

Chad Philip Johnson

Professor Calkins

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Hello, World

The world of the late 20th and early 21st centuries represents a time unlike any other in history. Television sets, personal computers, cellular phones, and other forms of technology increasingly pervade daily life and have created potent new ways for people to experience and interface with their environments. Meanwhile the variety of personal amenities—from candied caffeinated beverages to talking greeting cards—seems to be increasing at an almost exponential rate. People are allowed more small comforts and individual satisfactions than ever before, producing what on the surface appears to be a safer, more accessible and structured standard of living. Beneath this exterior, however, are new hostilities and dangers—the undesirable products of these conveniences. In Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*, the character Jack Gladney shares his constant struggles with the subversive forces which have been unleashed by his modern world. Living in the quaint college town of Blacksmith, U.S.A., Jack's life is detailed through his experiences at home with his family, at work on the College-on-the-Hill, and through his generally normal routines and interactions with others. Through his character, DeLillo labors to explain how a successful, well-educated and not dishonest man is subjected to the throes of the world in which he exists, being unable to gain control over the many circumstances of his life. For Jack, this predicament has culminated into a conflicted and unexpected middle-age life, one which appropriately reflects the hushed chaos—or white noise—which has always enveloped him.

On the surface, Jack and his family appear to be quite normal, in many ways typifying the average American middle class arrangement. He has the obligatory two story home in a comfortable neighborhood with a wife and four children, but additional details about his past begin to reveal strong peculiarities. Both Jack and his wife have had numerous previous marriages, from which all of the children in the household came; and there are yet more children elsewhere, living with ex-husbands and ex-wives. Jack believes that he trusts his wife fully, but relates to this idea strangely: “[She] and I tell each other everything. I have told everything, such as it was at the time, to each of my wives. There is

more to tell, of course, as marriages accumulate" (29). He loves his wife and has made what he believes to be a truthful assessment of his marriage, but he eventually discovers that she has had an extra-marital affair in a way which also recklessly endangered her personal health and wellbeing. There are also a number of subtle suggestions throughout that she started another affair with someone whom her husband considers to be a close friend (Weekes 290).

The character Jack also has distanced, strained relationships with his own children. When one of his daughters comes to visit for Christmas, Jack's thoughts turn to the unfamiliarity of their meeting. He observes how she is "self-possessed and thoughtful," but made the household "feel self-conscious at times, a punishment that visitors will unintentionally inflict on their complacent hosts" (94). At the conclusion of their visit Jack realizes as he takes her back to the airport that "[she] was watching me carefully, importantly.... The look was one of solemn compassion.... It was a look I did not necessarily trust, believing it had little to do with pity or love or sadness.... [It was] the adolescent female's tenderest form of condescension" (96-97). He is estranged from his daughter and, instead of making attempts to counter this uncomfortable realization, can only accept the state of their relationship. Like many fathers, Jack also has difficulty relating to his teenage son, who always responds with profound ambivalence to his father's advances. When attempting to discuss a topic as simple as the weather, the resulting conversation is "hopelessly circular and illogical... in which origin is indistinguishable from terminus" (Barrett 98). It only ends when a voice through the radio inadvertently weighs in, offering chance words on their subject which the son finds to be "preferable to his own father's" (doCarmo 13). Later, when he is having a triumphant moment speaking in front a large group of people, Jack decides that "I didn't want him to see me there. It would make him self-conscious, remind him of his former life as a gloomy and fugitive boy" (127). Learning some of the finer details of Jack's family life provides a very different perspective on the portrait of the average middle class family, but this also lends clarity to some of the more transparent qualities which have always been present. Many examples are also given for how and why Jack is ineffectual in his roles as husband and father, but these faults cannot be easily attributed to a lack of caring or thoughtfulness on his part.

Professionally, Jack is chairman of the department of Hitler studies and has prestige not only amongst his fellow academics at the College-on-the-Hill, but also in national and international circles.

