

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*

Dalton Conley



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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.

Honky Details

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From Reader Review Honky for online ebook

Alex De Vera says

While Dalton Conley's "Honky" may be a good primer for many privileged kids, it does nothing to expand on the social conditions of those living in poverty. The trajectory of the author's life as he tells it, seems to widen the racial gap even further. For a great part of the narrative, the author does count his blessings, and although I don't blame him, he fails to see his opportunities from the eyes of his neighbors who didn't have the same cultural capital as his family did. More often than not, he reflects on the what ifs of his life, beginning with "I wonder what would have happened had my mother not been white," when she entered a hospital lab without permission, to questioning what would have befallen him if he were not white after starting a fire in a upscale Chelsea loft. Conley pulls away from expanding on what might have happened if he were of a different race thus taking away from further discussion on the issues of race.

Throughout the book, he develops friendships with the neighborhood kids, but they seem to be used as a device for comparing the lives they had and eventually led. Conley could have done a better job examining the causes of these life differences rather than merely pointing to the fact that he was very lucky because of his skin color. One example of this is when he first started school and did not receive corporal punishment when those around him did. By examining why "the other parents had requested that their children be physically disciplined," he could have drawn on the works of Albert Memmi and the historical impacts of colonization. It is unfortunate his family could not afford to live in a better neighborhood, but they had the chance to move up. Those around him did not, and pausing to examine why for the reader would have strengthened the story. Conley writes about the advantages he had growing up, but fails to explain why such opportunities were available to him and not to others.

Juliet Jeske says

An entertaining and quick read about a challenging childhood in the rougher New York of the 70's and 80's. Conley is a skilled writer who manages to stay away from too much sentimentality about his childhood- the only white kid in a government housing project in the Lower East side of Manhattan. Raised by artists and surrounded by violence and crime, the author uses his training in sociology to comment on how his race and socioeconomic background gave him an unseen advantage. The book is slightly more clinical than a typical memoir but still emotional enough to drive the narrative. If you are a memoir fan, I would recommend it! It is especially enjoyable if you want to learn more about New York when it wasn't quite as sanitized and gentrified.

Jay Koester says

Short, entertaining book on growing up white in a black/hispanic neighborhood. An important look at the ways it was easier for him to escape the neighborhood than it was for many of his friends. Too many people still want to ignore the benefits being white gives you in American society.

The rest of this review is going to be telling a few of my stories of my similar experiences. For more on the book, read one of the other 104 reviews.

I grew up about the same time period as Honky, but in Lawrence, Kansas. Because we lived in a "bad" neighborhood, from kindergarten through fourth grade, I went to a school several miles away, instead of the school just a couple of blocks from our house. But in fifth and sixth grade, that school ran out of room, and the district said I had to attend the school down the street.

Though I remember being scared as hell the first day, it turned out to be a great experience for me. There were only a few other white kids at the school, and I was the only one who could be considered middle class. But in that school, being middle class meant I was quickly labeled as the "rich kid." My junior high was fairly poor, too, so it wasn't until high school that I found out that much of the city was better off than me, and I wasn't so rich after all. But I grew up appreciating all I had. I was the "rich kid," so I knew I didn't have much to complain about compared to my peers. All my friends lived across the street from me in a low-income housing project. They looked across the street and saw me living in what looked like a mansion. So my advantages weren't so subtle in most cases, and I knew I had it good.

Conley writes in Honky about the trouble he gets into and easily escapes because he is white. I didn't do anything quite as shocking as Conley writes about, but one story from junior high sticks out. My friend David and I were in English class when he dropped his pencil and bent down to pick it up. I kicked him in the butt and sent him sprawling to the floor. The teacher immediately told him to go to the principal's office. Not selling me out (yet), he protested, "For falling out of my chair?" She just told him to shut up and go.

Once at the principal's office, David fessed up to the whole story, but the principal wouldn't believe it, asking, "Do you know how many times Jay has been sent down to the office during his years here?" "Probably none," my friend, replied. "That's right. Now, do you want me to call him down here and find out what really happened?" David: "Yeah, go ahead." Principal: "I don't think that will be necessary. Go sit in the hall."

So, I did something wrong, and David was punished. Was it because I was white, and David was hispanic? Did I never get in trouble because I was white or because I was good? Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Patty says

Very interesting and quick read through a white man's journey of growing up in NYC's housing projects in the 70s and 80s. He offers both comical as well as sad tales involving race and class. Some of the stories relate to many of our own tales of growing up, while others are jarring.

One of the most fascinating parts of the book (albeit predictable) are the different cultural rules for fitting in between his public school in the projects vs. a school he later attends, much more affluent and white, in Greenwich Village. In the projects, "snaps" about someone's mama "Your mama is so fat she needs 2 seats on the bus" is the way to fit in, whereas in the wealthier school, intelligence and the wealth of one's parents were the indicator of high social standing.

*Some things never change...some of the city kids I work with were telling me that the mama jokes continue to this day. They are immigrant kids from Burma who keep asking me, "Why do the kids keep talking about my mom?!" while I laughed out loud.

Noel says

This is a memoir about a kid whose parents, who are free-thinking whites, are poor enough that they live in the lower east side of Manhattan at a time when that area was mostly black and Puerto Rican. These parents are not too attuned to their children and pretty much the Dalton grows up on the streets of lower Manhattan as a white minority. His descriptions are great, his insight unique. Having myself grown up on the streets of the same island, but a world away on the upper east side, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and looking into his world through a totally different window.

