The Diversity Book Club
Gina Betcher, Research Officer, OVPR and Colleagues

Reading Who We Were to Discover Who We Can Become

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot

This book is a joy to read as one. Seven, it tells the story of Henrietta Lacks’ friends and family members and their reactions to learning of the contribution Henrietta’s cells have made to medical science. It is a sensitive depiction of the culture of a poor black community in the American South of the 1950s and 1960s, and it sheds light on how medical research subjects are valued by the medical community. The book is the story of how they participate in and how they are likely to interpret the information they are given. Rebecca Skloot tells a moving story and, at the same time, provides extensive scientific information that both adds to the narrative and makes the science of cell culture both fascinating and accessible to a general audience.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon

I chose this book because developmental disorders, mental illness and the inclusion of people of varying levels of ability should be part of the conversation when we discuss diversity.

How The Irish Became White by Noel Ignatiev

I chose this book. The text illustrates the fluidity of solidarity between racial and ethnic groups, and the social and political pressures that immigrant groups face as they seek economic and political advancement. One major theme in the book is that the racial category “white” is not a self-evident one and that social divisions among citizens, and humanity generally, are not natural or “fixed” but result from, and can be dissolved by, human action and choice.

Harlem is Nowhere by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts

Harlem is Nowhere: A Journey to the Margins of Black America drew me in particularly because of a presentation and a resulting essay I read. As a graduate of my hometown, I’ve known the culture of Harlem for a long time. The book is a record of the people, places, and things that make up the fabric of African American life. It’s a beautiful and important book for anyone interested in understanding the history and culture of Harlem.

Iron Cages by Ronald Takaki

Takaki’s work suggests that American concerns at the founding about how a democratic republic could ensure its economic and political survival fueled the creation of a new vision of democracy. This vision emphasized individual, self-governing citizens’ shared and shaped attitudes towards which individuals were morally fit for citizenship. The reason I like this book is because it underscores how racial and ethnic identities are socially constructed and that the frameworks that are often used to evaluate individuals classified as members of these groups are historically contingent.

The Everyone Counts Faculty and Professional Learning Community on Race provided me with the opportunity to explore personal and professional values shaped by the American race experience. This platform allowed me to welcome OVPR staff to a book about race and white privilege.

The goals of my project were to:

- become enriched readers
- enable discussions on race and about white privilege
- recognize diverse histories and what this means; and,
- contribute meaningful texts to a diversity library inside the Office of Diversity and Inclusion

The library will result in future invitations to read selected texts as a community.

Reviews are from those who contributed books to the diversity library with thanks to the Everyone Counts Fund.