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Who's Afraid of Anne Frank? Or Why White Supremacists Should Fear This Book

Laura S. Brown
University of Washington

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WHO'S AFRAID OF ANNE FRANK? OR WHY WHITE SUPREMACISTS SHOULD FEAR THIS BOOK

Review of *The diary of a young girl: The definitive edition, aka The diary of Anne Frank*. First Dutch publication June, 1947.

For two years, from mid-1942 until August, 1944, a young girl with pale skin, dark hair, and large brown eyes lived, along with her elder sister, her parents, and two other families, jammed into a tiny space at the top of a warehouse along the waterfront of the Amstel River in Amsterdam. They had to pass their days in silence; at night, they could light no lights. A perfectly average white-skinned tween with a gift for the written word, living in the most terrifying and boring and compelling circumstances. Many people have seen her face, since the diary, which she began to keep from just before hiding in that space, was found and published by her father, who was the only survivor of the people jammed into that room.

Anne Frank, this little white-skinned girl, had the misfortune to be born in Germany as the Nazis rose to power; when her father used his business connections to move the family to the Netherlands, they were safe for but a brief moment, until the Wehrmacht swept through Europe. She had misfortune, because Anne and her family were not considered white people by the Nazi racial laws. She, and they, were Jews. When the Nazis rose to power and promulgated the Nuremberg Race Laws in 1935, the Franks, every Jew in Germany, then in every land conquered by the Third Reich, were immediately and arbitrarily defined as “not white,” or to use the language of that version of racism, “not Aryan.”

Like six million other people with pale skin, including one of my own great-grandfathers and two great-aunts, Anne, after her family was betrayed to the Nazi occupiers of The Netherlands, was among the Jews whose death was the responsibility of the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Based on eyewitness accounts, she is thought to have died in a concentration camp called Bergen-Belsen in March, 1945, less than a year after she and her family had been hauled off, ill with typhus. She was 15 years old. Within two months of her death the Nazi regime had been defeated; the Nuremberg Racial Laws were struck down. Pale skinned little girls like Anne who happened to be Jewish could be white again. Until they weren't.

In 1961 a little pale-skinned girl with dark hair and dark brown eyes, living in a pleasant suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, opened *The Diary of Anne Frank* as one of the options for her

fifth grade reading assignments. That little girl was not quite nine years old. That little girl's grandparents had fled Russian-held Poland in 1919 and 1920 because, well before there were Nazis, there were pogroms, murderous riots akin to the Tulsa Black Wall Street Massacre, pogroms that were at least an annual occurrence, as one grandmother told that little girl. They came to America, where, while there was bias against their variety of pale-skinned people, it had almost never been murderous.

That second little girl was me, and as I dove into Anne's diary I was beset by nightmares and terror. In pictures of my young self you can see a resemblance to young Anne; we are both Jewish of Eastern European descent, which means that we share a genetic heritage. While from a young age I had been subjected to what would today be referred to as anti-Semitic microaggressions by the white people around me, classmates, teachers, and especially the dreaded elementary school principal, and while I knew, vaguely, at age nine, that something terrible had happened to Jewish people in Europe while my parents were teens, reading Anne's diary, the words of someone who was only a little older than I was when she wrote them, drove home a terrifying reality to me.

I might look like a white person; my skin has forever been low in melanin, after all, and Jews are not the only white people with curly hair or brown eyes. I knew I was a Jew, see aforementioned microaggressions, the most persistent of which was the annual being-called-to-the-principal's-office ritual revolving around my unwillingness to participate in the Christmas carol ceremony, which featured a faux stained glass representation of the Bishop, Saint Nicholas. I had already been attending afternoon Hebrew school classes two, and then four, days a week after my day at public school.

After reading Anne Frank's words, though, I realized that the whiteness of Jews was not guaranteed. We could be considered white one minute—and usually are by BIPOC people, and some other more permanently White pale-skinned Euro-Americans, given the tendency of most Jews of my heritage, who make up the bulk of those living in the US, to have skin that burns at the touch of even one faint ray of sun. Then someone, some law, some regime, some murderous person, could declare us outside the pale of whiteness the next minute. Long before the white supremacist marchers at Charlottesville proclaimed, “Jews will not replace us,” with “us” implying “white people who ascribe to some kind of Christian nationalist ideology, definitely not Jews,” Anne Frank taught me about the fragility of how whiteness is constructed. Her utter normalcy as my near age peer, her physical resemblance to me and my cousins and my friends at Hebrew school, her essential optimism and creativity, none of that mattered to those who marched her away to die miserably, cold and ill in a concentration camp, as much as the fact that because she was a Jew she and her family and six million others of my people had been defined out of whiteness by the stroke of a pen.

