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Honky

Dalton Conley

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Honky

"A wonderful book about growing up . . . as a white kid in a largely poor black and Hispanic neighborhood. . . . A triumph."

—Jonathan Lethem, author of *Motherless Brooklyn*

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Dalton Conley : Honky before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Honky:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. The Unobservant Sociologist? The Duck that Doesn't Quack?By MargoI understand why some reviewers are frustrated. Conley IS self-indulgent and paints an extremely one-sided picture of the neighborhood outside his window. Those things, for the most part, frustrate me too. BUT. As a graduate student that just finished my thesis on spoken/written narratives, let me tell you how difficult it is to find white people

willing to engage race in relation to themselves -- anything after 1999 starts looking real dicey real quick. Of course he's going to mess up - but that just makes it more fun for me. Of course he's self-indulgent - he's an academic. The most frustrating thing to me is the degree to which his narrative is one-sided. The only character that seems fully formed, besides himself, is Gerome and that only seems to be to make a complete circle compositionally. This self-indulgent academic is a sociologist He is paid to observe. Come on, man! Observe!³ of 3 people found the following review helpful. thought provoking and meaningful
By Michael
Like the author, I am white and spent part of my childhood living in low income housing in a predominantly black and hispanic neighborhood. I found this memoir so fascinating I could hardly put it down. Like the author, I have often pondered the complex reasons why I was able to escape to middle class success from the world of poverty, hopelessness, and violence that almost all my elementary school classmates presumably still live in. The book is a funny and honest memoir of childhood with just a light dose of analysis from the author's standpoint as an adult sociologist. Conley's description of the "cultural capital" and other resources that fueled his escape to an easier life really fits with my experience. This is a short book, and its brevity makes it a quick, entertaining read. I agree with some other reviewers that brevity also causes it to lack material that would be a great interest to many readers. What were the feelings and motivations of his parents? I also agree that Conley could have talked more about the complex, positive aspects of black family life that contrast with practices in white families, since his experiences should put him in a rare position to comment on this issue. I well remember the experience of being at a birthday party in the home of a black friend in second grade, sitting in a warm embrace on the lap of his grandmother, and realizing that the exuberant, loving, multigenerational family atmosphere there was a striking contrast to that in my family.⁰ of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting Read
By Laura Santillan
I bought this book for English class, at first I wasn't impressed. I didn't like the title or the opening "yo momma" joke. Once you get past that and start to read the book it gets interesting. The innocence of a child that sees people for just that a person vs the color of their skin to the troubles of growing up in the inner city, to the social acceptance. I can say I can mostly appreciate this book.

As recalled in *Honky*, Dalton Conley's childhood has all of the classic elements of growing up in America. But the fact that he was one of the few white boys in a mostly black and Puerto Rican neighborhood on Manhattan's Lower East Side makes Dalton's childhood unique. At the age of three, he couldn't understand why the infant daughter of the black separatists next door couldn't be his sister, so he kidnapped her. By the time he was a teenager, he realized that not even a parent's devotion could protect his best friend from a stray bullet. Years after the privilege of being white and middle class allowed Conley to leave the projects, his entertaining memoir allows us to see how race and class impact us all. Perfectly pitched and daringly original, *Honky* is that rare book that entertains even as it informs.

From *Publishers Weekly* "I've studied whiteness the way I would a foreign language," declares Conley at the outset of his affecting, challenging memoir, laced with the retrospective wisdom of the sociologist (at New York University) he has become. As the child of bohemian, white parents, he grew up in an otherwise black and Hispanic housing project on New York's Lower East Side. At elementary school in the 1970s, he found himself placed in the "Chinese class," after his stint in the black class where he was the only student not to receive corporal punishment. A left him uncomfortable. Despite the family's lack of funds, they had cultural capital in the form of social connections, and were able to transfer young Dalton to a better school, where he began to feel some snobbery toward kids in his own neighborhood. Yet the friend who accepted Dalton most was a black youth from the neighborhood, Jerome, who was tragically disabled in a random act of violence that helped spur Conley's parents to leave the Lower East Side for subsidized housing for artists. Part of the memoir concerns the universality of poverty. A but a thoughtful examination of the privileges of race and class also emerges. Despite the book's title, the author cites only one major episode in which he was threatened and called "honky." Conley acknowledges that he doesn't know how to account for such successes as gaining admission into the selective Bronx High School of Science: race? parental protectiveness? his own aspirations? It is "the privilege of the middle and upper classes," he observes, to construct narratives of their own success "rather than having the media and society do it for us." (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.
From *Booklist* Conley, a sociology professor, brings to his analysis of race a unique experience in the social and racial maze of New York City. Conley grew up in a Manhattan housing project that was predominantly black and Hispanic. Yet his minority white status offered a perspective and insight into the analysis of American race and class conflict. Conley found himself placed with Asian students on a higher academic track in elementary school, later migrated downtown to the Village with rich white students in junior high school, and was finally placed in one of the more selective public high schools. Throughout his personal journey, he learns that class and race are interwoven in a complex social fabric making it somewhat difficult to determine which is the dominant factor. While Conley appears to maintain close personal friendships with minorities, his whiteness still provides him with opportunities not available to his black and Hispanic neighbors. Conley's perspective on his youth is likely reconstructive and colored by preferences. Yet his book offers a clarity and simplicity that is insightful and raises concerns of a more universal significance. Vernon Ford Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved
From *Kirkus* sConley

(Sociology/New York Univ.) recounts his years of growing up poor in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s in the projects on the Lower East Side of New York, where as a white he was a minority amid Latinos, blacks, and Asians. His mother and father were a bohemian couple who abandoned their respectable origins and moved to the inner city. Young Conley went to school first on the Lower East Side first and later in Greenwich Village. The comparison between the poorer schools of the Lower East Side with those of better-off Greenwich Village allows the sociologist in Conley, mercifully gagged until that point, to come gushing through, in the process spilling the jargon of his profession over what had heretofore been a fine first-person narrative. Sociology gets him into trouble in other ways as well. Conley, for example, is inclined to appropriate slang words like "yo" from their present usage back into the late 1960s-when, arguably, it was being used only in some small sectors of the black community. Moreover, the word "honky" is a slightly disingenuous pejorative term, used (by Latinos mostly) more for its shock value than for anything else. More serious still is Conley's portrayal of blacks (and some Latinos, too) as hopeless victims-in contrast to the whites, who emerge triumphantly unscathed to tell the black and Latino stories with all their sympathies in all the right places. Not without its charm, Conley's account has the makings of a made-for-television movie. -- Copyright © 2000 Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.