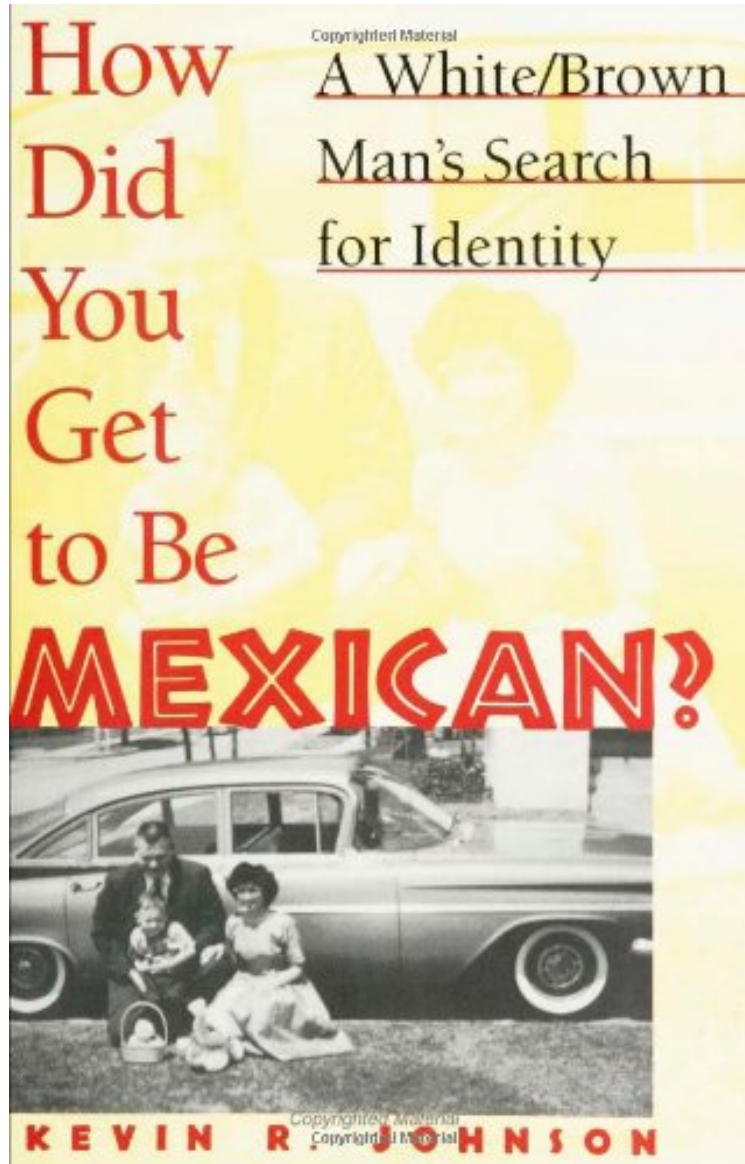


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How Did You Get To Be Mexican

Kevin Johnson

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#1518167 in Books 1999-08-10 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.00 x .70 x 6.00l, .96 #File Name: 1566396514272 pages | File size: 61.Mb

Kevin Johnson : How Did You Get To Be Mexican before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised How Did You Get To Be Mexican:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Best Book I Ever Read By P. Lukens The subject matter was of tremendous personal interest to me, because, like Johnson, I have an Anglo father and a Latina mother, and am, myself an academic. I often found myself identifying with his anecdotes and quite thoroughly enjoyed the combination of autobiography and academic tome. On the academic side, Johnson contributes a great deal (not to mention a new

perspective) to the literature on racial construction. Too many academic works on Latino/a racial construction treat Latino/as as a monolithic body, suffering the same levels and types of discrimination, whether they are an immigrant or US born. Johnson recognized the great diversity amongst Latino populations. Some mixed race individuals, in fact, face more discrimination from Latinos than from whites. To be embarrassingly honest, I had never heard of Kevin Johnson until he reviewed my book for the Journal of American History. Wanting to know the scholars who reviewed me, I purchased and read this book. I whole heartedly recommend this work to any mixed race individual, as well as to any academic working in the fields of racial construction, Latino history, or even those studying recent US History in general.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great! By Michelle I love this book!! Came pretty quickly as well!

