BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT

UNDER THE SKIN
THE HIDDEN TOLL OF RACISM ON AMERICAN LIVES AND ON THE HEALTH OF OUR NATION

LINDA VILLAROSA

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2023 BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY BOOK PRIZE FINALIST
BOOK SYNOPSIS

From an award-winning writer at the New York Times Magazine and a contributor to the 1619 Project comes a landmark book that tells the full story of racial health disparities in America, revealing the toll racism takes on individuals and the health of our nation.

In 2018, Linda Villarosa’s New York Times Magazine article on maternal and infant mortality among black mothers and babies in America caused an awakening. Hundreds of studies had previously established a link between racial discrimination and the health of Black Americans, with little progress toward solutions. But Villarosa’s article exposing that a Black woman with a college education is as likely to die or nearly die in childbirth as a white woman with an eighth grade education made racial disparities in health care impossible to ignore.

Now, in Under the Skin, Linda Villarosa lays bare the forces in the American health-care system and in American society that cause Black people to “live sicker and die quicker” compared to their white counterparts. Today’s medical texts and instruments still carry fallacious slavery-era assumptions that Black bodies are fundamentally different from white bodies. Study after study of medical settings show worse treatment and outcomes for Black patients. Black people live in dirtier, more polluted communities due to environmental racism and neglect from all levels of government. And, most powerfully, Villarosa describes the new understanding that coping with the daily scourge of racism ages Black people prematurely. Anchored by unforgettable human stories and offering incontrovertible proof, Under the Skin is dramatic, tragic, and necessary reading.

BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT: UNDER THE SKIN
Linda Villarosa is a journalism professor at the City University of New York and a contributing writer at the New York Times Magazine, where she covers the intersection of race and health. She has also served as executive editor at Essence and as a science editor at The New York Times. Her article on maternal and infant mortality was a finalist for a National Magazine Award. She is a contributor to The 1619 Project.

LEARN MORE ABOUT LINDA AT LINDAVILLAROSA.COM.
LINDA VILLAROSA IN THE MEDIA

HEAR FROM LINDA DIRECTLY ABOUT HER WORK IN SELECT RADIO AND TV SPOTLIGHTS, PLUS WRITTEN INTERVIEWS:

- **NPR / Fresh Air** – ‘1619 Project’ Journalist Lays Bare Why Black Americans ‘Live Sicker and Die Quicker’
- **The Nation** – Linda Villarosa on the Impact of the Racist Health Care System on “Every Body”
- **Queer Forty** – Under Her Skin: An Interview with Linda Villarosa
- **WNYC / The Takeaway** – How Racial Health Disparities Persist
- **PBS NewsHour** – ‘Under the Skin’ Delves Into Systemic Racism and Its Toll on Health

'BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT: UNDER THE SKIN'
BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WARNING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDE SPOILERS!

1. How does poverty influence who has access to quality health care? How does racial discrimination and bias contribute to disparities in health care? How did Linda Villarosa’s thinking about racial disparities in health care shift over time? How did her opinions on systemic bias change while witnessing her father’s treatment for colon cancer and dementia?

2. What did the Relf v. Weinberger lawsuit reveal about sterilization under U.S. government programs? How were the Relfs targeted based on their race, class, and intellectual abilities? What interventions could have protected them?

3. How does the history of medicine in the U.S. demonstrate that its roots are in slavery? How is this reflected today in how Black people are treated, how their pain is managed, and how they receive care? What can be done to reconcile this history within health care?

4. What did Villarosa witness while Simone Landrum was giving birth in New Orleans, with support from Latona Giwa? How was Landrum treated during this birth, and during previous pregnancies? What is the role of a doula and how do they provide much-needed maternal care? How can doulas be better protected and supported?
BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How were residents of Walnut Cove in Stokes County, North Carolina harmed by Duke Energy? Why were the county’s poor and Black residents disproportionately harmed? How was Danielle Bailey harmed? How did local activists battle for better living conditions? Why are activists of color, like Danielle and her neighbors, often left out of the environmental movement?

