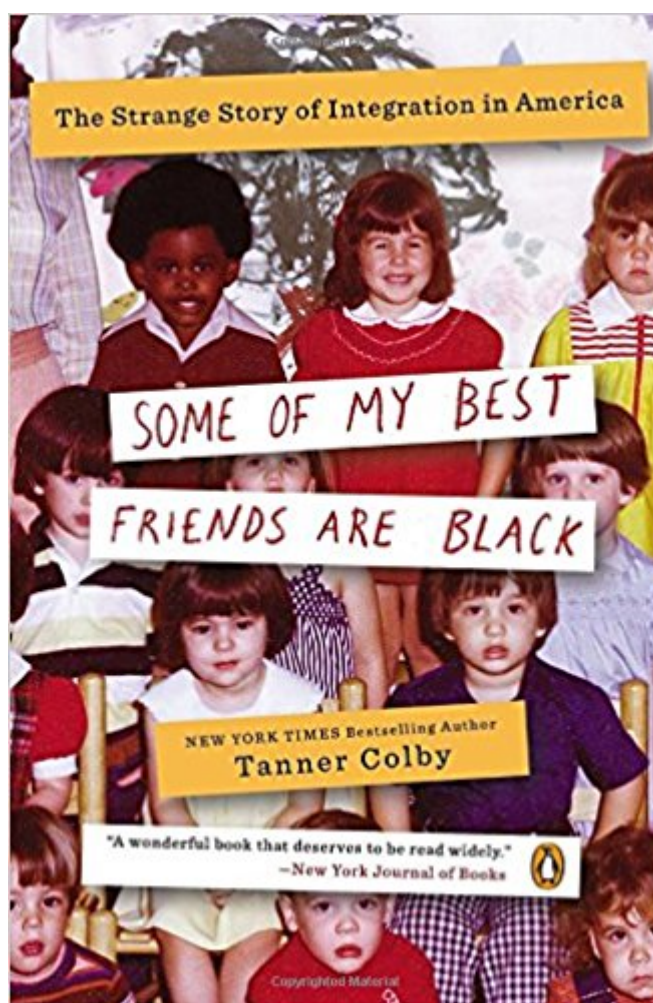


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# Some Of My Best Friends Are Black: The Strange Story Of Integration In America



## Synopsis

An irreverent, yet powerful exploration of race relations by the New York Times-bestselling author of *The Chris Farley Show* Frank, funny, and incisive, *Some of My Best Friends Are Black* offers a profoundly honest portrait of race in America. In a book that is part reportage, part history, part social commentary, Tanner Colby explores why the civil rights movement ultimately produced such little true integration in schools, neighborhoods, offices, and churches—the very places where social change needed to unfold. Weaving together the personal, intimate stories of everyday people—black and white—Colby reveals the strange, sordid history of what was supposed to be the end of Jim Crow, but turned out to be more of the same with no name. He shows us how far we have come in our journey to leave mistrust and anger behind—and how far all of us have left to go.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Who would expect a coauthor of two Saturday Night Live alumni biographies (*The Chris Farley Show*; Belushi) to pen a thoughtful, judicious, yet provocative social history of American race relations? Evenhanded, felicitously written, and animated by numerous interviews, Colby's book is a pleasure..." -- *Library Journal* "Pointing out the shortfalls of court-ordered busing, affirmative action, and other well-intentioned programs, Colby's charming and surprisingly funny book shows us both how far we've come in bridging the racial divide and how far we've yet to go." -- Publisher's

Weekly" "With depressing persuasiveness, the author argues that we haven't achieved racial integration, because, well, we don't really want to. ...the author's personal voice is compelling and his thesis is most disturbing. Recommended reading for anyone who still thinks we live in a post-racial America." -- Kirkus "Colby, emerging from the "comedians who died young" pigeonhole that he had made for himself... finds a new way into a national discussion, which is so cluttered at this point that it can be difficult to find the floor. His refreshing angle is based in aw-shucks honesty and an earnest humor..." -- The Daily Beast "Kansas City residents who are proud of their metropolis might wish Tanner Colby had never written *Some of My Best Friends are Black*, despite the book's superb qualities." -- The Kansas City Star --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"I've often thought that the issue of race has been more than adequately dealt with by America's people of color and that it was finally white people's turn to engage with the uncomfortable subject if we were to move forward together as a nation. In *Some of My Best Friends Are Black*, Tanner Colby bravely and ably accepts the challenge. This book taught me unexpected and valuable lessons about my country, my people, and myself. What can a white guy named Tanner teach a black guy named Baratunde about race in America? Turns out the answer is 'plenty.'" -- Baratunde Thurston, author of *How to be Black* "In weaving together the personal narratives (including his own) of "the Children of White Flight" and "the Children of the Dream" Tanner Colby has crafted a powerful piece of social commentary and contemporary history. Hugely readable, quirky, and incredibly smart, *Some of my Best Friends Are Black* presents four unforgettable smaller stories to tell the big story of race in today's America." -- Tim Naftali, author of *George H.W. Bush* and director emeritus of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum "Irony, surprise, virtue, and hustling are always the interwoven story of ethnic troubles in America. Tanner Colby lets us see that, however many advances have been accomplished, the unfamiliar styles of those who intend to do well--along with those who inevitably pollute any area with short-sighted economic dreams--inevitably lead to a universal conclusion: "Mistakes were made." The story of how and why this happened is what gives this book something special beyond the usual sentimentality imposed on human events, above and below." -- Stanley Crouch, author of *Reconsidering the Souls of Black Folk* --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I grew up in a relatively poor and very diverse community and our school was eventually bussed to a more affluent (and much whiter) neighborhood. I always assumed that we all did well because this change provided some uplift for me and many of my friends to move into a safer, more stable school