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Identify This Book By Bill Hinchberger This is the story of a mother who dearly wanted to assimilate but couldn't - and her son, who could have but finally wouldn't. It is the story of a man of mixed White-Latino heritage engulfed in self-doubt about his place in a society obsessed with race. It is the story of a prominent young lawyer and college professor who can never fully enjoy his success because someone always pops up to accuse him of being a "box checker," a counterfeit Latino for affirmative action purposes. Contradictions run wild in Kevin Johnson's autobiographical account of growing up racially mixed and emotionally mixed up. On one page, he rightly laments racial pigeonholing. On the next, he paints a painfully detailed picture of someone's racial history and physical features. The book is replete with mixed heritage characters who "identify" publicly with the racial tradition of one parent over that of another. At first this approach left me frustrated (maybe I yearned for transcendence). But soon I realized that Johnson could hardly tell his story otherwise: the contradictions are not his but society's. Such is the sad - indeed the surreal - state of America's racial politics. However sad and surreal race relations indeed may be, books like Johnson's represent a breakthrough of sorts for diversity and understanding. For most of our nation's history, dispossessed individuals were truly silenced - either by poverty or outright discrimination. As society began to allow different voices to emerge, pure outsiders got most of the attention. Now people like Johnson, who inhabits what the book jacket calls "the borderlands between racial identities," are receiving the call to tell their stories. Before I run on any longer, I should reveal some modest secrets of my own. Johnson and I attended the same high school in Southern California. In college, in the late 1970s, we shared two different apartments on Berkeley's Haste Street, a student ghetto just south of the University of California campus. We remained friends as he progressed through the legal profession to his current position as associate dean for academic affairs and professor of law at the University of California, Davis. Johnson was born in 1958, the first child of a White father and a Mexican American mother. His parents divorced when he was young, and he grew up hopping from the barrio's poverty to the relative affluence of the beach cities near Los Angeles. Johnson's mother, a staunch assimilationist, neither taught him Spanish nor encouraged pride in his Latin roots. When she remarried, she attached herself yet another Anglo. Following the advice of his politically savvy father, the adolescent Johnson began to ponder his Mexican American background. He began taking Spanish in high school. He continued in college. Meanwhile Berkeley introduced him - as it did us all - to heretofore unimagined diversity. Yet, to me, my roommate seemed most comfortable while slam dancing to the Dead Kennedys at the San Francisco punk club Mabuhay Gardens. White like me, I would have told anyone who bothered to ask about his racial identity (though I knew, of course, about his mother's background). Tellingly, no one raised the question. My analysis at the time partly reflected my own lack of maturity and perception, but there's little doubt that Harvard Law School forced my friend unequivocally out of his Latino closet. Like other Harvard law students from modest economic and social backgrounds, he wondered whether he really deserved his place in the elite institution. Had the admissions committee let him in just because he'd checked the Latino box on the application? Even after he made law review, he could never convince himself. During a tussle over affirmative action on the virtually all-white law review, Johnson took a firm pro-diversity stance. From that point on, he became increasingly outspoken about his Mexican American heritage - both personally and professionally. Though it might have been easier to blend in as white, he opted for a more rewarding, if rockier, bicultural path. His chapter about Harvard, which opens the book, should be required reading for any undergraduate contemplating the LSAT. This isn't the first time someone has slammed Harvard Law, and it won't be the last, but Johnson's account makes the experience seem outright hellish for anyone with the slightest non-conformist streak. Pranks (probably innocuous to your average Yale man) resound with new meaning when aimed at a sensitive outsider. For his defense of affirmative action, Johnson earned a citation in a spoof yearbook as author of a volume entitled, "I Hate Whites." Nearly two decades later, the barb still stings. After law school, Johnson plunged into pro bono work on behalf of Latin American immigrants and married a woman of Mexican American descent. Virginia helped him grow more comfortable with his identity, and together they try to provide a foundation of Mexican culture for their three children. Policy discussions generally take a backseat in Johnson's autobiographical account. When they appear, they're grounded in personal experience - like his analysis of the "box checker" dilemma. The question is simple: what constitutes a member of an underprivileged group for the purposes of affirmative action? The answer is complex, if not insoluble. Under pressure to admit or hire individuals from certain groups, many institutions and businesses are keen to count anyone vaguely entitled to membership. Predictably, this has sparked a debate among civil rights activists over who qualifies to check the box. Individuals of mixed racial heritage, like Johnson, come under special

