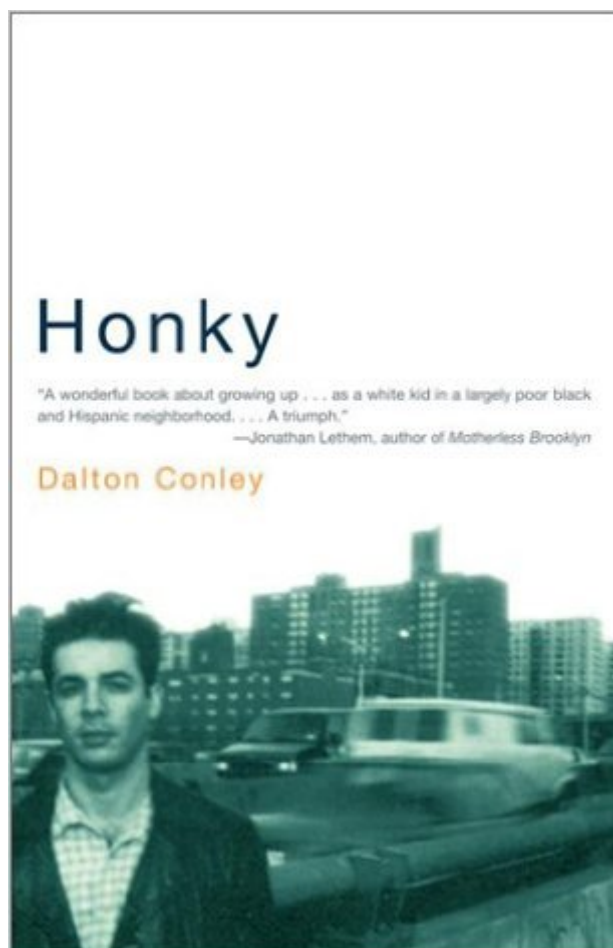


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# Honky



## 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 found this book both confusing and troubling. As a black man who grew up on the Lower East Side of New York, I find Conley's observations out of sync with my own. First of all: the Masaryk Towers--the "project" where he lived--was not a PUBLIC housing project, nor was it low income. Its population was far more mixed than the projects where I grew up. His stories, while well written at times, seem forced--as if to prove a point: white people have privileges that black people do not. I think we know this already. As a person of color, I felt a bit hurt by the book's constant opposition between white success and black failure. If it's stereotypes the author is trying to attack, he sure doesn't succeed. Black people are type cast in this racial drama. My life growing up was filled with

rituals, joy, ideas. His picture of black life is filled with anger, tragedy, and sadness. Where is the positive, complex side of black life on the Lower East Side. As for the book's title: I've never called ANYONE honky. Was Conley called honky? The title of the book--like so many of Conley's stories--typecasts black people in a confusing and troubling way. Our lives are as complicated as white people's. I wish this book had shown this. Too bad. I think Conley means well. He just doesn't get it.

I found this to be an interesting and frustrating book. Dalton is a decent, though self-indulgent writer, who is able to create good narrative momentum. He has some interesting if not very deep things to say about race and class and childhood. But everything positive about the book was deeply undermined for me because it contains a great deal of factual error and distortion. I know this because my family figures prominently in his story. He was my brother's best friend during a critical period of their childhoods, which Dalton recounts at considerable length. And much of what he says is simply wrong. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that he wrote things as he remembers them and did not deliberately embellish the story. But the inaccuracies are significant because they pertain to the very heart of what he is trying to say. When Dalton transferred to PS41, he moved into a very different socioeconomic sphere, and the contrast between his earlier experiences and the new world he entered affected him deeply. Those contrasts--and the meanings he draws from them--are a great deal of what he tries to make sense of in the book. And that is what makes his inaccuracies so troubling. The portrait he paints of my family is of an extremely privileged, wealthy clan of economic and cultural elitists. That makes a better story, but it is also false. It makes me wonder just how accurate his other memories are. Is what he says about other people, places, and experiences as distorted as what he says about my family? His book is a clear lesson in just how subjective and unreliable memoirs are as sources of information about anything or anyone other than their authors. If you read this book, you'll know what Dalton thinks his childhood was like. No more, no less.

About midway through his excellent, humorous and poignant memoir of growing up white in the mostly minority inner-city that comprises the edges of Manhattan's Lower East Side, Dalton Conley strives to comprehend the forces that enabled him, unaccompanied by his non-white peers, to transcend the urban blight that characterized both the outer and inner landscapes of those living in his neighborhood. "I'll never know whether it was my mother's protectiveness, my expectations and aspirations, or simply my race that spared me from a worse fate," writes Conley. "I will never know

the true cause and effect in the trajectory of my life. And maybe it is better this way. I can believe what I want to believe. This is the privilege of the middle and upper classes 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 and society do it for us." Honky, at its core, is Conley's construction of his own narrative, a thoughtful examination of the trajectories that were at force in his childhood, as well as a personal and moving account of his gradual childhood acknowledgement of the significance of his whiteness and the privileges of race and class while growing up in multiple, unequal worlds. Clearly his book has a lot to teach - and it does - but in a thoughtful and non-preachy manner. As a coming-of-age story, Honky is a study in contrasts: a child of white, progressive, and poor parents growing up in an otherwise Black and Hispanic housing project, an inner-city boy predominantly schooled in upper middle class public schools, and a fledgling, awkward teenager slowly seeing and coming to understand what he lyrically claims are the "invisible contours of inequality" that peopled the many worlds he simultaneously inhabited. His account is as refreshingly straightforward as it is honest, as, for example, when he realizes after moving from the inner-city with his family into a mostly white neighborhood during his high-school years his own self-proclaimed social awkwardness. "I paced in circles," writes Conley, "like a dosed up laboratory animal, wishing I were back in our old neighborhood, where at least I had my skin color to blame for not fitting in." Conley's aim throughout his memoir is not so much to preach but to demonstrate, and by demonstrating, uncover what are essentially both the paradoxes and determinants of race and class in America. "If the exception proves the rule," he declares, "I'm that exception." He is forthright about the "cultural capital" of his family, that which allowed them, for example, to work the public schooling system to their advantage, using the addresses of friends in better neighborhoods as their own so that the author and his sister could attend better schools - an advantage seldom available to their minority peers. And never more aware is Conley of the lingering scars he harbors, both physical and emotional, that are the remnants of the violence that plagued his neighborhood in the 1970's and 80's and of which he carries today in his adulthood. Honky is a must-read for those interested in complexities of race and class in America today. It provides a first-hand account of one who was forced to grapple with the language and idioms of whiteness in a way that most non-minority Americans take for granted. And his take on poverty in America is especially clear and bleak, a reflection by one who was able to both live in and transcend its grasp. Conley, now a sociologist at Yale, who is trained to develop statistical models to examine sociological problems, quips at the end of his memoir that "what's gained in story is lost in numbers." As regards to Honky we are fortunate that is the case. Brian T. Peterson, New York City

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