

## “He Liked Black People. He Felt Sorry for Them”: A Personal Response to Privilege in “Bro”

Haley Nelson

The fictional piece, “Bro” by Ian Williams is humorous, enjoyable to read, and has some incredibly important messages embedded within about privilege and harmful mindsets. The main character, Greg, and the relationship he tried to foster with a Black man, Bro, reminded me of an experience I had with a fellow student in my school when I was probably about 12 years old. I would like to note that I have white privilege, neurotypical privilege, able-bodied privilege, socioeconomic privilege, and the list goes on. As a privileged individual, I try my best to engage in interactions with others in a genuine way, rather than a way that reinforces that privilege. However, I have not always made decisions with the best intentions. The experience I had in Grade 7 reflects Greg’s actions and motivations in the short story “Bro”.

There was a high school student at my school while I was in middle school who I knew had Tourette’s Syndrome. I believe his name was Thomas<sup>1</sup>, and he was fairly new to my school. I volunteered twice a week at my school’s concession, and the concession lady, Jennifer, knew Thomas quite well. Many students with learning exceptionalities often go to work with Jennifer during their day to learn about life skills and just to have a break from class. From spending time with Thomas, Jennifer learned that Thomas enjoyed watching boxing on the television, and she told me about this. One day I saw Thomas sitting alone in the lunchroom, and I took it upon myself to go talk to him. I said hello and he greeted me back but then that was followed by an awkward silence. I proceeded to try and small talk with him about boxing, even though I know nothing about it. He immediately snapped at me and said, “I don’t even know you!” He then got up from the table and walked away. I was hurt by his reaction because I was just trying to be nice. However, now that I have matured and had time to reflect on this experience, I realize that I had some bad intentions in this situation.

I was reminded of this moment because of the events in the story “Bro”. The story follows Greg, a middle-aged, Caucasian man who has the goal of befriending a Black man. From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Greg does not care about befriending an individual whom he gets along with or has similar

---

<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the real individuals discussed in this personal experience.

interests; he only cares about looking superior and heroic for being friends with a Black, and oppressed, individual. This is reinforced by how Greg met and approached Bro:

[W]hen [Greg] beheld a Black man at the Home Depot in the next town, he recognized the significance of the occasion... On the way in, he nodded at the man. On the way out, holding a shovel, he said, 'Bro,' and made a fist in his coat pocket but chickened out of raising it in a fight-the-power, 1968-Olympics way. The Black Panther way. That guy from *Black Panther* who died. Colon cancer. Tragic, just tragic. Stage one complete. 'I made a Black friend,' Greg announced to his wife. (Williams)

Greg was not even interested in learning Bro's real name, like a true friend would. Not only did Greg's reasoning for forming a friendship with Bro remind me of my own experiences, but also the protest he carried out near the end of the story.

After forcing a friendship with 'Bro', Greg also decided to randomly protest about Black issues to boost his white ego even more: "'I'm protesting everything, baby. Slavery, the police, the criminal justice system, Karens, Katrina, the war on drugs, Mandela—'" (Williams). Privileged individuals like Greg and myself, sometimes approach marginalized people with intentions to benefit themselves, rather than actually helping them. I was not actually interested in being Thomas' friend or talking about boxing with him. I was more interested in making myself look good for helping out the lonely kid with Tourette's. This is not behaviour exclusive to me. Privileged people often seek out opportunities to make themselves seem heroic and charitable by almost exploiting marginalized individuals. For example, Greg did not want to be friends with Bro because they genuinely get along or he likes him as a person. Greg just wanted the heroic 'brownie points' for befriending a Black individual. Greg's behaviour is consistent with what is commonly known as the 'White-Saviour Complex'. If Bro was Caucasian, I am doubtful that Greg would have ever approached him. This behaviour extends into the protest Greg started. Does he really care about Black issues in society, or does he just want to make himself look good for organizing said protest?

I think it is so important that Williams brought attention to the reality of privileged individuals taking advantage of their superior position to those in marginalized positions in order to reap the benefits. This is something all privileged individuals need to think about and reflect upon. This piece was truly relatable in terms of bad intentions, relationships, and privileged perspectives. We should not engage with and be friendly to diverse and marginalized groups of people just because we feel bad for them, as this only puts our privilege in the spotlight even more.

## Work Cited

William, Ian. "Bro." *The Walrus*. 13 July 2022. <https://thewalrus.ca/bro-fiction/>.