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'Is Marriage for White People? How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone'

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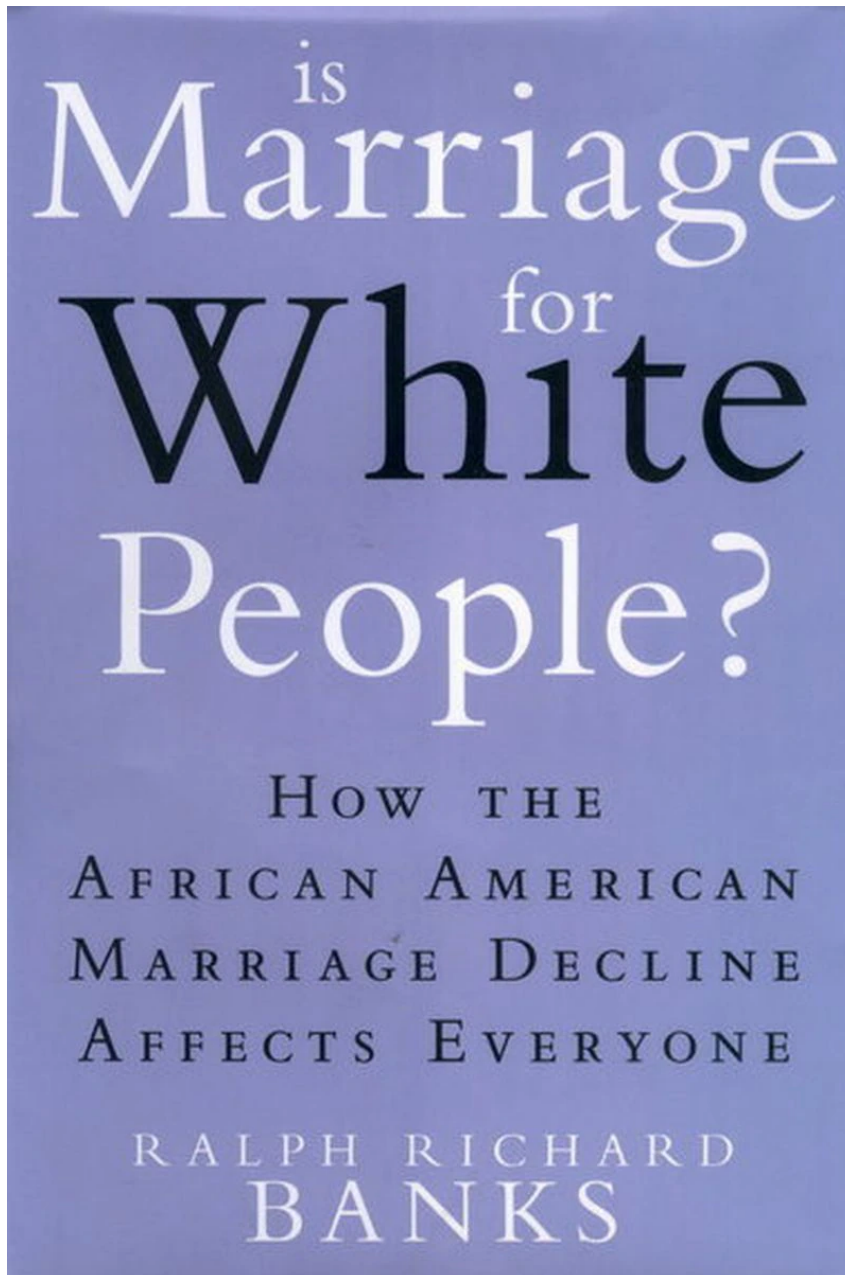
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When I was little, I remember constantly having to defend "The Cosby Show" as realistic. My parents have been married for 31 years. My grandparents were married for 49 years before my grandmother passed away. My brother has been married for 11 years. My younger cousin (mid-20s) just got engaged this year, and another cousin got married a couple of weeks ago.

Marriage surrounds me. So the idea of a book titled "Is Marriage for White People?" immediately put me in defense mode, ready to tear the book apart.

Imagine my surprise when I found that I agreed with almost everything the author had to say.