How is Black mental health care affected by racist stereotypes, assumptions, and stigma? What are some of the vulnerabilities that arise from untreated mental illness? What effect does this have on Black men? Children? Teenagers?

Why is mental illness often treated as a crime? How does this criminalization disproportionately impact Black people? Why is drug use criminalized in the United States? What alternatives exist or should be created?

Why was Diamond Village in West Virginia established? How did the SOAR (Solutions Oriented Addiction Response) program prevent overdoses in Charleston? Why are harm reduction programs like these often created in the absence of government support? Why are these programs often targeted for police raids and criminalization?
BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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9. How did the HIV/AIDS virus disproportionately impact Black people in America? How do community health workers (CHWs) like Cedric Sturdevant address some of the racial health disparities? Why are CHWs underutilized, underpaid, and poorly supported in the United States? How do you think CHWs should be supported and protected?

10. How are health extension workers (HEWs) an integral part of Ethiopia’s health care system? How do HEW programs support young women like Aster Roba? How do HEW programs contribute to declines in maternal and child mortality rates around the world? How could the United States benefit from more programs that utilize community health workers?

11. Why is the mortality rate for Black babies influenced by the race of their doctor? Why do you think the mortality rate for white babies is largely unaffected by the doctor’s race? How can programs, such as Perinatal Quality Collaboratives, improve hospital practices? What are some of the limitations of these programs?

12. How are doctors’ decisions shaped by their internal bias? What are some of the recent and current medical school interventions that attempt to address racism within health care? What other interventions do you think should be made?

THESE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WERE CREATED BY THE PUBLISHING HOUSE ANCHOR BOOKS AND ARE NOT AFFILIATED WITH BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY.
How did the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that epidemics do discriminate based on race? How did you witness patterns of marginalization, bias, and inequality during the pandemic? Why do the conditions of social and physical environments—also known as social determinants of health—have an outsized influence on health outcomes?

How did America’s racial reckoning and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerate awareness of the history and racism in the U.S.? Why is now the time for transformative change in health, health care, and health equity? What actions do you think should be taken first? What actions can you take?
FURTHER READING AND MORE INFORMATION

Below is a list of healthcare organizations and nonprofits committed to fighting the racism prevalent in America’s healthcare system:

- **African American Health Coalition**: The African American Health Coalition is dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles and advocating for healthy communities for people of African descent.

- **African American Planning Commission**: The African American Planning Commission is a New York City-based nonprofit organization committed to reducing homelessness and addressing the related issues of domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, mental illness, substance abuse, shortage of affordable housing, and unemployment in the communities in which we live and serve.

- **American Sickle Cell Anemia Association**: The American Sickle Cell Anemia Association (ASCAA) is a Cleveland-based organization operating in the state of Ohio. Founded in 1971, the ASCAA is the world’s oldest sickle cell and hemoglobinopathy service organization. We are also the largest repository of statistical and case information beneficial to the worldwide patient network and the medical establishment. In addition, our overall focus is to provide a wide range of medical-social-work-oriented services to individuals and families diagnosed with either the sickle cell trait or variants of the disease itself. Since its inception, the agency has served more than 400,000 families.

- **Association of Black Psychologists**: The Association of Black Psychologists sees its mission and destiny as the liberation of the African Mind, empowerment of the African Character, and enlivenment and illumination of the African Spirit.

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**FURTHER READING AND MORE INFORMATION**

- **Black AIDS Institute:** Black AIDS Institute (BAI) is dedicated to ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Black community. BAI is the only uniquely and unapologetically Black HIV think and do tank in America. We believe in complete freedom for Black people by eradicating systematic oppression so that we can live long, healthy lives. Our decisions, responses, programming, and messaging are informed by our roots, and by our core values of Black Empowerment, Equity, Impact, Self-Determination, and Integrity.

- **Black Emotional and Mental Health (BEAM) Collective:** Our mission is to remove the barriers that Black people experience getting access to or staying connected with emotional health care and healing through education, training, advocacy, and the creative arts.

