



***This reading group guide for  
Our Hidden Conversations:  
What Americans Really Think About Race and Identity  
By Michele Norris.***

It includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and featured interviews with author Michele Norris.

The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

## **Introduction**

Peabody Award–winning journalist Michele Norris offers a transformative dialogue on race and identity in America, unearthed through her decade-long work at The Race Card Project.

*The prompt seemed simple: Race. Your Thoughts. Six Words. Please Send.*

The answers, though, have been challenging and complicated. In the twelve years since award-winning journalist Michele Norris first posed that question, over half a million people have submitted their stories to The Race Card Project inbox. The stories are shocking in their depth and candor, spanning the full spectrum of race, ethnicity, identity, and class. Even at just six words, the micro-essays can pack quite a punch, revealing, fear, pain, triumph, and sometimes humor. Responses such as: You’re Pretty for a Black girl. White privilege, enjoy it, earned it. Lady, I don’t want your purse. My ancestors massacred Indians near here. Urban living has made me racist. I’m only Asian when it’s convenient.

Many go even further than just six words, submitting backstories, photos, and heirlooms: a collection much like a scrapbook of American candor you rarely get to see. Our Hidden

Conversations is a unique compilation of stories, richly reported essays, and photographs providing a window into America during a tumultuous era. This powerful book offers an honest, if sometimes uncomfortable, conversation about race and identity, permitting us to eavesdrop on deep-seated thoughts, private discussions, and long submerged memories.

The breadth of this work came as a surprise to Norris. For most of the twelve years she has collected these stories, many were submitted by white respondents. This unexpected panorama provides a rare 360-degree view of how Americans see themselves and one another.

Our Hidden Conversations reminds us that even during times of great division, honesty, grace, and a willing ear can provide a bridge toward empathy and maybe even understanding.

## **Our Hidden Conversations Discussion Group Goals**

**Why are we here?** A great way to start your OHC Book Club meeting is to establish goals for the reading and gathering. It's like setting an intention.

Here are some suggestions:

- Create a safe, common space where everyone is encouraged to connect and engage in productive conversations
- Understand the complexities and layered-experiences associated with race, identity and belonging. Themes may include: family dynamics, adoption, marriage and relationships, allyship, privilege, profiling, othering, language, feeling invisible and feeling uncomfortable.
- Formulate and articulate our own personal The Race Card Project (TRCP) 6-word story.
- Gain experience taking across difference.
- Begin to build the skills and muscles needed to “stay at the table” when/if the conversation is uncomfortable.

## **Rules of engagement!**

**Our Hidden Conversations Discussion Group Rules of Engagement:** *Creating a safe space is very important when discussing themes and topics referenced in Our Hidden Conversations. Please make sure that all discussion participants agree to some discussion rules.*

**Here are some suggestions:**

- Please be respectful.
- You don't have to agree.
- Listen fully.
- Follow the “Vegas Rule”. The details of the discussion today will stay in the “room” but the lessons and experiences we've learned can be taken with us and shared.

## **Post Read Questions for Discussion**

1. Which stories stood out to you or stopped you in your tracks?
2. How did the book impact your perspective?

3. “Did you find any stories or experiences uncomfortable or hard to hear?”
4. What lessons did you take from the book?
5. Did you see parallels between the family stories in the book and your own family stories?
6. What impact did the story telling approach have on your reading experience?
7. Which chapter or themes of the book resonated with you?
8. How can the book inspire you/readers to engage in conversations about race, history, identity and family dynamics within your own circles?
9. What hidden conversations exist within your own life or community?
10. Were you surprised by the level of honesty and vulnerability of the submissions?
11. How can these stories and conversations impact the work you do everyday?
12. Would you ever consider submitting your own six words? After reading this book, did you find yourself wanting to dig deeper or explore something more?

**“Read as you go” Book Club Guide:** If your group prefers to read the book in segments together see suggested content below.

