



## Honky

By Dalton Conley

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### Honky By Dalton Conley

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.

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# **Honky**

*By Dalton Conley*

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## **Honky** By Dalton Conley Bibliography

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### Editorial Review

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. About 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.)

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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*

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From Kirkus Reviews

Conley (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.  
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