community. As some of the families in Vestavia Hills experienced, the initial trepidation to our coming dissolved once we arrived. Nonetheless I wonder how much of my ease in fitting into this new environment came from being white. I never question how my friends of color who also fit in might have had to give up a sense of authentic identity. Whether they made tradeoffs or not the fact that I never thought to ask says a lot about my privilege as a white person and social mobility in America. Now the mother of a bi-racial child in a city that struggles mightily with its undercover history of racism, this is a book I feel all of us should read and consider as an attempt to better come to grips with the meaning of white privilege.

I liked this book a whole lot (which I had been skeptical about from the title at the start). What I liked best were the numerous anecdotes that gave context and perspective to the point he was trying to get across.

It was a good book

Great book!!!! Highly recommend it!

"Anybody tells you that this school didn't break off to try and stay all white is lyin' through their teeth." -Vestavia Hills Principal Cas McWaters. As a resident of Vestavia Hills, Alabama, to read that admission from someone in a position of authority within the Vestavia Hills school system was worth the price of this book. Hats off to Principal McWaters for his candor and Tanner Colby for a well written book. The first chapter of this book covers the story of Vestavia Hills as it relates to its schools and the issue of race. Since Colby graduated from Vestavia Hills High School, it is not only a historical account but also a personal journey of discovery. At times blunt, but not condemning, the book explores the perspectives of both blacks and whites involved in this piece of history. It is a sad story, but at the same time encouraging because it shows how we are now not what we were then. Most encouraging to me, is Mr. McWaters' candor and cooperation with the author. All too often, we have been unwilling to speak honestly about these issues. I am limiting my comments to the first chapter as I want to encourage Vestavians and people who live in the Birmingham, Alabama area to read this book. It should be required reading for all Vestavia Hills High School students in my humble opinion.

I'm very impressed with Colby's insight as to the history of integration. I live in Kansas City and had

heard from a friend of mine whose aunt was a long-time real-estate agent here what JC Nichols had done. Colby nailed it -- we had a long-time history of segregation forced by Nichols and the KC School Board. The rest of his narrative resonated with me as well. Have we really, truly, integrated? I think not.

In-groups and out-groups have been formed in different societies over the centuries. For example, in ancient times, we find the Greek/barbarian categorization of a certain in-group (Greeks) versus the out-group (barbarians = all non-Greeks), the Jew/gentile categorization (gentiles = all non-Jews), and the Christian/pagan categorization (pagans = all non-Christians). In more recent centuries, in American culture down to the 1960s, we find that white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) dominated the prestige culture, relegating everybody else to the out-group (= all non-whites and all non-Anglo-Saxons and all non-Protestants). However, in each of these examples, the people in the supposed out-group usually were not one cohesive group. Instead, they were several out-groups. For example, blacks were one out-group, even though most of them were Protestants. Roman Catholics were another out-group, even though most of them were white. Jews were another out-group, even though most of them were white. And so on. Nevertheless, in American culture in the 1950s and 1960s, the black civil rights movement managed to win widespread support among certain whites, resulting in landmark civil rights legislation under President Lyndon B. Johnson. Tragically, President Johnson also escalated American involvement in the Vietnam war, and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader of the black civil rights movement, was also involved in anti-war protests. Tragically, Dr. King was assassinated in 1968. His assassination sparked riots in certain parts of the country. After Richard M. Nixon was elected president in 1968, it fell to his administration to help restore law and order, on the one hand, and, on the other, restore peace and calm and hope among blacks by promoting affirmative action and so-called black capitalism. But in the years following Dr. King's tragic assassination, his dream of racial integration met with resistance not only from many whites, but also from certain blacks. In his book *Some of My Best Friends Are Black: The Strange Story of Integration in America*, Tanner Colby says, "If children conform to the standards set by their peers, in the 1970s and 1980s the peer pressure for black children to keep with their own was intense" (page 33). In the terminology of in-groups and out-groups, they were being pressured to form a cohesive in-group of their own - ostensibly to resist certain efforts toward integration and to celebrate their own cultural heritage. Up to a certain point, this trend is understandable and even defensible. However, when peer pressure works to suggest that getting an education is somehow not a good thing, this kind of attitude about

