


FEBRUARY 2021

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL   
**BOOK CLUB**  
DISCUSSION  
GUIDE



## THE SKIN WE'RE IN

BY DESMOND COLE

RECOMMENDED BY KETTY NIVYABANDI



FEBRUARY 2021  
**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

## WELCOME AMNESTY BOOK CLUB MEMBERS

Welcome back! With 2020 in our rear-view mirrors and the excitement of 2021 on the horizon, we're happy to announce the first book of 2021.

This first selection is a bracing, provocative, and perspective-shifting book from one of Canada's most celebrated and uncompromising writers, Desmond Cole. *The Skin We're In* will spark a national conversation, influence policy, and inspire activists.

In his 2015 cover story for *Toronto Life* magazine, Desmond Cole exposed the racist actions of the Toronto police force, detailing the dozens of times he had been stopped and

interrogated under the controversial practice of carding. The story quickly came to national prominence, shaking the country to its core and catapulting its author into the public sphere. Cole used his newfound profile to draw insistent, unyielding attention to the injustices faced by Black Canadians on a daily basis.



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### About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit **[www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca)** or write to us at:

Amnesty International,  
312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

## Desmond Cole THIS MONTH'S AUTHOR

Desmond Cole is an award-winning journalist, radio host, and activist in Toronto. His writing has appeared in the *Toronto Star*, *Toronto Life*, *The Walrus*, *NOW Magazine*, *Ethnic Aisle*, *Torontoist*, *BuzzFeed*, and the *Ottawa Citizen*. *The Skin We're In* is Cole's first book.

Follow him on Twitter @desmondcole

For more on Desmond Cole, stream the 2017 documentary film *The Skin We're In* on CBC Gem.



## Ketty Nivyabandi RECOMMENDS THIS BOOK TO AMNESTY READERS

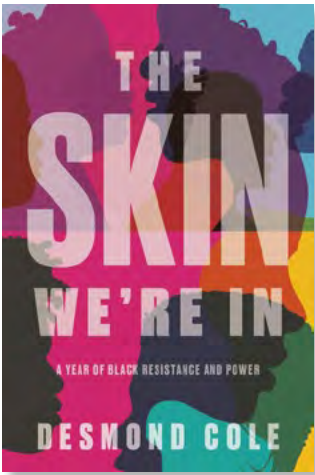


Ketty Nivyabandi is the Secretary General to Amnesty International in Canada. She is a human rights defender and a passionate advocate for social justice. She was forced to flee her home as a result of her activism in May 2015, after she mobilized and successfully led women peaceful protests in her home country, Burundi.

As a refugee and human rights defender, she has testified before the Canadian House of Commons Sub-Committee on International Human Rights on ongoing human rights violations in her country, particularly against women. She regularly speaks on refugee issues, democracy and human rights—with a particular focus on women human rights defenders—and the effects of conflict on women's intimate lives.



## ABOUT: *The Skin We're In*



### THE BOOK:

Both Cole's activism and journalism find vibrant expression in his first book, *The Skin We're In*. Puncturing the bubble of Canadian smugness and naive assumptions of a post-racial nation, Cole chronicles just one year—2017—in the struggle against racism in this country. It was a year that saw calls for tighter borders when Black refugees braved

frigid temperatures to cross into Manitoba from the States, Indigenous land and water protectors resisting the celebration of Canada's 150th birthday, police across the country rallying around an officer accused of murder, and more.

The year also witnessed the profound personal and professional ramifications of Desmond Cole's unwavering determination to combat injustice. In April, Cole disrupted a Toronto police board meeting by calling for the destruction of all data collected through carding. Following the protest, Cole, a columnist with the *Toronto Star*, was summoned to a meeting with the paper's opinions editor and informed that his activism violated company policy. Rather than limit his efforts defending Black lives, Cole chose to sever his relationship with the publication. Then in July, at another police board meeting, Cole challenged the board to respond to accusations of a police cover-up in the brutal beating of Dafonte Miller by an off-duty police officer and his brother. When Cole refused to leave the meeting until the question was publicly addressed, he was arrested. The image of Cole walking out of the meeting, handcuffed and flanked by officers, fortified the distrust between the city's Black community and its police force.

Month-by-month, Cole creates a comprehensive picture of entrenched, systemic inequality. Urgent, controversial, and unsparingly honest, *The Skin We're In* is destined to become a vital text for anti-racist and social justice movements in Canada, as well as a potent antidote to the all-too-present complacency of many white Canadians.



### THE DOCUMENTARY:

This film marks a distinctly Canadian contribution to the "Black Lives Matter" movement which originated in the US, but which describes a set of systemic injustices and disadvantages faced by all black people living in white-dominated societies. Cole asserts that anti-black racism is so all-encompassing in Canada that black people and their allies, far from congratulating themselves that they do not live in America, should be following the American example and dismantling the structures that continue to hold them back.

