



DISCUSSION GUIDE

About the Film

The recent births of Jack and June, the third multiracial generation in filmmaker Eli Steele's family, coincided with a startling projection: by the year 2050, at least 20% of all Americans will self-identify as two or more races. What will this fate mean to a nation that has been tormented by race throughout its history?

Born to a black father and a Jewish mother, Steele has long battled the forces of Identity Politics, from college campuses to places of employment. He believed that holding onto his individuality over being reduced to skin color was part of America's promise to him.

However, Steele's belief in this promise was shaken when his son was denied entrance to a public school for refusing to name his "primary race." Why did race still matter so much? Had Identity Politics, with its promise of redeeming America from the old ethos of white supremacy, delivered us to a new racial order where skin color, once again, trumped character?

To answer these questions, Steele journeyed out into the America of today. He interviewed countless Americans of two or more races and explored racial controversies in the headlines from the George Zimmerman trial to a conference on white privilege.

Steele used undercover cameras and blunt man--on--the--street interviews to achieve an unvarnished look at race in America from the perspective of a man with no allegiance to a single tribe.

A Message From Filmmaker Eli Steele

I had no choice but to make *How Jack Became Black*. Born to a black father and a Jewish mother, I was the only mixed kid in my neighborhood and I often wondered why I had been born into this peculiar fate. I also wondered why at nearly every major life decision I faced disapproving questions from my society for choosing to embrace my full heritage instead of one race. Throughout these experiences, I learned to make an uneasy peace with my society while remaining true to myself.

However, when my two children, Jack and June, were born, I realized that their fate might be even more complicated than mine. Their racial identity — touching every race box but Asian — was more mixed than mine. But what really worried me was the kind of America they were born into. When I was born, America was about moving toward character and away from the horrific legacy of slavery and segregation that reduced people to skin color. As I grew older, I began to see more and more examples of America embracing race boxes that fuel today's divisive identity politics.

In this America, where would Jack and June fit? Would their rich and complex history be marginalized because their skin color looks a certain way? How could this be possible at a time where more Americans than ever are crossing the color line? Was it because our government and institutions have become fixated on identity politics and its race boxes?

The only way for me to find out was to journey out into America. I had to confront the many questions that bothered me growing up. I also wanted to know if other Americans felt the same way as I did. The end result is my answer in the form of a documentary that I hope will provide guidance to Jack and June and their multiracial baby boom peers when they come of age.

Conversation Starters

Use these general prompts as an opportunity for audience members to share their personal reactions to ***How Jack Became Black*** before diving into a deeper discussion utilizing the Film Discussion Questions provided below.

1. Which moment in the film resonated with you the most? Why?
2. What was your main take away from the themes of the film?
3. Which person did you relate to or empathize with most in the film? Why?
4. Did anything that happened in the movie remind you of something that has occurred in your own life or that you have seen occur in others' lives?
5. What lessons can be learned from the choices and experiences made by the subjects in this documentary?

Film Discussion Questions

These questions are designed for people who want to use ***How Jack Became Black*** to engage in deeper discussions. Rather than using all the questions below, we encourage you to choose a few questions that meet your group's needs and interests.

1. Is race a truth or is it a power?
2. Early in the film, Eli recounts the times he was racially bullied and says that if he allowed others to define him, he loses. What does he mean by that?
 - Eli says that he “does not fit into a race box.” If his society fails to or cannot adequately define him, then is it up to him to define himself?
3. What are the main points that Eli learned about being multiracial through his experience voting for Jesse Jackson?
 - Do you think he would have reached the same conclusion had he been born to one race?
 - How will the ongoing multiracial baby boom change the way we see race in our society?
4. The film talks about the race boxes. What are the values attached to these boxes today under identity politics?
5. Why do you think the Los Angeles Unified School District asked Eli to check a “Primary Race” box?
 - What would you have done if you were in Eli's situation?
 - Why was the school willing to deny Jack an education and violate the California Constitution guaranteeing a free and public education? Why did race matter so much?

6. For people who check multiple race boxes, the US Office of Management and Budget has instructed the Census Bureau to “allocate” responses that “combine one minority race and white” to “the minority race.” Why does the government choose to keep the one drop of black blood rule alive?
 - Is there any truth to checking the multiracial options?
 - Later in the film, it is revealed that the schools can use “observer identification” or “third-party identification” to guess a student’s race. Do you agree with that?

7. Jack and June come from nearly every major race category. What race box should they fit into?
 - If ethnicity means culture, language, and influences, are they more American than Hispanic?
 - What do Jack and June have in common with other multiracial individuals who are from different racial makeups? What is the point of putting them into the same multiracial box?

8. Angie McKee describes how a racist shopkeeper followed her and her family. She says if she took the “ignorant shopkeeper” as representative of all white men then she would also be condemning her own father. What does she mean?
 - What does Angie’s story teach us about race and the multiracial perspective?

9. Eric shares his story that President Obama identified himself as black because other people saw him as such. Why does that bother Eric? Is it better to define oneself or let others do it for you?
 - Would President Obama have won the 2008 presidential election if he ran as a multiracial man?

10. Eric brings up the one drop of black blood rule which pushes any one with a drop of black blood into the black. Is Eric right to demand an end to following a rule

that played a role separating whites and blacks during slavery and segregation?
Why are we as a society still following this pernicious rule?

11. In the multiracial section, Clay Cane says that multiracial individuals want to escape their blackness. What does he mean? Is it a fair charge or is Clay, in saying this, revealing something about himself?

12. In the section on UCLA, where do you think America would be today if we had pursued the original purpose of Affirmative Action — institutional reform — instead of racial preferences?

- Do you agree with Eli's decision not to check a race box?
- How will the growing multiracial population affect racial preferences?

13. In the section on politics, the film covers both the Democratic and Republican side. How has identity politics defined politics and is it for the better or for the worse?

- Why did the Republican chairman bring up the Martin Luther King quote about character only to betray it minutes later?
- In the De Blasio section, why did those interviewed fixate on his whiteness? Is skin color a good measure of a man?
- Have our politics become dominated by our external qualities, including skin color?
- Why do politicians seek power by dividing us into groups?

14. Eli asks if identity politics may be new racial order like White Supremacy. What does he mean by that?

- Do we organize people by race today? If so, how does it make us better?
- Does organizing people by race lead to all disparities between groups being blamed solely on race? Does it cause us to ignore the more deeper and more human reasons for why these disparities exist?

15. In the section on Trayvon Martin and Ocoee, Eli asks if America will ever be able to move past her racist history or not. Does the past define us?

- Is it possible for us today to make a better America than those before us?

16. The Trayvon Martin section deals with two men: Martin and William Maxwell.

Trayvon was killed by George Zimmerman. In the Vietnam War, during a time of great racial tensions, William Maxwell was saved by his Army troops. What do these two different stories reveal about America?

17. After spending time at the White Privilege conference and hearing that skin color defines a person, Eli discovers he is “now white.” What does he mean by that? What matters more —how Eli sees himself and his family history or how others see his skin color?

18. At the end of the film, we hear: “The smallest minority in America has and always will be the individual.” What is meant by that?

- How is the individual an answer to the racial order of the day?
- Do you believe we will ever move from racial group identities back toward the individual? Or is it too late?