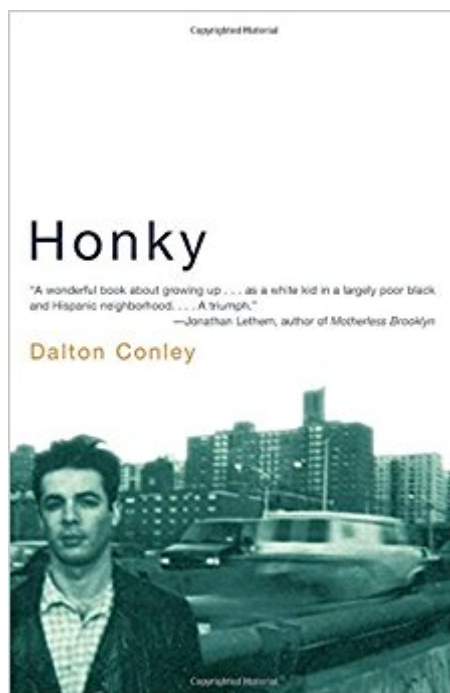


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# Honky



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"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 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. 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. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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 --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I 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-induglent academic is a sociologist He is paid to observe. Come on, man! Observe!

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.

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.

This was a textbook for class, but maybe should be a textbook for life. We have done ok to decrease racism in America, but it is not gone yet. Dalton tells his story as he tries to learn, who he is. You can learn about these things and more in this easy to read story about a boy named Dalton from the projects who learns about white privilege when he burns down an apartment or escapes punishment from school. What happens to his sister as the school tries to be gender and race attentive. When do children learn to be racist? Dalton explores this as he tells his stories of stealing

babies and vacationing in Pennsylvanian with family.

I also lived on the lower east side. Compared to the project where I lived, Masaryk Towers was a step up. Conley mentions the brown bricks of the projects but does not mention until later in the narrative the yellow bricks of Masaryk. The yellow bricks can be viewed as its difference from the projects in the area. Conley makes it sound as if he's practically the only white person around. There were other whites in Masaryk and some whites lived in the housing projects as well. In addition, as Conley has a Jewish background, I'm surprised that he did not (unless I somehow missed it) mention the large Jewish community on the other side of the bridge right near his home. I didn't like that Conley said that the names of the projects such as Riis and Wald have little meaning to the people who lived there. Many people live in places and have no idea whom they're named after. I also didn't like that he insinuated that you could not get an education on the lower east side. I've had teachers who've inspired me to excel. I've given this book 3 stars because it brought me back to the old neighborhood. The Pioneer supermarket, the luncheonette. These were part of my daily existence. Yet I think he was too hard on the Lower East Side. There is hope there.

I picked up this book after reading Conley's sociology book, "Being Black, Living in the Red." The latter is first rate--I found it very, very helpful. I was curious about the formative experiences of the author of THAT book. Except for that, I don't know that I would have finished this one. Conley gives sketchy details of all characters except himself--for instance, we get no idea why his father forsook his "artist" identity to take on steady work, though this seems an important event, with which Conley deals in half a page. Even of himself, he is less forthcoming than it initially seems--for instance, he tells us of his various misdeeds and psychopathologies, but he does little more than report them. ("Show, don't tell," someone should have instructed him.) I found myself frustrating with a pile of, "But what about . . ." questions I wanted the author to have addressed. ("So what about your Mom's short-lived writing career? How did that affect her and your family?" "How did your OCD affect your place in your various neighborhoods? Did whites/middle class folk deal with it differently than blacks/lower class?") I think this book is more a set of object lessons in the author's (very insightful) understanding of race and class than a compelling or convincing memoir. We get the details relevant to the lessons, not those that would make a full-fledged story.

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