getting an education can be self-defeating in the long run. Regarding the schools, Colby pointedly says, "To say that America's schools are resegregating is to misstate the facts. They can't resegregate. They've never integrated. The absence of artificial transfer programs to shuttle kids around just means we're seeing the country for what it has been all along. What it never stopped being" (pages 204-205). Colby's book is designed to be a kind of report card about Dr. King's dream of integration - or at least a kind of report about it. Colby centers his attention on four places: (1) Birmingham, Alabama, where he went to school at suburban Vestavia during the heyday of busing to achieve racial integration; (2) Kansas City, Missouri, where he perceptively focuses on housing issues; (3) Madison Avenue, where he worked at one time as a copy writer in an advertising company; (4) Lafayette, Louisiana, where he spent his toddlerhood and the early years of his life. He interviewed certain people regarding issues about integration in each of these areas. In my estimate the interviews are the best parts of the book. (He now lives, with his wife, in Brooklyn, New York.) As Colby shows, J.C. Nichols started his high-status housing segregation in Mission Hills, an area in Kansas City, Missouri, decades before the white flight to segregated suburbs in more recent decades. Disclosure: I grew up in a white working-class neighborhood in Kansas City, Kansas, but I am quite familiar with Kansas City, Missouri, and with the white suburban areas in Johnson County, Kansas. In addition, in my first and second years in college, I attended Rockhurst College, the Jesuit college on Troost Avenue in Kansas City, Missouri. Now known as Rockhurst University, Colby discusses the neighborhood around it in his extended treatment of housing in Kansas City, Missouri. He describes Troost Avenue as the Berlin wall - with Rockhurst on the east side of Troost - the wrong side to be on to receive pizza deliveries. Just to the west side of Troost is the University of Missouri - Kansas City (UMKC). As Colby recounts, some faculty from UMKC and other home-owners east of Troost formed a broad neighborhood organization to protect their housing investments from the perfectly legal block-busting approaches of certain real-estate profiteers. Concerning advertising, Colby says, "Advertising is aspirational. It takes what people want to believe about themselves and then sells it back to them in the form of a car or a house or an iPod. At the end of the day, people don't really aspire to whiteness or blackness. Back in Kansas City, J.C. Nichols wasn't selling segregated housing. He was selling status. . . . The gold standard for any brand is to achieve a global status that transcends those [cultural and linguistic] barriers, that needs no translation. Nike. Apple. BMW. They're not black. They're not white. They're just cool. That's the brand that makes money. And the only way to be that brand is by connecting with each individual personally while still having a message that resonates universally. Which is why good advertising is really hard to do, and why most of it sucks" (page 213; his emphasis). But J.C. Nichols

was not the only person selling status. Arguably, all advertising is attempting to sell status. We Americans tend to be status-seekers, as Vance Packard pointed out decades ago in his book *The Status Seekers* (1959), the follow up to his widely read critique of advertising, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957). But if advertising is aspirational, so were Dr. King's speeches about integration. In Colby's words, Dr. King took what many people wanted to believe about themselves and sold them on the justice and timeliness of the black civil rights movement. Even so, he wasn't selling them a material commodity, exactly. Instead, he was selling them his dream of integration - a dream that many white Americans bought into, but by no means all whites. But what is Colby selling in his book? Basically, he is selling a tough-minded look at the efforts toward integration that Dr. King's speeches helped inspire. To be sure, Colby interviewed certain people whose successes are worth reporting - and worth reading about. The aspirational dimension of his book comes from those winning stories of experiences of modest success. Yes, we Americans collectively should cheer for the people involved in the modest successes that Colby recounts. In addition, we should celebrate the end of Jim Crow laws in the South and the enlargement of the black middle class in recent decades. We also have greater diversity in the prestige culture in America today than we had in, say, the 1950s. However, for the most part, Colby is advertising the decidedly disappointing results of the efforts toward integration. From the time of President Johnson's administration onward, we Americans collectively have expended an enormous amount of time and energy and money from the federal and state and local governments and from private sources in working on efforts toward integration. Our collective expenditures of these resources have been gigantic - leading to massive busing efforts and many other schemes involving magnet schools. The British poet Robert Browning famously wrote, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" Thus far, Dr. King's dream of integration has exceeded our grasp. Dr. King's dream of integration is a vision -- it is visionary - just as certain statements in the Declaration of Independence are visionary -- aspirational. It's a goal toward which we Americans can choose to work, if we want to. But to work toward the goal of integration, we should be as tough-minded as Colby is about just how hard meaningful integration is to work out. Yes, to be sure, there is a systemic dimension to the institutional structures in American society that work against integration. The systemic dimension should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, as Colby shows, we should not overlook the individuals, either. In the final analysis, the optimal form of integration will involve individuals who freely choose to help advance integration. In the meantime, Colby's book shows that the time has come for tough-minded Americans to go back to the drawing board, as we say, and come up with new ways to help advance Dr. King's dream of integration.

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