



Black: The History of a Color

Michel Pastoureau , Jody Gladding (Translator)

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Black - favorite color of priests and penitents, artists and ascetics, fashion designers and fascists - has always stood for powerfully opposed ideas: authority and humility, sin and holiness, rebellion and conformity, wealth and poverty, good and bad. In this beautiful and richly illustrated book, the acclaimed author of *Blue* now tells the fascinating social history of the color black in Europe.

In the beginning was black, Michel Pastoureau tells us. The archetypal color of darkness and death, black was associated in the early Christian period with hell and the devil but also with monastic virtue. In the medieval era, black became the habit of courtiers and a hallmark of royal luxury. Black took on new meanings for early modern Europeans as they began to print words and images in black and white, and to absorb Isaac Newton's announcement that black was no color after all. During the romantic period, black was melancholy's friend, while in the twentieth century black (and white) came to dominate art, print, photography, and film, and was finally restored to the status of a true color.

For Pastoureau, the history of any color must be a social history first because it is societies that give colors everything from their changing names to their changing meanings; and black is exemplary in this regard. In dyes, fabrics, and clothing, and in painting and other art works, black has always been a forceful, and ambivalent, shaper of social, symbolic, and ideological meaning in European societies.

With its striking design and compelling text, *Black* will delight anyone who is interested in the history of fashion, art, media, or design.

Black: The History of a Color Details

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From Reader Review Black: The History of a Color for online ebook

E says

This book is perhaps 50% about black and 50% about what made various colors popular over time. That would be okay, except that his last book did something similar, so it felt like a lot of overlap (but then again, there IS a lot of overlap between blue and black--ever seen someone wearing a dark suit and had a hard time figuring out if it was black or navy?). I also did not think the illustrations were as carefully chosen as there were for Blue: The History of a Color. But, thankfully, that is not supposed to be Jesus on the cover. Further, the author seemed to get bogged down in the Middle Ages (but looking at his academic interests, I'm not surprised). And yet, I am still awarding this book three stars. The history is consistently interesting, as is the surprising level of insight into human nature that a history of color affords. In his latter books Pastoureau has branched into green and red, and I think those will be quite fascinating as well.

Jackie says

More of a 4.5, but given how much I enjoyed it, learned, and incessantly felt the need to talk about it with my friends, erring on the side of more stars is the way to go.

Jess says

Fascinating look at the social and cultural definitions and uses of the colour black throughout history, going right back to the dawn of mankind through to the 21st century. Richly illustrated and accessible, despite the breadth of topics discussed.

Laura says

Pastoureau discusses the color black in artistic and other contexts, especially its changing popularity and symbolism. There is a lot of interesting information about the cultural and scientific context of color from prehistory to the present.

Occasionally ideas and even specific phrases are repeated, and the translation of some names and phrases is clumsy. For example, Manet's painting of boats in the French city of Boulogne is identified as Bologna; Saint Benedict is given both his French name (Benoit) and his English name on the same page.

I enjoyed this book, especially learning about the perception and classification of color before Newton's publication of his prism experiments and the scientific idea of the spectrum. I enjoyed his previous book "Blue" a bit more, but look forward to reading "Green" next.

Berna Labourdette says

Este historiador francés, experto en historia medieval, simbolismo, paleografía y heráldica, tiene además una singular afición por la historia y el simbolismo de los colores y cómo éstos ha ido cambiando a medida que avanza el tiempo. En este ensayo aborda el color negro y resulta verdaderamente apasionante descubrir como pasó de ser un color que no era considerado como tal, al color del origen de las cosas, el color del diablo y finalmente un color de lujo. Muy, muy interesante.

Rick says

Michel Pastoureau's **BLACK: THE HISTORY OF A COLOR** is a fascinating look at attitudes toward black from prehistory to the present. Pastoureau considers the changing significance of black in, among other things, myth, religion, superstition, art, and fashion.