*The Skin We're In* invites viewers into the mind of an emerging intellectual and firebrand. Boasting intimate access to one of Canada's most intriguing voices, it profiles Desmond Cole as his most exciting chapter unfolds.

This is his journey from journalist to activist, unfolding in real time. We follow Cole as he travels across Canada in pursuit of stories, examples, and knowledge about black identities and experiences

<https://www.cbc.ca/firsthand/episodes/the-skin-were-in>

(Free in Canada only)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL BOOK CLUB

1. *The Skin We're In* was also released in a film format prior to the release of the book, in which at one point a member of Black Lives Matter, Alexandria Williams asks, "Who's running media, who gets to control it, who gets to control the narrative? It's not us." What does she mean by this? Who controls the media in Canada and abroad, and how does this affect the information and perceptions that we can access?
2. The concept of journalistic objectivity comes up in discussions of political and social discourse often, but as Cole presents in both the novel and conversations since then, he feels as though objectivity is selectively used when beneficial to the author/network, especially when reporting on events against racialized individuals. As Cole argues, this flawed notion of objectivity further perpetuates systemic racism as it does not allow connections to be made against the overall fabric to our society.  
  
Discuss this with your group; what are your thoughts on objectivity as understood by media? Is objectivity attainable in media or does everything come with a bias? Cole has argued that not only is it impossible to be objective as journalist, but impersonal; what are your thoughts on that? Do you feel it is essential to be objective as a journalist? Does objectivity and truth go hand in hand, or do you feel like it is like oil and water?
3. Systemic racism is entrenched in our day to day lives and is perpetuated by structures in place used to continue a cycle of oppression through various avenues, often larger than ourselves. Yet the work in resistance against anti-Black racism and the overall racism found in Canadian structures is work we must all take on individually in order to put an end to it. Create a list with your group on ways you can all contribute to the dismantling of systemic racism and racism in your day to day.
4. How was your perception of anti-Black racism and over-policing in Canada changed prior to reading the novel to after reading it?
5. What is something that you can take from reading this book, that can be applied in your everyday?
6. Who would you recommend *The Skin We're In* to? Why?

## STAY TUNED

PANEL ON ANTI-BLACK  
RACISM AND OVER-POLICING  
SPRING 2021



Amnesty International will be hosting a virtual panel to discuss anti-Black racism and over-policing in the Spring of 2021. We will send an invitation to all Book Club members on how you can join us in the coming weeks.

# TAKE ACTION

## Stop anti-Black racism and over-policing in Canada



After the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the world watched in horror as a police officer forcibly pressed his knee into George Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, during which time he was unable to breathe. From there we began to see a recurring rhetoric that anti-Black racism is 'not as bad' in Canada as in the United States when, communities have been speaking out for decades about how Black people experience policing in Canada. These experiences, including enslavement, are often omitted from school curricula, museum exhibits, and official stories, except to highlight Canada's position as the beacon of freedom at the end of the Underground Railroad.

Similar to the United States, this racism is baked into Canadian society. Between 2013 and 2017, a Black person was nearly 20 times more likely than a white person to be involved in a fatal shooting by the Toronto Police.

### URGE YOUR PREMIER NOW

**to support new, transformative approaches to upholding public safety. Racism is not up for debate – it is systemic.**

**ACT NOW**

**[amnesty.ca/stop-anti-black-racism](https://amnesty.ca/stop-anti-black-racism)**

State violence is not just created by policing either. It includes racial laws, inequitable provision of services, intentional neglect and exclusion, social bias, and the ways institutional policies impact the well-being of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.

Black people in Canada have experienced enslavement, criminalization, immigration bans, and discrimination

resulting in underservice and exclusion in education, housing, healthcare, and employment.

Many Black Canadians have been pushed to Canada from other countries ravaged by colonialism, and their experiences in Canada are similar each with their own distinctions. There are global threads of white supremacy, violence, exploitative resource extraction, and disposability of Black people that run parallel to the experiences of Indigenous people on this colonized land.

Living in Canada as a Black person comes with the imposed presumption of criminality, manifesting in the surveillance and over-policing of Black individuals and communities, unjust encounters with police officers, and introduction into a system which treats Black people more harshly for the same crimes and results in a disproportionate number of Black people in prisons.

Communities have told officials what they need, and it isn't more enforcement.

## COMING UP FOR MARCH/APRIL 2021

### *The Dime Box* by Karen Grose

#### Recommended by Lawrence Hill

Greta Giffen barely escaped being murdered by the man she grew up with. When she bolts from their secluded cabin in northern Ontario, her new life comes at a price. The man dies under suspicious circumstances, and a detective believes Greta has the perfect motive. In a tense police investigation, Greta is forced to confront the secrets that have haunted her since childhood. Until she does, she will never truly escape that cabin in the woods.



Author **Karen Grose**



Guest reader  
**Lawrence Hill**

#### The discussion guide will be sent out March 2021.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

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