- **Black Mamas Matter Alliance:** The Black Mamas Matter Alliance (BMMA) is a Black women-led cross-sectoral alliance that centers Black mamas and birthing people to advocate, drive research, build power, and shift culture for Black maternal health, rights, and justice.

- **Black Women’s Health Imperative:** Our mission is to lead the effort to solve the most pressing health issues that affect Black women and girls in the U.S. Through investments in evidence-based strategies, we deliver bold new programs and advocate health-promoting policies.

- **California Black Women's Health Project:** Established in 1994 as an affiliate of the Black Women’s Health Imperative based in Washington, D.C., we seek to empower women to become active participants in improving their health status. We are committed to advocating for policies and practices that promote and improve physical, spiritual, mental and emotional well-being of Black women and girls in California.

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FURTHER READING AND MORE INFORMATION

- **Center for African American Health:** We empower the Black community to make informed health decisions that benefit the whole person through education, collaboration, and advocacy. We believe that health is more than health care. Our goal is to focus on the places where we live, work, play, and pray to attain the highest level of health and well-being for all our communities.

- **Center for Black Women’s Wellness:** Our mission is to improve the health and well-being of underserved Black women and their families. Established in 1988 as a program under the National Black Women’s Health Project (now the Black Women’s Health Imperative), our initial purpose was to conduct self-help group development in public housing, to develop resiliency among low-income women. Over time, CBWW expanded its reach and scope, serving women, men, and children throughout Metropolitan Atlanta through a host of programs and services aimed at optimizing health, strengthening families and communities, and advancing health equity.

- **Grand Rapids African American Health Institute:** The Grand Rapids African American Health Institute is a leading national organization devoted to achieving healthcare parity for African Americans. Driven by research and committed to education and advocacy, GRAAHI aims to create awareness and develop programs that achieve positive health outcomes for all communities. The organization seeks to ensure that all people have optimal health care and benefit from health systems without race being an impediment. GRAAHI operates under four pillars of service: Community, Advocacy, Research and Education (CARE)

- **National Black Nurses Association:** NBNA mission is to provide a forum for collective action by African American nurses to represent and provide a forum for Black nurses to advocate for and implement strategies to ensure access to the highest quality of health care for persons of color.
FURTHER READING AND MORE INFORMATION

- **National Medical Association:** The National Medical Association (NMA) is the collective voice of African American physicians and the leading force for parity and justice in medicine and the elimination of disparities in health. It is the largest and oldest national organization representing African American physicians and their patients in the United States. The NMA is a national professional and scientific organization representing the interests of more than 50,000 African American physicians and the patients they serve. NMA is committed to improving the quality of health among minorities and disadvantaged people through its membership, professional development, community health education, advocacy, research and partnerships with federal and private agencies. Throughout its history the National Medical Association has focused primarily on health issues related to African Americans and medically underserved populations; however, its principles, goals, initiatives and philosophy encompass all ethnic groups.

- **Sad Girls Club:** Sad Girls Club is a nonprofit organization committed to destigmatizing mental wellness for millennial and Gen Z womxn, girls, and femmes of color.

- **Sista Afya Community Mental Wellness:** Sista Afya Community Mental Wellness' vision is for Black women across the African Diaspora to be free from psychological and physical illness through supporting one another and engaging in accessible mental wellness care that centers the well-being of the whole person.

- **Therapy for Black Girls:** Therapy for Black Girls is an online space dedicated to encouraging the mental wellness of Black women and girls.
BKLYN BOOKMATCH READALIKES

Did you enjoy Under the Skin: The Hidden Toll of Racism on American Lives and on the Health of Our Nation? Want to read something similar? Check out these readalike titles below.

- Weathering by Arline T. Geronimus
- Sickening by Anne Pollock
- Who Is Wellness For? By Fariha Roisin
- Medical Apartheid by Harriet A. Washington
- Eating While Black by Psyche A. Williams-Forson

YOU CAN ACCESS THE LIST AND PLACE HOLDS ON THESE TITLES IN MULTIPLE FORMATS THROUGH THE BPL CATALOG: BORROW.BKLYNLIBRARY.ORG

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