**Before the meeting or in the first 10 minutes.**

Ask participants to leaf through the book with sticky notes. Have them mark or note anything that strikes them. Maybe it’s an arresting photo. A sweet photo or sentiment. Maybe it’s the typography or the layout. *(This is also a nice time to snack and serve drinks)*

Let everyone share what they flagged and discuss. *Our Hidden Conversations*, is very unique in design and it was done with intention. Discuss why you think the book was assembled in this way.

Each time you meet have the group do this exercise as an ice breaker and you will see the conversation deepen each time.

**Next: Review “Why we are here”**

**Next: Review “Set expectations”**

**Next: Select a chapter or chapters to read.**

Select and prepare the reading. This could be decided ahead of time or at the meeting. You can read at home in the traditional “book club” way or you can select abstracts to read as a group during your gathering. You can also play selections from the audio book.

We suggest grouping the chapters in the following ways:

**Section 1:**

*PROLOGUE: A Magnificent Detour xiii*

*INTRODUCTION: Post-Racial? xxxiii*

*1: Breadcrumbs 1*

*2: How It Grew 61*

**Section 2:**

- 3: *“I wish he was a girl”* 79  
4: *Coins in the Couch* 107  
5: *Memory Wars* 167 *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* 168  
6: *How Do You Define Racism?* 193

**Section 3:**

- 7: *“Black babies cost less to adopt”* 213  
8: *“Start with kids and mix well”* 267  
9: *The Patterns Themselves Tell a Story* 323

**Section 4:**

- 10: *So, You Want to Talk About Lynching?* 377  
11: *Color Me Surprised* 397  
12: *America: A Freight Train of a Word* 425  
*Epilogue* 437

**Section 5:** (*Closing Activity— see reference and example in featured interviews*)  
*“It matters like it or not.”* 444

**Next: Discuss**

- Use the “Post Read Questions for Discussion” and “Printables” Table Talk prompts to discuss your sections.

**Finally: Close and Call to Action**

- Bring everyone together and ask the group what they think the next section will be about.
- Ask if anyone is ready to write or share their TRCP 6-word story.
- Assign the section and chapters for the next meeting.
- Encourage your group to tell their story to 2 people and also ask 2 people for their stories before you meet again.
- On the last meeting or in the last 10 minutes of each meeting have the group do a choral reading of the poem (or portion the poem) that starts on page 444. Michele curated this poem to be read in order and aloud in a “round robin” format. Examples can be found in the featured interviews section of this guide.

**Additional Resources and Printables:**

**Table Talk Questions**

**The Race Card Project Postcards**

**Media Kit**

**Feedback Form: Please help us grow by submitting your feedback.**

## Enhance Your Book Club with these interactive ideas:

### 1. Share your story with us:

- Send your 6-words to [The Race Card Project](#)
- Create a video and share your TRCP 6-word story *or* experience with the book on social media.

Ideas for your post:

*Tell us your story: Example of a TRCP 6-word story share – [Frank from Knoxville](#)*

*Tell us your favorite thing about the book*

*Tell us the craziest or most shocking thing you read in the book*

*Tell us if you had a tear-jerk or waterworks moment*

*Tell us if a story made you laugh out loud*

*Please tag us so we can boost and boast:*

[@theracecardproject](#) [@michele\\_norris](#) (two underscores)

[#TheRaceCardProject](#) [#OurHiddenConversations](#) [#storytellingtherapy](#) [#belonging](#)  
[#dinneradozenbookclub](#)

**2. Show and Tell:** Have each group member bring an artifact, photo, or play a song from their life to illustrate their TRCP 6-word Story.

**3. Create an Art Installation:** Based on the TRCP 6-word stories you share about yourselves or others from the book; create a piece of artwork.

Ideas include: (but anything is possible)

*These can be physical ideas or be made into digital projects for virtual book clubs.*

- A patchwork quilt—everyone designs a square
- A time capsule—filled with artifacts that describe your groups “story”
- A collage or mosaic—designed to incorporate everyone’s story.
- A poem or song—each stanza would reflect each person’s TRCP 6-word story
- A graphic novelette or animated short based on your story.

