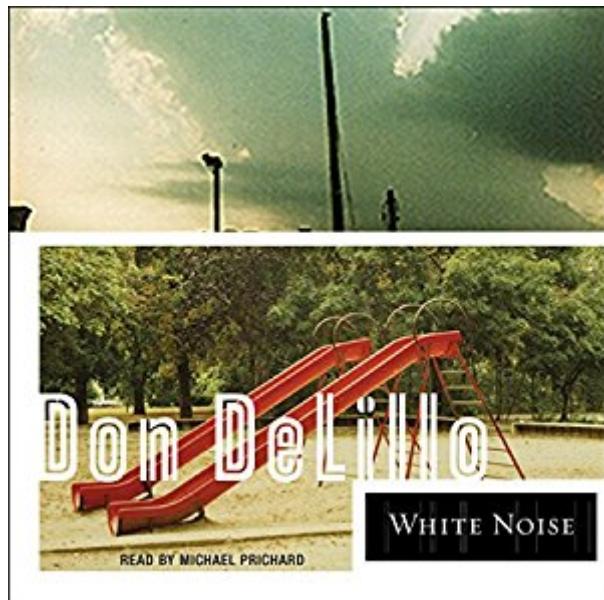


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White Noise



Synopsis

Winner of the National Book Award, *White Noise* tells the story of Jack Gladney; his fourth wife, Babette; and four ultramodern offspring as they navigate the rocky passages of family life to the background babble of brand-name consumerism. When an industrial accident unleashes an "airborne toxic event", a lethal black chemical cloud floats over their lives. The menacing cloud is a more urgent and visible version of the "white noise" engulfing the Gladneys - radio transmissions, sirens, microwaves, ultrasonic appliances, and TV murmurings - pulsing with life yet suggesting something ominous.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

White Noise was the first DeLillo I ever tried to read, a few years ago, and I was disappointed; I thought it was thin and heartless and clever-clever. Then I got older, visited America for the first time and read it again, and suddenly it seemed true, oh so true. The book is full of dark pleasures: the family's hilariously misinformed conversations about everything under the sun; the now-classic episode of The Most Photographed Barn in America (it's not especially beautiful or old, it's just been photographed over and over again); the description of a cloud of poisonous gas as an Airborne Toxic Event; the narrator's manically argumentative son Heinrich; his daughter's mysterious utterance in her sleep of the magical words "Toyota Celica". And much, much more. The crisp beauty of DeLillo's writing can seem cold on first reading, but this is a function of the eerie ambiguity of the book's tone; it's neither satirical nor celebratory, it's just looking hard at these lives and the

world around them. White Noise is, for my money, DeLillo's funniest book and his most death-haunted; that he balances the ever-present fear of death with a (for him) new compassion for his characters is maybe the most amazing thing about it. It gets better every time it's read, which is the mark of a classic.

I'm not sure what to think of Don DeLillo. White Noise, like Mao II, like Underworld, like End Zone, is a book bursting with ideas and observations about people, the world and modern life. And some of these observations will make you see things in a new way, or at least crystallize your thoughts so perfectly that you nod your head and say, "Yes, that's exactly what I think. Now why didn't I say it like that?" Well, because you're not Don DeLillo. So give the man credit, because that's something few people can do. At the same time White Noise shows up one of DeLillo's bigger flaws: he doesn't really create characters you care about, even a little bit. Indeed, in White Noise I'm sure he didn't want to. They're not real characters at all, only a group of signifiers and commentators who all speak with the same voice and even use the same expressions, whether they are ex-sportswriters, housewives, sulking teens, or nine-year-old girls. By page 300 this gets tiresome. Intellectual insights are more memorable when they are hung on interesting and engaging characters. So while I enjoyed White Noise and am impressed with the mind behind it, I found it ultimately unsatisfying.

In "White Noise" DeLillo proves himself to be the Balzac of the contemporary era, particularly that of America suburbia. Very basically it portrays the negative effects of technology on our society. Overwhelmed by information, we become anesthetized to our environment....we must filter out some the data that bombards our system, and indeed we filter out most of it. Our systems so burdened by the information that we treat all things with indifference....except for our own death, which remains the one thing we would like to filter out of our consciousness but don't seem able to do so. Now, this all recalls the dry writings of Heidegger or Baudrillard, but instead DeLillo will have you laughing til you cry with certain passages. We have a Professor who is head of the "Hitler Studies" department (one thing about information overload is that people specialize in minutiae). His colleague, Murray, who philosophizes over food labels, wants to start an "Elvis Studies" department. The concept of the "hyperreal" is evoked. For example, there is a tourist site near the college. It has no other appeal than the fact that it is the "most photographed barn" in America. Throughout the book we see the characters, just like many of us, concentrate on image rather than substance. I have noticed that there is a review below by a man that claims that neither he nor his "brilliant" wife the engineer found anything of interest in "White Noise". I, too, am an engineer and

know, by the way, that most engineers find themselves (often victims of self-deception) "brilliant". I speculate that the reason they could not understand this book is that they are too submerged in the "white noise" world of consumerism and information. In addition to that many engineers are afraid to address the issue of the dark side of technology.

Harold Bloom has said that the common theme of great American novels -- from Moby Dick to Gravity's Rainbow -- is apocalypse. Don DeLillo's genius is turning the American literary tradition on its head with tales of anti-apocalypse. Whether it's the Cold War that never runs hot in "Underworld", the Kennedy conspiracy that masks the true national decay in "Libra" or the "airborn toxic event" in "White Noise", DeLillo is a master of building fear, taking it away, then showing how the disaster distracted us from the things we should fear most. "White Noise" is a book about death -- more specifically, our fear of death -- and how we have created a consumer infotainment paradise to distract us from our inevitable demise. But that description hardly does the book justice. There's more brilliance on any page of "White Noise" than I could hope to write in a lifetime. DeLillo has a knack for finding deep meaning in common things -- like a supermarket. Characters are described as much by their postures and gestures as they are by words. Most of the important meanings of the book are left for readers to think on their own. If you need a plot and lots of A-B-C action, please don't read White Noise. It's a book for people open to seeing the world in a different light. "White Noise" proves that there is nothing more reassuring than a disaster, and nothing more terrifying than the banal.

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