Once I got past the nightmares and the grief that my first reading of Anne Frank evoked in me, I began, as do many Jewish tween and teen girls, to idealize her. I started, with zero success, to attempt to keep a diary because she had kept one. I became more highly attuned to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which anti-Semitism was manifesting in my world, in the polite, upper-middle class, highly educated suburb populated by people who generally defined themselves as white, as in, not-Jews, people who pulled their kids out of the public school system as high school approached. Because why? Not because my high school wasn't among the top ten public high schools in the country when I attended it in the last years of the 1960s, which it was, well-funded by school levies, offering every AP class available in the 1960s. No, this migration was because my particular junior high school was the only one of the four in the district that was not majority Jewish. The high school was majority Jewish, and so the white-not-Jewish teens from my junior high school were sent to private high schools to which, at the time, few Jews were admitted.

One of my friends from Scouts, on her way to one of those private schools, told me that her parents didn't want her running the risk of dating a Jewish boy. I had been in her home. Her parents had been lovely to me. And they were anti-Semites; more polite than the ones my grandparents hid from in their basements, less lethal than the Nazis. But they didn't want my friend to date anyone who resembled one of my beloved younger brothers. She wasn't the last person I heard tell that story. Apparently I was white enough to be their daughter's friend, but not really white, because...

I thus think I understand why Anne Frank's diary is the target of so many book-banning campaigns. It's not because she talks about getting her period, or getting a crush on the teen boy who was in hiding with her, although this is commonly the pretext given for "protecting" children from the book. It's not because if one reads the book that one learns that something called the Shoah—the Nazi Holocaust that murdered my people, and Roma and Sinti people, and queer people, and people with atypical minds and bodies, and Christians who attempted to help Jews, or who refused to worship Hitler instead of Jesus—took place 80 years ago, perpetrated by an enemy in the fight against whom many Americans lost their lives. The fact that the US fought the Nazis in that war, developed the atomic bomb to drop on Nazi Germany, that this other virulently racist and also very very white regime was our enemy is meant, by the book-banners, to be kept covered up. This cover-up is another part of the pretext for banning Anne's book, because heaven forbid that American children who share the ethnicity, the cultural histories of anti-Semitism, and the attachment to the construct of "whiteness" that propelled the murderers of Treblinka and Babyn Yar and Sobibor learn about who and what the US was fighting in the part of the Second World War that took place in Europe.

I have come to the conclusion that what white supremacists and their allies are *really* afraid of in this short, poignant book is that children, pale-skinned like me or not, will begin to grasp some things that are dangerous to white supremacy. First, like me, a child may intuit that there is something leaky about the container of the thing called “whiteness.” Depending on the age at which one reads this book—and I was nine, remember—one can follow the story line. The Franks were Germans with pale skin who were Jews, until the Nuremburg laws, which made them not Germans any longer, because they were Jews.

Whiteness is socially constructed. You can be allowed in, as the Jews of Germany were for over a century. Many of those hauled off to die by the Nazis had won the Iron Cross for valor fighting as German citizens in the First World War. You can be forced into whiteness; since the Hamas pogrom of October 7, 2023, many people have insisted that those murdered and kidnapped were “European settler-colonialists,” ignoring how many of them would never have passed for “white,” because they were Jews of Arab ancestry. In the narrative prevalent in the late fall of 2023, these murder and kidnap victims are being defined as white, not by white supremacists, but by those who have spent their lives fighting white supremacy. This reveals precisely my point; whiteness is fragile. Whiteness can be socially constructed to support a particular narrative. Whiteness can be taken away.

You can also be kicked out of whiteness. That expulsion does not require something as overt and appalling as a Nuremburg law. I was kicked out of whiteness every year at Christmas time, when I refused to join my not-Jewish friends in singing the praises of their Lord. The teen boys of my high school were kicked out of whiteness by the parents of the not-Jewish girls who we had been in class with from kindergarten until the prospect of too many adolescent *Jewish* males in one place sent those parents running to pay tuition some place where those Jewish boys were not. As the 2023 war in Israel and Gaza proceeds I feel once again kicked out of whiteness by my insistence that I am a Jew.