During the development of Christianity, for example, black was often associated with death and with Satan, but at different periods, the meaning fluctuated radically.

Monastic garb was originally black, gray, brown or white, but debates raged for centuries as to which was the most appropriate color. In the Reformation, Protestant divines, and eventually their followers, dressed in black, a situation that still affects us today.

In many cases, as with the Reformation, black had a moral value. Pastoureau even points out that, although the technology to produce color films was developed by 1915, color films did not flourish for more than 20 years thereafter because color was somehow thought to be immoral.

Pastoureau discusses the notion of the primary colors, which changed dramatically when Sir Isaac Newton discovered the color spectrum, thereby establishing that neither black nor white was actually a color.

Color choices were also affected by the technology of dyeing, which changed gradually over time, allowing not only richer tones of black but also better and different color choices.

In the course of considering changing attitudes toward black, Pastoureau also addresses many other colors, thereby giving us a completer picture than a consideration of black alone might have done.

This volume is a worthy successor to the two other Pastoureau books I've read – **BLUE: THE HISTORY OF A COLOR** and **THE DEVIL'S CLOTH: A HISTORY OF STRIPES AND STRIPED FABRIC** – and I recommend it to anyone interested in the development of color or who just wants to discover new ideas they may never have thought about before.

Michael Finocchiaro says

Like its predecessor *Blue*, *Black* is a fascinating study of the history of the color black in European culture.

Orkun says

Siyah renginin tarihi daha iyi anlatılamazdı. Çok teknik bir anlatım içerdiği için zaman zaman içimi baysa da uzun zamandır merak ettiğim bir kitabı da aradan çıkardığım için keyifliyim.

Richard says

this book is not quite up to the standards of "Blue", but still can't wait to read the next in the series, "Green." these books are easy to read and full fascinating information about the perception of color through European history.

Jeff says

Michel Pastoureau's book "Blue: The History of a Color" was an amazing read, and i bought the sequel "Black" at the same time. Sorry to say that i only just now finished reading it, and it is every bit as interesting as its predecessor. My only tiny quibble is that the Blue volume talks about the difficulties that dyers had in the Middle Ages achieving a true black, because of restrictions that said you couldn't dye red and blue at the same location; this means that some of the information in the Black volume will be redundant to those who have read Blue. But the rest of the book is awesome, as is the beautiful production.

Kerfe says

Pastoureau traces the cultural history of the color black in the Western world, with examples from politics, society and the arts. Black has been evil, fashionable, romantic, rebellious, royal, required, exotic, fertile, pagan, shunned, modern. I had not realized the impact that the chromophobic Protestant Church had on erasing color from people's lives for several centuries. Luckily, the 20th century saw most people reject the severe moral view that found "bright and patterned colors are unworthy of a good Christian."

Though business and positions of authority still favor black, Pastoureau feels it has become at present just another color, neither the most popular (blue, though you'd never know it in NYC) or the least (yellow).

verbava says

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Jade says

This book is great, I loved it. It's very informative, never boring, and touches on a large variety of areas, including heraldry, religion, fashion, optics, painting, dyeing, race relations, bereavement and so on. It's well-researched, full of historical anecdotes, and very entertaining. I learned a lot, often about subjects I didn't know anything about, and yet I never felt out of my depth. Pastoureau's narrative voice is very agreeable.

For anyone looking to read his books on colour, I'd recommend starting with this one instead of reading them in order of publication. While *Blue: The History of a Color* is very specifically about the colour blue, this one touches more on colours in general, their hierarchy throughout history and so on, which makes it a better introduction to the history of colours as a whole -- and is also, of course, relevant to the history of black specifically (is it a colour or is it not?).

Four and a half stars. Recommended to pretty much anyone.

Ayne Ray says

This strikingly designed, richly illustrated book consisting of nearly 100 historical and artistic plates traces the history of the color black, providing a sociological history charting its changing symbolism and shades of meaning. Fascinating reading.

