

# Black Inc. Book Club Notes

**TITLE:** The Invisible History of the Human Race: How DNA and History Shape Our Identities and Our Futures

**AUTHOR:** Christine Kenneally

**ISBN:** 9781863957038

**PRICE:** \$29.99

**SUBJECT:** Non-Fiction

## *About the Book*

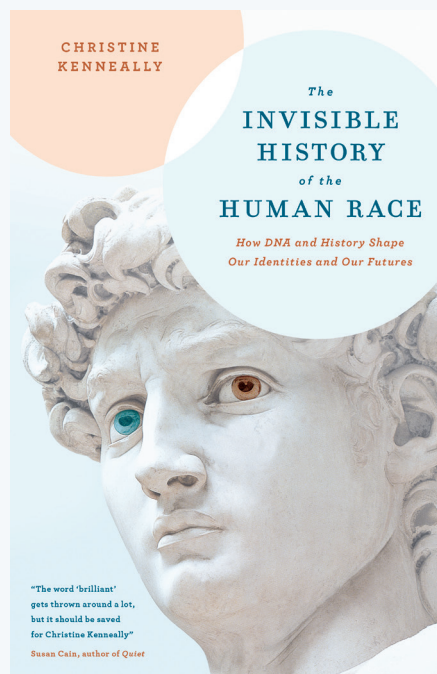
*The Invisible History of the Human Race* is about some of the biggest questions we can ask about ourselves. Who am I? Why am I like I am? Where do I fit in human history? It is also about questions on a broader scale. What is it to be human? How are we alike and different? What more can we learn about ourselves?

Bringing together the sciences and the humanities, Christine Kenneally looks at these questions, examining what gets passed down over generations. In the first section, she addresses our ideas about what gets passed down. She then moves on to looking at what does get passed down. The final part is about how what gets passed down affects us.

Kenneally starts by examining genealogy. Why does it have such a bad reputation with academic historians and scientists? She looks at how the study of one's family can be illuminating, and counters arguments against the practice, such as that it serves eugenics.

What else gets passed down as well as the written (and now digitised) records that are so useful to genealogists? Ideas and feelings can be – the use of the plough affected gender relations in societies, for example, and a history of slave trading still affects African countries today. And then there is DNA, that tiny piece of information that is really at the centre of this book.

Exploring both a history of humanity's understanding of DNA, and what DNA tells us about human history, Kenneally shows us both the possibilities and



the current limits of research into and based on DNA. What is passed down is contributory, not deterministic, she says, but it can still reveal much about what our genes mean for us in terms of belonging, identity, and health.

This book is not just about the ideas contained within it, but is a passionate argument for the value of exploring our heredity and ancestry, and continuing to find out more.

## **About the Author**

Christine Kenneally is an award-winning journalist and author who has written for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Slate*, *Time* magazine, *New Scientist*, *The Monthly*, and other publications. She is the author of *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language*, which was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award. She currently lives in Melbourne.

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## Praise for *The Invisible History of the Human Race*

“Christine Kenneally’s brilliant, ambitious work integrates cutting edge genetics with a deeply humanistic perspective on our personal and communal past. Transcending the usual intellectual silos, she shows how historical events became inscribed in DNA and how our ancestry casts riveting shadows onto the future. This wholly original book will change how you view your parents, your children and your own messy, mosaic self.” —Amanda Schaffer, contributor to the *New Yorker* online and contributing editor at *MIT Technology Review*

“The word ‘brilliant’ gets thrown around a lot, but it should be saved for Christine Kenneally and her book *The Invisible History of the Human Race*. Transcending the nature-nurture dichotomy, Kenneally shows us how our societies and our selves got to be the way they are. Don’t read this book looking for neat answers—gaze instead through a glorious kaleidoscope of science, psychology, history and first-class storytelling.” —Susan Cain, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*