scrutiny. The phenomenon is captured by the book's title, "How Did You Get to Be a Mexican?" A senior professor asked Johnson that very question during an interview for a position on a law faculty. Johnson's book offers a partial answer, but no response will prove satisfactory as long as our society remains obsessed with race. Indeed, we can only put racism behind us when we no longer care about the answer.* Bill Hinchberger is the editor of the BrazilMax website.

A lawyer and professor describes growing up with a Mexican American mother who denied her heritage, and an Anglo father, and discusses racial identity in American society

From Kirkus sThe son of a Mexican-American mother and an Anglo father, Johnson ponders life as a "mixed-race" man in the racially charged atmosphere of America. Johnson (Law/Univ. of Calif., Davis) grew up uneasily among ethnic contradictions. His mother preferred to describe herself as "Spanish," rather than acknowledge her true heritage; even so, his father, a blue-eyed blond, urged him to embrace his Mexican heritage. In an era of affirmative action, Johnson felt highly conflicted about "checking the box" on college and law school entrance and loan forms and thereby profiting from an ethnic heritage that he grew up freely embracing. He felt just as uncomfortable with Anglos who didn't know his ethnicity as he did with militant Chicano activists who might doubt his bona fides. But Johnson regarded the painful plight of his mothershe was stricken by clinical depression and getting by on welfare after her two marriages had founderedas a negative example of what can happen to people who are forced by racism to deny who they really are. The bulk of the book is taken up with Johnson's intellectual autobiography, tracing his own uncertainties as questions of identity exacerbated the problems of adolescence and early adulthood, and then following his career as a lawyer and law professor more secure in his racial identity, though still not without self-doubt. Indeed, the most appealing aspect of the work is the author's candor about his insecurities and personal dilemmas. But bland writing fetters Johnson's intelligence. To put it bluntly, he writes like a lawyer. A thoughtful story, told somewhat indifferently. -- Copyright 1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. "A compelling and thoughtful portrayal of the struggle for identity faced by a sensitive young man who did not fit neatly into the artificial racial and ethnic categories embedded in the political and cultural fabric of this nation." -- Gregory H. Williams, Dean of Ohio State University College of Law and author of *Life on the Colorline: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*"Engaging and warmly inviting. Funny and tragic by turns, this book has a momentum that carries the reader along. Johnson's struggles reverberate beyond himself; the incidents he recounts, whether dramatic or small, apply to the lives of others who have had to deal with poverty, class origins, and racial stereotyping." -- Richard Delgado, coeditor of *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*From the Inside FlapDuring an interview for a faculty position, a senior professor asked Kevin Johnson bluntly: "How did you get to be a Mexican?" On the other hand, a young woman at a Harvard Law School dinner party inquired: "Are you one of those people whose high school friends are all dead from gangs and stuff?" The son of a Mexican-American mother and an Anglo father, Johnson has spent his life in the borderlands between racial identities. In this insightful book, he uses his experiences as a mixed Latino/Anglo to examine issues of diversity, assimilation, Latino immigration, race relations, and affirmative action in the contemporary United States. Johnson also grew up in the borderlands between classes. He spent his childhood with his mother, first on welfare and then with a racist working-class stepfather. As an adolescent, he moved to his father's home in a predominantly white upper-middle-class suburb. His educational experiences, too, extend from a racially mixed elementary school to an all-white high school, and from Berkeley to Harvard Law School. From this vantage point, he analyzes the intersection of race and class in the United States. *How Did You Get to Be Mexican?* looks not just at the question "Who is a Latino?" but also at the question of where persons of mixed Anglo-Latino heritage fit into the racial dynamics of the United States.