



Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class

By Lawrence Otis Graham

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Debutante cotillions. Million-dollar homes. Summers in Martha's Vineyard. Membership in the Links, Jack & Jill, Deltas, Boule, and AKAs. An obsession with the right schools, families, social clubs, and skin complexion. This is the world of the black upper class and the focus of the first book written about the black elite by a member of this hard-to-penetrate group.

Author and TV commentator Lawrence Otis Graham, one of the nation's most prominent spokesmen on race and class, spent six years interviewing the wealthiest black families in America. He includes historical photos of a people that made their first millions in the 1870s. Graham tells who's in and who's not in the group today with separate chapters on the elite in New York, Los Angeles, Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Nashville, and New Orleans. A new Introduction explains the controversy that the book elicited from both the black and white communities.

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Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class By Lawrence Otis Graham Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #55855 in Books
- Brand: Harper Perennial
- Published on: 1999-12-22
- Released on: 1999-12-22
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 1.04" w x 5.31" l, .77 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 448 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Graham, an African-American attorney, went undercover as a busboy at an all-white Connecticut country club and wrote about the experience first in *New York* magazine and then in *Member of the Club*, his 1996 book of essays. Now, he switches his attention from the white to the black elite. Graham spent six years researching the history of the African-American upper crust and this book is both a thorough work of social history and a thoughtful appraisal of his own place in the black social hierarchy. Graham makes clear that the black elite has always been strongly shaped by the peculiarly intertwined American preoccupations with color and class, noting that, in the past, most members of the black elite felt they were "superior to other blacks and to most whites." Stressing the importance of surrounding themselves with "like-minded people," the black elite enrolled their children in certain social clubs, which were training grounds for the social graces and created the foundation of a black old-boy network. Graham stops short of offering an apology for behavior that is hard to characterize as anything other than snobbish (he himself had a nose job when he was 26 so that he would have a less "Negroid" look). But he does bemoan a dwindling interest in tradition, and he suggests that it wasn't such a bad thing to grow up in the 1960s and '70s without the "sense of anger and dissatisfaction the rest of black America" expressed in those years. Graham has produced a book that casts an unblinking eye on America's black elite, cataloguing its achievements while critically analyzing its shortcomings. It is a must read for anyone interested in African-American history and the impact of ideas about social class on our society. 16 pages of photos. BOMC main selection; first serial to *U.S. News and World Report*; author tour. (Feb.) FYI: The ABC News program 20/20 is producing a television segment based on the book.

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From Library Journal

In this work, Graham, who exposed bias against African Americans in his sharp-tongued account of working at an elite country club (*Member of the Club*, LJ 5/1/95), here focuses on "America's black upper class": a conservative, well-to-do group that dates back to the first black millionaires in the 1870s and whose members are associated with institutions like the Links and the Oak Bluffs area of Martha's Vineyard.

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From Kirkus Reviews

A record of the pleasures and the follies of an elevated black society. According to Graham, all racial, ethnic, and religious groups lay claim to their own privileged class that group which, either because of family name, wealth, title, education, or other circumstance fashions itself a cut above the rest. The class sets itself apart with their clubs, their fraternities, and their sororities, while looking askance at any outsiders who can never make the grade. The reasons for forming such exclusive groups are often perfectly honorable, most commonly because members have been denied access to other organizations in the larger population. But matters can get out of hand, as Graham (*Member of the Club: Reflections on Life in a Racially Polarized World*, 1995) perhaps unwittingly demonstrates in his examination of what he calls the black elite. His is less of a critical examination and more of a glossary of people, places, and things constituting the black upper class. And as one might expect, this realm of the right colleges and degrees and pedigrees is downright incestuous, a world where cotillions and coming-out parties still matter. Graham, an insider and attorney, knows it well. Yet his contemporary savvy matters less, in the end, than does his appetite for historical detail. His insights into the story of blacks in vacation spots like Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts and Sag Harbor on Long Island, N.Y., for instance, are fascinating. Nevertheless, the ongoing claustrophobia of

privilege (with many of the same people and their coteries cycling and recycling) can weary a reader. One walks away with the impression that Graham's effort could have been cut in half and all one would have missed is an extra afternoon of interminable croquet, followed by cucumber sandwiches down by the gazebo. (38 b&w photos, not seen) (Author tour) -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Francis Rutland:

As people who live in typically the modest era should be upgrade about what going on or details even knowledge to make all of them keep up with the era and that is always change and move ahead. Some of you maybe will update themselves by reading through books. It is a good choice for you personally but the problems coming to you actually is you don't know what one you should start with. This Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class is our recommendation so you keep up with the world. Why, because this book serves what you want and need in this era.

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Gabrielle Ponds:

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