

Meeting Isabel Wilkerson, the Pulitzer-Prize-Winning Author of *Caste*

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**SPECIAL ISSUE:
NARRATIVE AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL
TRANSFORMATION**

**Afterward
Meeting Isabel Wilkerson, the Pulitzer-Prize-
Winning Author of *Caste***

Chloe Jordan

The bestselling author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* and *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson, also a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Humanities Medal, has become a leading figure in narrative nonfiction, an interpreter of the human condition, and an impassioned voice for demonstrating how history can help us understand ourselves, our country, and our current era of social and political upheaval (Wilkerson, 2020). As a student in Mercer's College of Professional Advancement's LBST 303 "Issues of Justice" course, I had no idea that I would be reading *Caste* together with the other students in the class and have the opportunity to hear Wilkerson in person.

When I was assigned to take LBST 303, "Issues of Justice in a Global Community," I was not aware of the course's topic, nor was I aware of what literature would be assigned. When I entered the course, the professor, Dr. Margaret Eskew, instructed us to order two books: Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* and Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash*, which she claimed were complementary. When I realized the focus of the course, I admittedly had a bad attitude. I was not particularly interested in once again going down the rabbit hole of race relations in America. I anticipated sitting back and learning recycled history that I had heard throughout my life an easy "A," or so I thought. I had absolutely no idea that I was about to embark upon the ride of a lifetime.

Wilkerson's book, *Caste*, begins with a prologue entitled "The Man in the Crowd." This opening is centered around a 1936 photograph taken in Hamburg, Germany during the Third Reich, the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945. Wilkerson directs the attention of her readers to a black and white photo of a Nazi crowd of shipyard workers heiling Hitler in unison. She scans the photo to focus on the upper right corner where one man is "standing against the tide" within this crowd of hundreds: "His face is gentle but unyielding. He is surrounded by fellow citizens caught under the spell of the Nazis. He keeps his arms folded to his chest as the stiff palms of the others hover just inches from him. He alone is refusing to salute" (Wilkerson, 2020, p. xv). Wilkerson's description of this photo evoked emotion in me I have never before felt from simply reading a book. She climaxes her portrayal of the photograph with two searing and thought-provoking questions: "What would it take to be him in any era? What would it take to be him now?" (p. xvii).

I began to think of the world we currently live in and how so many of us tend to follow the beaten path, whether politically, socially, racially, or when dealing with understanding gender dynamics. What does it take to stand against the tide and all that entails—to stand up for what is right? Could I endure the ridicule and bashing from social media? Would family members or the larger community ostracize me? Tears began to roll down my face at the mere prospect.

The course I had expected to sit back in became a course that kept me on the edge of my seat. My professor listened to my challenges and misgivings with an evenness, patience, and positive reception that I suspect came from her intense study of the Nazi period punctuated by the publication of her doctoral dissertation on the language of Hitler. The syllabus was demanding and simultaneously inviting. Held over Zoom, the class discussions were nonetheless intense, alarming, impassioned, and scintillating. The Canvas assignments forced us all to confront honestly and in-depth issues of justice in our past and present. For me, *Caste* was the vehicle that magnified the objectives of the class. I discovered that there was no such thing as the racial labels "black" and "white" before American colonization. Africans were Nigerian, Sudanese, or Egyptian, while Europeans were Spanish, English, or Italian. The social class structure imported from England created the motivation for a division of the working class even though workers from many different geographical areas were working, socializing, and even intermarrying with one another. I learned that there is no viable evidence for referring to Euro-Americans as "Caucasian" an incorrectly coined, obsolete phrase the scientist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach used to describe all with European ancestry.

I began to share *Caste* with everyone I knew and discuss its contents in daily conversations. It began to become part of me. I learned that this is not only

history, but also my present. Wilkerson connected so many dots in creating a synthesis between American racism, the German Holocaust, and the Indian caste system, explaining that American racism is a vehicle for caste in America all the more engaging because, as we became aware, caste is static and lacks movement. Whatever caste you are born into, you die in. To think that no matter how much education I acquire or success I achieve, my socioeconomics may change, but my level in this social stratification will be unyielding. The thought is heart-wrenching. Upon completion of LBST 303, one of the most impactful courses to date in the entirety of my educational career-top tier, I received an email from my professor inviting her students to attend the Narrative Matters conference hosted at Mercer to meet author Isabel Wilkerson. Dean Priscilla Danheiser made it possible for the students in the course to attend the session with Isabel without additional expense. I did not know what to expect from the conference. All I knew was that it would be awesome to see my professor and fellow classmates in person, all of whom I only knew from Zoom.