**4. Create a Playlist, Cookbook, or Must Watch List:** Often times our stories and histories are linked to food, music, or film. Create a group cookbook, playlist, or “must watch” list of movies/episodes that help tell your TRCP 6-word story.

## Featured interviews with Michele Norris

*—On the book, **Our Hidden Conversations**—*

### **“Underneath, We All Taste Like Chicken” - Michele Norris Asks Americans To Talk About Race**

The Late Show with Stephen Colbert

Emmy and Peabody Award-winning journalist, author and podcast host Michele Norris shares some of the poignant replies she received when she asked ordinary Americans to write six words about race. Michele’s latest book, “Our Hidden Conversations,” is available now.

### **Michele Norris on ‘Our Hidden Conversations’ about race and identity**

Washington Post Live

Michele Norris, a Peabody Award-winning journalist, has explored how people think about race and identity through six-word submissions for the Race Card project over the past decade. Norris joins The Post’s Jonathan Capehart to discuss her new book, “Our Hidden Conversations,” which draws from those stories.

Washington Post Live is the newsroom’s live journalism platform, featuring interviews with top-level government officials, business leaders, cultural influencers and emerging voices on the most pressing issues driving the news cycle nationally and across the globe. From one-on-one, newsmaker interviews to in-depth multi-segment programs, Washington Post Live brings The Post’s newsroom to life on stage.

### **Author Michele Norris talks unspoken aspects of race in America**

CBS Morning

Award-winning journalist Michele Norris has been at the forefront of exploring race relations in America, a journey she embarked upon by collecting over 500,000 six-word stories on race and identity. She joins “CBS Mornings” to break down some of the responses and talk her new book, “Our Hidden Conversations: What Americans Really Think About Race and Identity.”

Each weekday morning, “CBS Mornings” co-hosts Gayle King, Tony Dokoupil and Nate Burleson bring you the latest breaking news, smart conversation and in-depth feature reporting. “CBS Mornings” airs weekdays at 7 a.m. on CBS and stream it at 8 a.m. ET on the CBS News app.

## ***—On The Race Card Project—***

### **How Just Six Words Can Spark Conversation About Race in America**

*The Atlantic*

*“We clearly are not post-racial,” Michele Norris, the celebrated former host of NPR’s All Things Considered, claims in this interview filmed at the 2017 Aspen Ideas Festival. That’s why she created the Race Card Project: to “examine and interrogate America’s racial DNA.” Participants are tasked with condensing their experiences, questions, or observations about race and identity into just six words, which Norris then publishes and archives for posterity. So far, she’s received over 50,000 submissions, including: “Why do I do that when I see a black man?” and “I’m only Asian when it’s convenient.”*

## ***—On Identity, Family, and Food—***

### **Michele Norris talks deeply personal podcast 'Your Mama's Kitchen'**

TODAY with Hoda & Jenna

Journalist Michele Norris, host of “Your Mama’s Kitchen” podcast, joins Hoda & Jenna to talk about the inspiration behind her podcast, the lessons you learn in the kitchen with your family, and what she’s learned from her guests, saying, “We don’t say thank you to our mothers enough.”

## ***—On Creating The Interactive Reading of The Epilogue on page 444—***

### **The Race Card Project: Say What?**

The Aspen Institute

Ever wonder what America's hidden conversation about race sounds like? Michele Norris has attempted to tap into that private discourse through her Peabody-award-winning exercise called The Race Card Project where thousands of people from all over the world have submitted Six Word essays on Race and Cultural identity. Each of those microscopic essays represents someone's attempt to distill their thoughts, observations, experiences, or views about race or cultural identity into one sentence with just six words. Some are funny. Many are painful. Some might make you nod in agreement, while others could cause you to squirm with discomfort. All of them will make you think and imagine life as lived by someone else. The vast collection of six-word essays and the individual stories they represent have formed the basis for a powerful theatrical production that takes audiences deep inside the beating heart of racial experience from all points of view. Underwritten by AFT.

### **Michele Norris: Our Hidden Conversations Theatrical Reading with Cast**

## Westminstertownhall

Award-winning journalist Michele Norris speaking about her best-selling book, "Our Hidden Conversations; What Americans Really Think About Race and Identity."

