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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness

by
Michelle Alexander

Author:

Michelle Alexander is a highly acclaimed civil rights lawyer, advocate, legal scholar and author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* — the bestselling book that helped to transform the national debate on racial and criminal justice in the United States. Since *The New Jim Crow* was first published in 2010, it has spent nearly 250 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list and has been cited in judicial decisions and adopted in campus-wide and community-wide reads, and has inspired a generation of racial justice activists motivated by Alexander’s unforgettable argument that “we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.” The book has won numerous awards, including the 2011 NAACP Image Award for best nonfiction. Alexander has been featured in national radio and television media outlets, including MSNBC, NPR, CNN, Bill Moyers Journal, The Colbert Show, Real Time with Bill Maher, Tavis Smiley, Democracy Now!, and C-SPAN.

Over the years, Alexander has taught at a number of universities, including Stanford Law School, where she was an associate professor of law and directed the Civil Rights Clinic. In 2005, Alexander won a Soros Justice Fellowship that supported the writing of *The New Jim Crow* and accepted a joint appointment at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity and the Moritz College of Law at The Ohio State University. Currently she is a visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and a contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times*.

Prior to joining academia, Alexander engaged in civil rights litigation in both the private and nonprofit sector, ultimately serving as the director of the Racial Justice Project for the ACLU of Northern California, where she coordinated the Project’s media advocacy, grassroots organizing, and coalition building and launched a major campaign against racial profiling by law enforcement known as the “DWB Campaign” or “Driving While Black or Brown Campaign.”

Alexander is a graduate of Stanford Law School and Vanderbilt University. She has clerked for Justice Harry A. Blackmun on the U.S. Supreme Court and for Chief Judge Abner Mikva on the D.C. Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals.

(from newjimcrow.com, retrieved 2/12/2020)

Summary:

The New Jim Crow is a stunning account of the rebirth of a caste-like system in the United States, one that has resulted in millions of African Americans locked behind bars and then relegated to a permanent second-class status—denied the very rights supposedly won in the Civil Rights Movement. Since its publication in 2010, the book has appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than a year; been dubbed the “secular bible of a new social movement” by numerous commentators, including [Cornel West](#); and has led to consciousness-raising efforts in universities, churches, community

centers, re-entry centers, and prisons nationwide. *The New Jim Crow* tells a truth our nation has been reluctant to face.

(from newjimcrow.com, retrieved 2/12/2020)

Questions:

1. What is the **central idea** discussed in the book? What issues or ideas does the author explore? Are they personal, sociological, global, political, economic, spiritual, medical, or scientific?
2. Do the issues **affect your life**? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now or sometime in the future?
3. What **evidence** does the author use to support the book's ideas? Is the evidence convincing...definitive or...speculative? Does the author depend on personal opinion, observation, and assessment? Or is the evidence factual—based on science, statistics, historical documents, or quotations from (credible) experts?
4. What kind of **language** does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it biased, inflammatory, sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?
5. What are the **implications** for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? Are they positive or negative...affirming or frightening?
6. What **solutions** does the author propose? Are the author's recommendations concrete, sensible, doable? Who would implement those solutions?
7. How **controversial** are the issues raised in the book? Who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?
8. Talk about **specific passages** that struck you as significant—or interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad...? What was memorable?
9. What have you **learned** after reading this book? Has it broadened your perspective about a difficult issue—personal or societal? Has it introduced you to a culture in another country...or an ethnic or regional culture in your own country?

(from LitLovers, adapted from “Generic Nonfiction Questions, retrieved 2/13/2020)