Anne Frank and her family were expelled from whiteness. If it could happen to her, someone so easy for tween and teen American kids to identify with, then, as those young minds develop critical thinking skills, some of those young minds might start to critically question how whiteness, and race in America in general, is constructed. *The Diary of a Young Girl* is a back door into a critical analysis of whiteness, to critical questioning of how people are categorized based on arbitrary phenomena, components of phenotype—or the whims of a cruel hierarchy of structural and systemic oppression. Anne Frank is the “one-drop rule” in another form. Her life illustrates how phony the categories of race are, and how dangerous they become when aspects of phenotype or belief or you-fill-in-the-blank become reified and otherized.

If I were a white supremacist, whether I knew I was one or not, I would be scared to death of letting my kids get their hands on Anne Frank's diary. They will like her too well, because she is likeable, and sympathetic, and she's a *kid*, like they are, living with crushes on movie stars and the nearest (in her case, only) cute person of the sex-to-whom-attracted, and puberty, and ugh, *parents!!!!*

Because they will like her too well they might begin to think and ask questions that are dangerous to white supremacy. "Why did Hitler hate the Jews?" the kiddo asks their parents. What is a parent supposed to say? Can that parent say, "Well, kiddo, because they aren't real white people like we are, and they have all the money and control Hollywood..." Seriously? "But why did he kill them?" How does a parent answer *that* inconvenient question? Does the adult change the subject, hoping the child's social media hasn't also exposed them to the latest act of extrajudicial murder of a BIPOC person by legal authorities? Or the shootings at synagogues or the defacement of Jewish graves, or Muslim masjids? If no one reads Anne's words, then the mind virus of white supremacy might have had a chance to take hold before someone accidentally stumbles upon her, a virus that seems to inoculate those infected with it against wanting to know truths about a) the fragility of the thing called "whiteness," and b) the evils done in the name of protecting that thing.

The Diary of a Young Girl is a dangerous book, in all of the best ways. It is dangerous to white supremacy, to fascism. It is dangerous to anti-Semitism. It is even dangerous to sexism, because Anne would, had she survived and continued in the direction we see her going, likely have been a feminist, or something resembling one.

It is a book that endangers complacency about what can't happen here, because even a tiny taste of European history tells a tween or teen that the Netherlands was among the most tolerant nations of Europe, a haven for Jews, and had been so ever since liberating itself from Spain in the 1600s. The Netherlands was a nation with as much freedom of worship from the time William of Orange kicked out the Spanish as the US has enshrined in its Constitution, which is why Jews felt safe there, albeit in the midst of the usual microaggressions aimed at marginal groups in any culture.

But there were Dutch collaborators with the Nazi occupiers, just as there are white supremacists sitting in the US Congress today, just as there were Nazis marching in the streets of Charlottesville being called "good people" by the man sitting in the White House that day. One of those collaborators is now believed to have been the person who turned the Franks in to the Nazi occupation authority's police. Very few Dutch people were in the Resistance, if I believe what I was told by my Dutch former mother-in-law who hid her Jewish husband in a closet more successfully than the Franks managed to

hide in their tiny space. One should thus expect very few non-Jewish white Americans to be in a resistance here.

It's been more than six decades since I read this book, since I went on to read other Shoah literature and meet survivors with numbers tattooed on their arms, to make my Jewish identity core to my social justice activism, and to my commitment to alliance and action on behalf of all oppressed people. If it's been a while since you've read it, or you've never read it, read it again, or for the first time, now. You can download it into your e-reader. Take the time to appreciate how dangerous these words are.

Then do your best to insure that this subversive, powerful introduction to critical thinking about race and its various constructions and discontents gets into the hands of every child you know above the age of eleven (in retrospect, nine was a little young to be reading it, but then if you're a member of a marginalized group you don't have the privilege of innocence about the danger you might be in). Talk about the book with them. Ask them what questions it evokes for them. Encourage curiosity—"Anne looks like me. Why did the Nazis think that she was different?" Or, "Anne was white, and she was still murdered for who she was. I thought that only happened to BIPOC folx like us."

I have this playful image in my mind's eye of an army of old women like myself, grandma/bobbe/abuela-looking women, standing outside of middle schools, passing the book out to kids as they leave for the day. "Here, great reading; it's been (sotto voce) *banned*." What tastier sauce to the adolescent palate than tincture of the forbidden.

This book is not a master's tool. It was nearly lost to history, and the frequency with which it appears on lists of books banned from schools and libraries tells us everything we need to know. It is a quiet, potent, wrecking ball aimed at the construct of whiteness. This Jewish woman, once that pale-skinned nine year old who first met Anne in 1961, knows that now. Know it, too.