

Book Club Discussion Guide

TURNING WHITE: A MEMOIR OF CHANGE, BY LEE THOMAS



Turning White: A Memoir of Change



Author Lee Thomas

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INTRODUCTION

In his thought-provoking memoir, *Turning White*, Emmy Award-winning TV broadcaster Lee Thomas shares the physical and mental battle he is waging with vitiligo — a skin disorder that is literally turning him white. As someone in the public eye, vitiligo has transformed not only Thomas' color, but his life. "Even people who have known me for years avoid eye contact when they see my face without makeup for the first time," he writes. Recently, Thomas turned the spotlight on himself during a special report for WJBK FOX 2 Detroit, where he is currently an entertainment reporter. In *Turning White*, Thomas shares his journey to help people understand vitiligo, and to help others cope with the psychological war that comes from this life-changing disease.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Thomas is a playwright, journalist, and four-time Emmy Award-winning television broadcaster. The son of a military officer and a nurse assistant, Thomas got zest for life and love for people from his strong family and their many travels. Currently residing in Detroit, he is an anchor/entertainment reporter and regularly goes to Hollywood to interview the stars. While dealing with the rich and famous he never thought the toughest story to tell would happen by turning the spotlight on himself, revealing a secret that was in plain sight. Lee Thomas, an African-American broadcaster, is turning white. In 1996 he was diagnosed with the pigment disorder, vitiligo.

Thomas has a B.A. in Speech Communications from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. As a broadcast journalist he has worked for the national television show "Channel One"; WABC 7 Eyewitness News in New York City; and WJBK FOX 2 News in Detroit. He can be seen daily on FOX 2 Morning in Detroit.

A DISCUSSION WITH THE AUTHOR

What exactly is vitiligo?

They categorize it as an "auto-immune disorder." Your body actually starts attacking your pigment. Being void of color, there's no pigment. It's something that's not contagious and not life threatening, so there are only theories without any conclusions. Eighty percent of the patients respond to the treatments, and 20 percent don't. Some people will actually turn completely white. One percent of the world's population has this, but you wouldn't know it because they don't come outside, they hide from the world.

When you first were diagnosed, what was your reaction?

I was completely devastated. I thought I was on top of the world, working my dream job in the biggest media market in the world and I didn't even hear anything else the doctor said. He said, "There is no cure but we have treatments." I just focused on the "no cure" part and was kind of dizzy. To me, the doctor was popping the bubble on my dreams. I thought, "OK, does this mean my career is over?" Because you know, a black man turning white on television is not what you think people want to see. It was traumatic. I thought it meant the end of everything I had worked for. I didn't think a guy could make it in public on television. I understand now why Michael Jackson went into seclusion. I call it emotional warfare.

You mentioned there is no cure for vitiligo. What are some of the treatments?

One of the treatments for vitiligo is to put on some cream and stand in an ultraviolet light. Starting off with short segments of light and eventually building your way up to 12 minutes



of treatment in the light. I found these types of treatment to be only mildly successful, and it seemed that as soon as I stopped or missed a treatment, the pigment would fade again.

If it gets to where your skin is over 80 percent without pigment, one of the treatments is to bleach your skin. Now you have the reverse effects, which is pigment spots starting to come back, sometimes darker than before. Because your pigment is your protection from the sun, people with this disease are prone to skin cancer and have to be very careful when the sun is shining. This is probably why Michael Jackson always had an umbrella or wore the gloves when outside.

You talk a bit about Michael Jackson and how he has said before that he has vitiligo. And people have been skeptical. You say you can vouch for him.

I can, I can definitely vouch for Michael Jackson. He has said it to Geraldo Rivera and also to Oprah, but everybody just glossed over it quickly because he has so many other things going on in his life. The disease goes to your extremities first. First, your hands, face, etc. That's why he was probably wearing the gloves at first. He also wore a mask once.



How long did you try to keep your disease a secret? And why did you decide to go public with it? For about four years I covered it up and hid it from my employers. As it progressed, it became harder to hide, especially on my hands. My employer, WJBK, FOX 2 in Detroit, has been nothing but supportive. They have definitely said they wanted me to stay but whatever I ultimately feel comfortable doing they support me.

I went public for anyone who has an obstacle they are dealing with. It really is one of those things that captures people's attention. My story is just an example of going against what the traditional thought might be; if you have something that you think might stop you of achieving your dream may be or living your best life, then I hope my story can be an example of no matter what the obstacle might be, there is a way around it, or through it, or over it. I'd like for my story to be an example for people to live their best life no matter what.