We met for lunch together in the Liberal Studies suite in the Administration and Conference Center building in Atlanta and afterwards assembled in the auditorium for the session. I could feel a nervous anticipation flowing through my body. Would this author be exciting? Would she disappoint? I wanted so much to get Wilkerson to autograph my book, but economics had dictated that I opt for an e-copy of the book. Realizing how much the autograph would mean to me, my instructor, always careful not to show favoritism toward any student, handed me her book and insisted that it was mine. A few tears later, the session leader announced that Isabel Wilkerson would be joining us shortly, but, due to COVID and personal safety concerns, she would not be having face-to-face contact or signing any books. We were to remain seated as Wilkerson entered and departed the auditorium. We also were alerted that she would be accompanied by security — a very disappointing announcement. Who was this lady? Why would she need security? Who would want to harm a New York Times bestselling, Pulitzer-Prize-winning, and Oprah Book Club author?

As a well-dressed and dark complexioned African American woman with long raven-colored hair entered the auditorium with her entourage and walked toward the front row, I exclaimed to myself, “This can’t be Isabel Wilkerson!” Not many African American women bear the given name “Isabel” or surname “Wilkerson.” Was I to believe that this was the woman, the historian, who had authored this wonderfully curated masterpiece? She was not at all what I had expected. She was stunningly gorgeous. She approached the podium, and my body was compelled to stand, or heel, to salute this brilliant illustrator. I wanted her to

know by every clap how much she was adored. I wanted her to understand how impactful she was. With every clap, I wanted her to feel the genuine praise that she deserves and that the awards, prizes, and acknowledgments could not deliver.

Accompanied by my professor and classmates to my first academic conference, I was uncertain about what was appropriate, what could be said, and what couldn't. She spoke so eloquently and thoroughly as she began her delivery by showing her personal tour copy of her book. She shared her inspiration and purpose for her writings and how she had constructed her Pulitzer-Prize-winning book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. Surprisingly to me, she did not lead with *Caste*. As she opened the floor for questions, hands began to raise.

At that moment, my mind raced equally with my heart in my chest. There was so much I wanted to say to this woman, but I could not just wing it. I had not prepared anything either. How could I consolidate all of my thoughts and deliver them in a way that she could feel from the last row where I sat as she stood up on that stage? After finishing her second detailed answer, my hand went up, and I was chosen. She had seen and acknowledged me. Me! I stood with a blank mind of unpreparedness, and the words of gratitude rolled off my lips or rather from my heart. I shared with her how impactful and life-changing her book has been for me. I told her how grateful I am that she stood against the tide and did the work it took to deliver this book to the world. I told her from one Black girl to another how much she is admired. Then I was done. I felt relieved. It was out of me now. It had gone out into the universe and had fallen upon her ears. Receptively, she placed her hand over her heart as the auditorium broke out in applause.

Now I understood it all. I knew exactly why this woman had security. I knew precisely why her life was being threatened. I knew intuitively what she feared: execution. There is a phrase I learned as a kid: "Too much light will blind you." The light Wilkerson has shed upon the world regarding caste and race relations, not just in America but around the world, can never be dimmed and places an enormous target on her back. As revolutionary as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, Wilkerson has definitely rung the bell of change — a bell that is loud enough, if received wholeheartedly, to cause a shift in the racial dynamics of this country. This bell would terrify any upper caste member fighting to maintain power through privilege.

Earlier my anticipation of the event had prevented me from eating the lunch the Department of Liberal Studies had provided for the students attending the conference. After Wilkerson's departure from the auditorium, I rushed to grab my lunch from the 4th-floor conference room before heading home in the Atlanta traffic. As the elevator door opened on the 3rd floor, Isabel Wilkerson and her

entourage stood before me. Shocked, all I could do was blow her a kiss from a distance and clasp my hands in gratitude. Then I heard myself yell out, “I wish I could have gotten you to sign my book.”

To my great surprise, she replied, “I can if you have a pen,” and waved me towards her. I ran to her, and she opened her arms to receive me and gave me the warmest hug. We hugged for what felt like a full minute. She took my newly gifted book, opened it, wrote me a lovely dedication, and autographed it as we conversed. I told her that I just wanted to give to her as she has given to the world. “Just pray for me,” she requested. “It gets tough out here. You wouldn’t believe. Just pray for me!” I would not have understood that request just an hour earlier. As I stood before her, imagining the death threats she would receive and the anger spewed out toward her, I vowed to pray for her protection daily.

For the remainder of May 19, 2022, I floated on a cloud. I walked in euphoria, with my feet never touching the ground. I had discovered that I have power, but I never dreamed that I was powerful enough to reach those whom I idolize. For the second time, Isabel Wilkerson served as a life-changer for me. What played in my mind on repeat like the music playing while waiting for customer service to answer a business call was the serendipity of the day’s events: the invitation, my availability, the lunch, the gift of the hard copy of the book, the announcement, the disappointment, my commentary to her, and her appreciation all led to this fabulous, almost private, or intimate moment. I believe that energy is transferable, and as such, I feel I transferred some of my love to her, and I can’t help but feel that she transferred some of her greatness to me. This will forever be one of my most memorable moments. I have been enlightened, energized, and empowered — to change the world.