Scot says

A lively, touching, and charming memoir that is an easy and quick book to read, even though the author is a Yale sociologist more famous for his academic work *The Pecking Order*. Don't let his credentials intimidate you: this would be an excellent book for a discussion group read, for high school seniors and up, to get a conversation going about the social constructions of race, class, and ethnicity, and what it's like to be the odd man out, the one slightly different from the rest. As the son of eccentric artistic types who chose to live in a bad neighborhood project in lower Manhattan, Conley grows up in the 70s the one white kid in a minority mix dominated by African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Add a blurring of his WASP and Jewish forefathers' traditions and heritages to the mix.

Too often memoirs nowadays tend to glorify the writer, usually cast as a victim overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds--this usually strikes me as self-indulgent and negligent of a range of forces, groups, and individuals who no doubt were big helps along the way. I like very much Conley's approach here, inverting that common stance. He doesn't sugar coat the tough times and struggles, but he notes how even as the only white kid in the mix, more often than not he actually gets away with things or comes out of scrapes with less personal impact and suffering than his darker skinned or thicker accented neighborhood crew. There is humor to be found here, as well as insight, and a disturbing but wise recognition that while many things in life just aren't fair, some of the great heroes are largely unknown characters worthy of true admiration and praise because though they might have fallen or been wounded in what for many is the struggle for daily existence, yet all along the way they treated those around them, whatever their color or class, with dignity, kindness, and respect.

Conley's recollections critique not only the society, but also the various (often conflicting and/or inept) bureaucracies established to deal with social injustice. Some of the more compelling passages include a Head Start girl fight over a Barbie doll; strategies to gain status by picking up *Happy Days* plot lines and character developments by eavesdropping; and a historic junior high school confrontation between the fans of classic rock and those of disco, who also were clearly divided by fashion sense, ethnicity, class, and race.

Lexxie says

It was a good interesting read. Well written. Above all, it gave a good portrait of what it was like growing up in the projects of New York. It missed the mark on providing clear examples of white privilege as it set out to do.

Joseph says

this is an excellent book that gives keen perspective on race and class in America. the writing flowed easily and it was a quick, entertaining, informative read. I haven't been this riveted about a book in a while.

Jesus Olvera says

This book was really good, not just because of the way it was written but because of the accuracy and realism of racism within schools and American youth. Not only did I enjoy this book because it was interesting, I enjoyed it because I could really connect with the author and book. This is a memoir about Dalton Conley who is a white boy with two artistic parents who grows up in a largely black and Latino area. He grows up in the projects in New York City and attends school there. As a kid he doesn't fully understand race and the fact that whites are seen as a majority in American society. He was in a particular situation: He was too poor to be seen and accepted by middle-class white groups, but he was also too white to be accepted by the gangs that were in his neighborhood and school. As he grows older and observes racial social behaviors and situations he starts to become self-conscious and even guilty. This book seemed like a social experiment in a sense because the author is in an unusual and uncommon position. He must assimilate himself to two groups that he has identified himself with, but they have not identified and accepted him. This book was a very interesting and different perspective on race in America. It's different and rare to see a white person as a minority and to see him trying to assimilate with other races. It was a book that gave me a different perspective on race.

Vannessa Anderson says

Dalton Conley did an extraordinary job in describing what it was like growing up with mostly with American Descendants of Slaves. Was a telling read.

Phoebe says

Honky sounds like it would be right up my alley, but the book itself wasn't as interesting as I'd hoped. Conley needs to work on his storytelling -- it often feels more like a book report than a memoir.

Annie says

A great read about growing up white in the projects of NYC and how race is perceived (or not) as one grows older. The author's ticks and unique quirks remind me a bit of a distant cousin.

Kevin Davenport says

I give this book a thumbs up because it's really an eye opening read. It really makes you reflect on how you look at everything in your life and what influences you or helps guide you towards your decision making. One essential quote that really stuck out to me while reading Honky was "This is the privilege of the middle and upper cases in America---the right to make up the reasons things turn out the way they do, to construct our own narratives rather than having the media do it for us." I really related to this statement being in the lower class of this country and having no positive say in how the media portrays us, leading to how people in general judge us. Overall this book is great and I'd advise it to anyone interested in social issues.

Wordsmith J says

One of the best books I've ever read about the divide, not only between races, but between classes. The author is a sociologist, and the book a memoir of his coming of age in housing projects of NYC's lower east side. The son of two struggling artists, and part of a white family living in a predominantly black and latino area, he recounts personal experiences about privilege, social constructs, what doors are open and shut and to whom, and the general challenges of inner city life. Very honest and well-written, funny and tragic, and a compelling read.

Michele Capobianco says

A powerful memoir and sociological work of nonfiction, Honky is a read for anyone who hasn't got all the answers to questions about class and race in America, particularly in New York City.

Growing up through the 1970's and 1980's, Dalton Conley experiences a somewhat unique environment, learning how to be the minority on a small scale while gradually learning that being white makes him the majority. He is treated differently than his peers and he struggles to understand his treatment as a function of race, class, or individual personality; a problem we have all faced at one time or another.

Conley, in the Epilogue, summarizes his understanding of mobility within race and class in America with a metaphor about driving a car. From the driver's seat, we can escape, hitting the gas, taking any road that we like. But from above, the view of a helicopter perhaps, all the drivers on the road move in "ebbs and flows of traffic...traffic flow seems absurdly constrained and rhythmically patterned." The control and individual freedom that we sometimes believe we have is just a part of the larger system of roads, of opportunities that are much more limited than we can perceive from within.

New York City has evolved in many ways socially and racially over Conley's lifetime. He currently lives in Manhattan in the neighborhood of Chelsea, commuting to Yale University where he works as a social scientist. He has studied at both University of Berkley and Yale University. Conley says in the Author's

Note, “Since Honky is based on lived experience, it is as much about what is not understood as it is about what is grasped. It is about the sense-making of children more than professionals. In short, it is about literary truths, not scientific ones.”