“Christine Kenneally’s sensational book belongs in the backpack of anyone who wants to explore his or her family’s past. Crisply written and packed with myriad fresh facts and rights, *The Invisible History* will make the journey down the genealogical trail a lot richer and more meaningful.” —Sylvia Nasar, author of *Grand Pursuit: The Story of Economic Genius*

“Kenneally offers a rich, thoughtful blend of science, social science and philosophy in a manner that mixes personal history with the history of the human species.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“The breadth of this book; its abundance of enthralling accounts and astonishing science; its adept, vivid writing; and Kenneally’s exquisitely calibrated judgment make it the richest, freshest, most fun book on genetics in some time” —*New York Times*

“original and provocative” —*New Yorker*

“This book is a trailblazer because it’s the first one I’ve ever read that examines how biology, psychology, and history come together to shape each one of us as individuals. It’s thoughtful, carefully researched and engaging.” —*Guardian*

A New York Times Notable Book of the Year 2014

Shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize

## Questions for discussion

1. Has the book changed where you sit on the nature versus nurture debate? Or does the book make that debate redundant?
2. How much does the past matter to your understanding of yourself? Did this change after you read the book?
3. Has the book changed your understanding of how the past affects the future?
4. ‘Pretty much everyone alive today has been asked some form of the question “Who are you?” and the ancient and universal impulse has been to respond by talking about our family’ (p4). Is this your experience and response?
5. Have you explored the genealogy of your family? If so, why? What did you gain from it? What connection do you feel with the family you have discovered? If not, why not? Do you share the critics’ dismissal of it? Are you more inclined to do embark on some genealogy now?
6. Kenneally argues that ‘dismissing genealogy on the grounds of egalitarianism today is anachronistic’ (p46). Do you agree that we are beyond class now, and that therefore the impulse to search for one’s ancestors is entirely unrelated to proving one’s ‘superiority’?

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7. 'Totalitarian power thrives when it alienates people from basic information about themselves' (p92). Do we have a right to information about ourselves? What kinds of information? What about the genetic information about our health that is discussed in Chapter 14?

8. Would you want records of your family kept in the Mormons' vault? Are you offended by the idea of you or your relatives being offered posthumous baptism?

9. Kenneally talks about how the easy availability of records means anonymity is getting harder (p110 and throughout Chapter 6). Is this a good or bad thing, and what kinds of controls might we need on such records?

10. Discuss the examples in Chapter 7 of how ideas and feelings get passed down in cultures. What ideas and values do you think you have inherited that you see as natural rather than cultural?

11. 'Different segments of DNA give us a glimpse of the fine-grained social processes and physical interactions that together add up to form the genomic history of the world. They force us to contemplate how alike we are and how unique we are. Above all they underscore how brief our personal moment in that history is' (p201). Has getting an understanding of DNA through reading this book made you contemplate these things?

12. Woodward and Sorenson had hoped that their genome project would bring about change for the good: 'perhaps if people understood and knew how closely they were related to each other, they would treat each other differently, hopefully better' (p224). Do you think that people understanding that everyone has common ancestors would lead to better relationships between different individuals and cultures?

13. DNA does not exist in a cultural vacuum. What are some of the potential negative impacts of reading history in DNA?

14. Kenneally asks: 'Does race exist in our genes or just in our heads?' (p236). She argues that race is not a useful concept for science but that ancestry is real (p239). What do you think? How do you understand the distinction?

15. 'If you find your ancestry explains something about your experience of yourself or your family members or your body, then it's a worthwhile pursuit. If your ancestry provides you with a framework for a cluster of ideas or thoughts or feelings that you have never connected before but that suddenly seem related in light of what you've learned, then it's not only interesting but also productive' (p263). Do you agree?

16. Would you, or have you, had genetic testing for medical reasons? What would you, or did you, do with such knowledge?

17. 'Your genome is just the first hand that life deals you. How you play it is up to you' (p312). How far do you think your life has been determined by your genome, how far by your environment, and how far by your own decisions?