case, what purpose does Kennedy's book actually serve? Those who have spent any time at all thinking about the word and its uses (and, by extension, about American-style racism) won't find, in *Nigger*, much they didn't already know; those who haven't considered the topic are unlikely to read such a book; and those looking for legitimation and permission (it is, after all, a black man saying that even white people sometimes have the right to say "nigger") will go away with their oversimplifications intact. In fairness to Kennedy and his obvious gravitas, perhaps we are meant to content ourselves with just what his subtitle—*The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*—suggests: a linguistic-historical review. The major disappointment of *Nigger*, however, is that, having spent 200 pages laying the perfect groundwork from which to launch a potentially enlightening discussion, Kennedy closes the book. One suspects that a writer and thinker with Kennedy's clear admiration for scholarly exactitude might have provided both significant insight and indispensable reflection on the matter, but he rarely goes beneath the surface. We cannot know whether Kennedy's courage failed him or whether he simply lost interest in the subject, but *Nigger* is one of those cases in which the reader has every right to regret the book that wasn't written.

Brenda H says

Though I don't read much non-fiction nowadays, I put this book on my TBR a few years ago after reading several positive reviews. And, I am glad I did.

The author, Randall Kennedy, explores the use of the N-word in American culture through personal experience, anecdotes, court cases, and many other sources. The book is well written and thoroughly researched (25 pages for the 93 endnotes!) making it an interesting, thought-provoking read. I highly recommend it.

Rating: 4

Doug Levandowski says

Many of the chapters wind up being a list of times the word appears, at best categorized into court cases where it appears. I would have enjoyed more legal insight from a legal scholar.