Nicole says

"*Black: The History of a Color* looks remarkably like a coffee table book--large format hardcover; gorgeous color reproductions of paintings, sculptures, engravings; nice layouts--but don't be fooled. The text is not just for flipping through. Michel Pastoureau, who previously wrote *Blue: The History of a Color*, explains at the beginning that he is not intending to continue a franchise through all the major colors, partly because the history of each color is too interconnected with all the others. That interconnected history is apparent throughout *Black*, which, while focusing on black, can't tell most of its story without reference to red, green, blue, yellow, and especially white and gray.[return][return]Pastoureau begins in ancient times with the use of black among Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians. In Pharaonic Egypt black was a color of fertility--like the silt of the Nile--and Germans thought the crow, the blackest of all animals, was ""simultaneously divine, warlike, and omniscient"" as well as a source of food before Christianity declared it unclean. He traces the social and cultural history of the color through the fall of the Roman Empire, the rise of the Church, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance.[return][return]Pastoureau's most interesting discussion is of black's place in the larger scheme of the color spectrum, which changes over time. At first black was considered truly a color, on a par with red or yellow in the public consciousness. Eventually, though, the position of black--and its new partner white (they weren't always so closely associated)--changes to something of a noncolor. One

reason for this is the rise of printing; black print on white paper created a new black-and-white world, in opposition to the color one around us. People even began to think that color could be represented in black and white. And while printing was separating black and white out of the realm of "color," advances in the study of optics were doing the same. Black and white had always been a part of the spectrum, but with Isaac Newton's new analysis of the rainbow and the nature of white light that would change.[return][return]The story continues through the present day, the fortunes of black--and the other colors--changing with political, economic, cultural, and artistic developments. Pastoureau has made this a fascinating history of aesthetics, culture, society, and religion, illustrated with dozens of examples of paintings, miniatures, and other documents. Information is drawn from coats of arms, paintings and other works of art, treatises on art and science, and records of household possessions. There are a few stylistic or translation issues (hard to tell which, but the phrase "par excellence" certainly appears more often than normal), but none of the historical detail is dry or inaccessible. An extremely attractive book with fascinating stories to tell about how Western civilization has interacted with the spectrum for the past two thousand years.[return](more at <http://lifeinbooks.wordpress.com/2008...>)"

Lisa Orki says

Noir ... C'est l'histoire du Noir à travers l'histoire Intéressant, mais pas non plus fascinant. Peut-être parce que finalement je connaissais déjà bien l'histoire de cette couleur, non-couleur. Quoi qu'il en soit, cet ouvrage est avant tout une recherche très pointue et approfondie de son auteur. Donc un livre dont je peux m'inspirer pour les recherches que je dois moi-même effectuer.

Sesana says

A few years back, I read *Blue: The History of a Color*, by the same author. This is the sort of history that's right up my alley, microscopic almost to the point of absurdity. It's very interesting, and beautifully illustrated. The meaning of the color black hasn't changed that terribly much, but it's still interesting to see all of the different meanings, in art and fashion and everything else, gone through all in one place.

Margaret Sankey says

Gorgeously illustrated, this is a social history of the color black in Western Art and society--a marker or penitence and mourning when the dyes were cheap and ugly, then of Satan as represented by black boars and Red-Black-White motifs in fairy tales, luxuriated with sable fur, made respectable as Protestant bourgeois-wear by durable fabric, co-opted by Romantics and Anarchists, glamorized into the little black dress and made generic by Model T Fords.

????? says

Wonderful book, rich in information and beautifully illustrated. Looking forward to reading more from the author.

Trena says

I got only a few pages into this so I won't rate it. First, and superficially, I hated the font. It was a cheap-looking sans serif 1970s font that didn't go with the glossy pages and coffee table format. Second, it just didn't interest me--it is a **very** dense history. If you are a true art historian, I think you will eat this up.
