

Real American: A Memoir

LISTENING & LEARNING

1. This book is packed with firsthand experiences, ranging from triumph to tragedy, all told from a Black and biracial woman's point of view. Were there moments that surprised you? What did you learn or newly encounter from seeing life through this woman's perspective?
2. There are many points in the book where Lythcott-Haims holds the trauma of an experience inside, rather than telling someone or having access to people in her life who would have believed and supported her. How would having allies nearby have affected the author's ability to see her painful experiences as true and as worthy of being heard?
3. Lythcott-Haims's life experiences are set against a backdrop of whiteness as the norm in the United States, and the assumption that it's preferable to brownness or Blackness. What do you see as the impact of this unspoken preference for whiteness on the author? How does this preference shape the popular contemporary American narrative?
4. Toward the end of the book, Lythcott-Haims writes, "No, I was never white." What does she mean? What does "being white" mean? Why could she have never been white?
5. Lythcott-Haims describes her memoir as a journey from self-loathing to self-love. When do you think her self-loathing took root, and when and how did she finally come to a true place of self-love?

BELIEVING

1. Once, a reader told Lythcott-Haims, "I'm sad that you are so angry." What might this comment reveal about the speaker? Did you find anger in the book, and if so, what did that anger convey to you? In what ways might Lythcott-Haims's anger be justified? How can this type of anger be useful?
2. Tiny acts or interactions that make a person feel lesser—micro-aggressions—are explained and highlighted throughout the book. What are some of the micro-aggressions Lythcott-Haims describes and why do they matter? How do you think a person who is on the receiving end of micro-aggressions should respond to them? What are some things people can do to avoid making micro-aggressive statements?
3. Lythcott-Haims has said she hopes that the book evokes empathy for Blackness, the Black body, Black mothers, Black children, and Black people generally. Did she succeed? If so, where did this book evoke empathy in you? Were these new feelings for you and if so, why? How did this text help you improve your racial awareness and empathy?
4. What parts were harder to imagine or empathize with? Why do you think that is?
5. Lythcott-Haims has publicly stated, "Racism is agnostic to class, to the degrees you have, and to who your daddy is." Yet some readers have told Lythcott-Haims, "It can't have been that bad if you became student council president in high school." How does this repudiation of Lythcott-Haims's point of view and experience speak to the ways that Black people are not believed? What does this common response tell us about the allegation that we are color-blind or post-racial?
6. How do Lythcott-Haims's experiences compare to your experiences with racism and/or anti-Blackness? How do the painful moments in her memoir inform and complicate your understandings of race and of class in America?

JULIE LYTHCOTT-HAIMS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

THE WRITING & ITS READERS

1. How is the term “Real American” used in public discourse today? Why do you think Lythcott-Haims chose this as the title of her memoir? What does the term mean to you?
2. Who are the intended audiences for this book? How do you know? Do you feel included in the audience for this book or do you feel like you are outside the intended audience? Why?
3. This book is in a nonstandard format (margins, font, chapters, page layout). Why do you think Lythcott-Haims made these choices? How does the format contribute to the message of the book?
4. Sometimes Lythcott-Haims switches from the first person to the second person “you.” Why does she do this? Where do you recognize yourself as the “you” to whom she speaks? Did any of the references to “you” make you feel uncomfortable? If so, why?
5. Writers of memoir depict real-life events featuring real people. If you went back through the book, whose perspective would you be interested in knowing more about, and why? Did you feel any characters in the book were treated unfairly, and if so, why?

BEING IN ACTION

1. Toward the end of the book, Lythcott-Haims cites the story of a white male police officer who develops empathy for the Black children on his beat only once his Black wife gives birth to their son. Does this example make you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the likelihood that white people can learn to see Black people as fully human? Examining your feelings and assumptions, do you think you see Black people as fully human? Why or why not? If not, what would it take for you to do so?
2. Some readers say Lythcott-Haims has told truths few others are willing to say out loud. What do you think some of those truths are? Have you experienced any of (or anything like them) them in your own life? What are the benefits and consequences of sharing such truths?
3. What does it mean to be an “ally”? Who are the allies in this book? Who needs allies in our society? How can you use this book as a reference point for how to be a better ally?
4. Lythcott-Haims states that racism is antithetical to America’s stated ideals of “liberty and justice for all.” What allowed the framers of the Constitution and the authors of the Declaration of Independence to write about equality while condoning slavery and the inhumane treatment of Black people? How is that mind-set apparent through the present day? What do you think we can do about it?

JULIE LYTHCOTT-HAIMS