The title is tricky. While it catches readers' attention, the subtitle "How the African-American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone" is more the focus of the book. Author Ralph Richard Banks surveyed approximately 100 people, some more than once, to find out their take on black marriage, black women as single parents, interracial marriage, how biracial children affect families, the misguided belief about there being more black men in prison than in college, and "marrying down" — marrying a man who is not in the same economic or education class as his wife.

The only weakness I found in the entire read was that it had the same voice of 30-something and 40-something black women complaining about why they're not married that you can read in many relationship books geared towards an African-American audience. Although I can sympathize with the issues this group has dealt with, I wanted to hear from the quieter voice: the voice of black men talking about why they're more likely to date interracially, the voice of white men who date black women or more elaboration on white men who think black women aren't attracted to them, the 20-somethings who don't think interracial dating is a big deal, the families of those who oppose interracial relationships and the experiences of biracial children.

But even Banks knew that this book was heavy on black women in their 30s and 40s. In the afterword he writes, "Men would answer questions, but women would answer and then elaborate at length . . . I also found that the interviews with women in their late thirties and older were richer and more nuanced than interviews with younger women."

For those who are unfamiliar with the experiences that this group has with dating, their opinions will be informative and interesting. For those who are very familiar with the "obstacles" these women face, it may be a bit draining to read their conclusions again.

But unlike many current relationship books, Banks did something that many black men who have written relationship advice did not. He encouraged interracial relationships, and he realizes this isn't common.

He writes, "As I researched this book, I was surprised to hear so many black men state without the least bit of doubt or equivocation that only black men are attracted to black women. If my discussions with black men are any indication, many black men believe that black women have no choice but to remain with black men."

He went on to explain that even when black women discussed white co-workers or friends who were interested in them, they had various reasons for not pursuing the relationships, mainly that they either felt a certain loyalty to not leaving black men behind or that they weren't convinced that white men truly were attracted to them.

According to Banks, "One problem with black women assuming white men are not

interested in them is that they overlook those who are."

Others were more cutthroat about the idea of dating someone physically unlike them. One woman even admitted that she struggled in a relationship with a black man who had a personality disorder, but, "Had he been white, I would have cut him loose immediately."

So why would a group who is so interested in dating and getting married ignore another group of single people? The author writes that most black women said black men had "swag." Anyone who is a fan of the hip-hop lifestyle understands what swag is, and for those who don't, there's another term for it that meets similar requirements: charm. Swag is the perfect blend of street smarts, charm and professionalism.

I was thrown off by black women who felt that Denzel Washington (outside of the film "Training Day") didn't have swag but Bill Clinton did. And I definitely have to disagree with Brad Pitt not having swag. Did any of these women see "Sleepers" or the mattress scene in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button"?

While current-day films (spoiler alerts included) that include interracial relationships — "Guess Who" and "Something New" — along with films about black women and the dating market — "Daddy's Little Girls," "Waiting to Exhale" and "Why Did I Get Married?" — gave real life examples, it was the interviews with couples and dating sites that stood out the most.

In an OkCupid study that emphasized the fact white men don't reply to black women's messages, other results may have been ignored, including the fact that Latino, Middle Eastern, Indian and Native American men responded to black women at higher numbers than white men, sometimes even at rates higher than black men.

And in another study that stated 90 percent of white men excluded black women from racial preference, Banks pointed out, "that 90 percent figure is grossly misleading. What descriptions of the study often left out was how few white men stated a racial preference at all. In that study fewer than 60 percent of white men stated any racial preference."

Some women who decided to overlook the stigma of dating interracially talked about how the issues of racial ignorance can either work for or against them. While some women tired of breaking down slang, arguing about issues of racism, explaining how black hair care products work and teaching their children about African-American culture because their husband couldn't, others found the racial inexperience as a bonus.

Without the pressure of dark skin versus light skin and natural hair versus relaxed hair (several women reported having white husbands who preferred they stop relaxing their hair and wearing weave), one woman stated, "I can be blacker with my white husband than with any black man I've ever dated."

If you're noticing a pattern of encouraging interracial dating, this is not by accident. Banks frankly states, "If black women don't marry because they have too few options, and some black men because they have too many, then black women, by opening themselves to interracial marriage, could address both problems at once."

[Is Marriage for White People? How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone](#)

By Ralph Richard Banks

Dutton, 189 pages (277 pages including Bibliography and Notes), \$25.95 (hardcover)

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