It affects people from all different races, but I just imagine a black man in the public eye, living in Detroit turning white, that's an entirely different thing.

Yes, I had to clearly define myself. Race is an issue in America, still, and I had to clearly define who I am. So that even if I'm pigment-less, all white, I'm still an African-American man; I'm still the man I want to be. And I'm defined as that no matter what I look like. And I had to really clearly define myself before I could speak about it on such a broad platform.

Has anyone ever asked you why don't you do the news without your makeup?

Why don't you show your viewers your true skin?

The reason I don't go on air without my makeup is because I know for a fact that when I'm not wearing makeup, my face is distracting. Viewers will be forced to look at my face, my ears, my neck, and then the news story becomes about me, my skin color, not about the facts. When I'm not working, I don't want to wear the makeup in public so I made a conscious decision to not wear it outside of work.

What made it important for you to have those pictures in your book, in addition to telling your story?

I thought those pictures were very important because I want people to understand that it's OK to look, it's OK to ask me. As people in the communication business, we're here to hopefully enhance people's lives. That's what I made this business be for me. For me to be able to tell this story that helps people. For people who don't really tell their story for themselves. To make it OK for people to look at me and maybe when they see someone who looks like me, they will have a more compassionate heart towards them.

Has anything positive come out of your diagnosis?

How did you get your confidence back after many setbacks?

This disease made me the man I want to be. I'm more compassionate, more understanding. It has also given me the opportunity to help people. That's why part of the proceeds from this book will benefit an organization that I started to help with the emotional effects of this disease.

It took me a while to get my confidence back, and what I had to do was clearly understand



Lee Thomas applying make-up



Lee Thomas at FOX 2 Detroit

where I was; I had to take assessment of what I had done. Sometimes we blow through life so quickly, especially in this business we're always looking for the next job. I'm the man I always wanted to be — right now, today. And I'm proud of that. And just because I'm changing colors and my pigment's leaving, it doesn't change who I am and it never will.

What advice do you give to others?

You can't let any cruel comments take your life away from you. You have just as much right to be outside in the sunshine or in the mall as anyone does. If I can be an African-American man turning white on television and still have my job, then there isn't really an obstacle you can't get through.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Discuss how you reacted when you first saw the pictures of Thomas' skin. Had you ever heard of this condition before you read *Turning White*, and if so, to what extent? How will you respond in the future when you interact with someone who has vitiligo?
2. Why do you think media have treated Michael Jackson, another public figure with vitiligo, so poorly and even dismissed the fact that he has vitiligo, going as far as saying he bleached his own skin to appear white? Does this display ignorance of the disease on their behalf or is it a personal attack on Jackson?
3. Can you relate to Thomas on any level of the personal and professional roller coaster of achievement and failure? How did you handle the pressure, and has it had a negative or a positive impact on your life?
4. Thomas quotes the Langston Hughes poem, "Dream Deferred," saying, "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" Seeing how his parents let their dreams "dry up like a raisin in the sun," Thomas decides that he is going to fight for his dreams as long as he is able. How can you relate to his passion and commitment? Can you, or have your dreams been deferred?
5. Do you think getting this disease had a positive effect on Thomas? Discuss how he is using the diagnosis to help other vitiligo patients and people who suffer from other diseases to regain their lives.
6. Thomas, although he isn't a doctor, says his diet can be partly to blame for his vitiligo. When he eats unhealthy foods, Thomas notices more spots. He doesn't condemn the way his mother fed him, but says that as Americans, we should cut down on how much we eat. Americans have been fed information on how diet affects their health, but yet seem to be doing nothing to change their lifestyle. What more can be done, do you think, to help Americans, especially African-Americans, change their eating habits and lead a more health-conscious lifestyle?
7. Why do you think it is that a three-year-old child can look with only concern that Thomas is physically in pain when seeing his discolored skin for the first time, yet when we look, we have reactions of fear, rage (in some extreme cases), guilt, ignorance, etc.? Do you think that by going public with his condition, people will be more compassionate when seeing others with cosmetic diseases?
8. Thomas says he hopes he does not pass this disease on to any future children. Why do you think he feels this way? Thomas has said that this was experience has brought him to be the man he was meant to be, so why do you think he'd want to take that away from a future (possible) child of his?