

Discussion Questions

Caste

1. At the beginning of *Caste*, author Isabel Wilkerson compares American racial hierarchy to a dormant Siberian virus. What are the strengths of this metaphor? How does this comparison help combat the pervasive myth that racism has been eradicated in America?
2. Wilkerson begins the book with an image of one lone dissenter amidst a crowd of Germans giving the Nazi salute. What would it mean--and what would it take--to be this man today?
3. What are some elements required for a caste system to succeed?
4. Caste and race are not the same thing. What is the difference between the two? How do casteism and racism support each other?
5. "Evil asks little of the dominant caste other than to sit back and do nothing," Wilkerson writes. Whether in the dominant caste or not, what are some of the ways that each of us, personally, can stand up to the caste system?
6. Wilkerson writes, "Before there was a United States of America, there was a caste system, born in colonial Virginia." How can Americans reckon with this fact? What does it mean to you to live in a country whose system of discrimination was cemented before the country itself?
7. Wilkerson frequently uses her own experience as an African-American woman to illustrate her points regarding caste. What do readers gain from hearing about Wilkerson's personal experiences in addition to her deep historical research?
8. Discuss how overt racism subtly transforms into unconscious bias. What are the ways that we can work to compensate for the unconscious biases inherent in a caste system?
9. How does the caste system take people who would otherwise be allies and turn them against one another?
10. What are some of the steps that society, and each of us, can take toward dismantling the caste system?