This unique program, which he designed, was intended to pioneer a new field of study which would bring acclaim to both the college and to many of its faculty members. At work Jack is a significant person with important duties; he wears dark glasses and a “sleeveless tunic puckered at the shoulders” (9) and is regarded by fellow faculty as having an intimidating aura. At the advisement of the school’s chancellor, he has adopted the tag J. A. K. Gladney to produce a “bulkier, vaguely threatening manifestation of his former self” (Barrett 103). However, like his family life, intimate details of his work life provide insight to the incompleteness of his qualifications. It is learned that Jack had “long tried to conceal the fact that [he] did not know German. [He] could not speak or read it, could not understand the spoken word or begin to put the simplest sentence on paper” (31). A natural requirement in the program’s academic standards exclaims the severity of Jack’s situation: “No one could major in Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill without a minimum of one year of German” (31). Jack’s very own program, for which he has been recognized and congratulated by the world for its creation, mandates that he would be denied enrolment if he were an applying student.

The College-on-the-Hill is never presented as being anything more than a university which has managed to find a shtick. Given that Jack is in many ways unqualified to be the head of Hitler studies, and because the school’s renown exists only because of his program, the knowledge of his secrets effectively undermines its credibility as an institution. Jack even acknowledges, when reflecting on his partial pseudonym, “I am the false character that follows the name around” (17). Aside from Jack’s “powerful” Hitler lectures, the only other glimpse of the inner workings of the College-on-the-Hill comes from the gathering of its faculty in the cafeteria at lunchtime. These episodes do nothing to suggest that the university upholds its reputation as a respectable place of higher learning, a fact which is “epitomized by [Jack’s] colleagues who have food fights in the cafeteria, read nothing more thought-provoking than tabloids or UFO magazines, and are obsessed with making sense of and proving mastery over their own pasts rather than any larger intellectual issue” (Weekes 292). Hitler is all the university has; it’s as if the dictator has, from beyond the grave, commanded that the world pay special heed to a university that should have put away all dreams of greatness and instead aspired for simple integrity and academic mediocrity. Instead, his persona has been hijacked in an appropriately wayward manner: “At no point is Hitler’s violence or genocide mentioned, only his image and speeches.... This lack of critical thinking or

contextual consideration transforms academia into a hollow, amoral shell" (Weekes 293). Outside of his home, the College-on-the-Hill is where one J. A. K. Gladney makes his living and has along the way become awkwardly entrenched in the pursuit of his professional ambitions.

The remainder of Jack's time is filled by activities which extend from his work at the college. He goes on walks with his friend—a peer who is interested in building a program focused on Elvis in the same way that Jack built his program on Hitler (this is the same character who is possibly having an affair with Jack's wife)—and takes lessons in German to prepare to give a big speech for a Hitler conference. In his idle moments he is oftentimes consumed with thoughts of death which, in turn, cause him to dread what the future will hold. As Stephen doCarmo notes in his article "Subjects, Objects, and the Postmodern Differend in Don DeLillo *White Noise*," DeLillo's emphasis on Jack's life caused the book to be structured unconventionally: "[The book's] first third, comprised of twenty short and essentially plotless chapters (the section titled "Waves and Radiation"), has Jack simply making random observations about life at home, at the college, and in the town of Blacksmith, showing no real concern for how they are 'adding up' or where they might be going" (23). These "plotless" chapters are exactly what provide the necessary amount of depth for the reader to understand the person that is Jack Gladney. The reader cannot possibly consider him to be bad or immoral, yet the individual pieces of his life add up to represent something that is scary and confusing—a life that is dangerously uncontrollable. It is reasonable to expect that, if the hostilities of the world were not so many, Jack and the millions of middle-class citizens which he represents would be able to do as they are inclined and (at the risk of sounding cliché) lead happier, more productive and fulfilling lives. One can also attribute the apparent instabilities of Jack's life to the befuddled ways he reacts to events later in the book, such as the Airborne Toxic Event and his exposure to Nyodene D., learning of the powerful psychotropic Dylar, and the jarring discovery of his wife's infidelity.

DeLillo's *White Noise* is a complex and multilayered story encompassing many topics—including rampant consumerism, high technology, and the bustlings of an advancing society—but it is also the story of an everyman named Jack and the ways he is struggling to relate to an unrelenting world which will not allow itself to be demystified. His life echoes the lives of the masses who are "always strangely hidden, tucked away in their own houses with their own TVs, their own private interests and obsessions"

(doCarmo 7). These are a people who are suffering in unknown and unidentifiable ways, but their perils are very real. The support and solutions they desperately need are being kept from them by the same world that is also destroying them.

Works Cited

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