For more than a decade, Norris asked people around the world to send in their stories. The prompt was simple: "Race. Your Story. Six Words. Please Send." She and the Race Card Team collected more than 500,000 stories, many of which are compiled in and expanded in "Our Hidden Conversations." The results are shocking in their depth and candor, spanning the full spectrum of race, ethnicity, identity, and class. Norris discuss all of this in this program, recorded in Minneapolis on February 1, 2024.

The program opened with a dramatic reading of some of those stories by a diverse cast of community leaders: The Honorable Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan, Heidi Adelsman, Roxane Battle, Sheletta Brundidge, Bill Kiffmeyer, Patricia Lopez, Kerri Miller, R.T. Rybak, Jasmine Brett Stringer, Laysha Ward, Tom Weber, Lizz Winstead, Jai Winston and Boua Xiong.

## Raves and Reviews

*"A remarkable book. By letting Americans of every walk of life share their deepest, most personal—and sometimes contradictory—attitudes on race, it takes us past the usual polarizing debates and points us toward the possibility of greater understanding."*

— **Barack Obama, on X**

*"A testament to that journey. Featuring photos and stories on race from people all over America, it highlights the truths of the American experience — and shares everything, even the messy bits. It's an incredible read."*

— **Michelle Obama, on Instagram**

*"A stunning book and a gift to our nation. Anchored by more than a decade of research and engagement with Americans across the country, Michele Norris takes us on a journey into the heart of this country's painful, complex and unrelenting battle with the salience and significance of race in our lives."*

— **Sherrilyn Ifill, Howard Law School, and former President & Director-Counsel NAACP Legal Defense Fund**

*"An important, compelling work. In an extremely unique way, Norris captures private, poignant and instructive stories that are a guide to racial knowledge that can lead to the understanding and healing we so desperately need. Ultimately, she shows that we need not fear the issues we must all confront."*

— **Eric H. Holder, Jr., 82nd Attorney General of the United States and author of Our Unfinished March**

*"When ordinary people, talk, extraordinary truths are revealed. Michele Norris has an*



*extraordinary gift – she is able to coax people into revealing their profound beliefs about race. This book is a safe space where difficult conversations become healing exchanges.”*

– **Tayari Jones, New York Times bestselling author of *An American Marriage***

*"The brilliant Michele Norris has spent fourteen years getting people to open up about race – starting with six words. The result of her noble project is this beautiful and inspiring book. It can help us all cultivate communities of bridge builders so that we can talk about race with both candor and love.”*

– **Walter Isaacson, New York Times bestselling author of *The Code Breaker***

*“Candid, unsettling and brilliant, the Race Card Project is a rare window into the enigma of race and the ways in which people make sense of it. In *Our Hidden Conversations*, Michele Norris has brought together a vista of personal truths that are as indelible as the issue they’re responding to.”*

– **Jelani Cobb, Dean, Columbia Journalism School**

*"Michele Norris is one of our most important chroniclers of American life. The stories captured in this book reveal the complexity, nuance, and dynamism of race in America. It is an indispensable resource for all of us.”*

– **Clint Smith, New York Times bestselling Author of *How The Word is Passed***

*“As an immigrant, I always dreamed of an America where all are welcome. I still do. That dream is powerful, but we know it’s not the whole story. Michele Norris has the rare courage, understanding and grace to tell the American stories we prefer to keep silent – and the ones we should be proud of telling.”*

– **José Andrés, chef and humanitarian**

*“*Our Hidden Conversations* is a unique, troubling, tough and beautiful book, a study of people sharing their thoughts and stories about racism. It sometimes broke my heart, other times surprised me, always challenged me, and ultimately left me uplifted, and with hope, because truth heals.”*

– **Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird***

*“Notable... Norris offers crucial insight into how Americans think about race, combining the painful with the inspiring.”*

– **Kirkus Reviews**

*"This is an eye-opening read and an affecting examination of how race affects our lives.”*

– **Booklist Review**