

Don DeLillo's White Noise

# A drab portrait of modern life

by David Deaton

**White Noise**  
Don DeLillo  
(Viking Penguin Inc., 326 pp.)

It's hard to believe this novel won the National Book Award in 1985. It must have been a bad year for fiction.

*White Noise* is as hard to define as its title. The novel isn't really about anything, so much as it is the depiction of a rather eerie emotional state.

That state is articulated by the book's narrator, a middle-aged academic, now into his fourth marriage, who teaches Hitler Studies at a small midwest college. Jack Gladney will surely join the fictional ranks of rational, deracinated anti-heroes.

What underlies his story (as such) is that most basic fear of us all: mortality. *White Noise* might have been better named *Fear of Dying*. Everyone, especially our narrator, is obsessed with death and lurid catastrophe.

Theirs is a condition well past anxiety, even beyond angst. Now it's a way of life. "Fear," as one character explains, "is self-awareness raised to a higher level."

And these characters are nothing but self-aware. Even Gladney's children are distanced, cerebral, emotionally mute. The one exception is his youngest, Wilder (What's in a name?), who hasn't yet learned to talk.

We are made to wish he will put it off as long as possible. The people in this book do nothing so well or copiously as talk. Though their dialogue is all very clever, it has the never-ending quality of a talk show.

They like to watch TV. Fragments of inane chatter are continually wrest from the box. Wherefore? "Television," as one

character explains, "is the death throes of human consciousness."

This character, another disembodied professor, is actually the most enjoyable one of the lot. He teaches courses in Cultural Iconography and would like to establish a department of Elvis Studies. This is not, for him, an

ironic proposal.

He is a happy man; the Void is his oyster. Going to the mall has the sublime Romantic connotations of returning to Nature.

De Lillo is at his best when describing just such things as "the ambient roar" of the shopping mall. Without being heavy-

handed he shows up contemporary culture for all its numbing sterility.

Yet pitfalls await anyone who dares to depict the peculiar emptiness of modern life. *White Noise* partakes of the very condition it seeks to describe.

It too gives way to numbing sterility. Painfully dull, tortuously long — it becomes a treatise on cultural iconography. A good hundred pages could be cut without any discernible loss to the story.

But one does not read *White Noise* for the usual reasons. It's a novel of ideas, not of action or character. Don't wait for the movie to come out.

In fairness, DeLillo has more than his share of brilliant and comic observations. The man is clearly a thinker. Unfortunately, his many fine thoughts are all but drowned out by his own relentless beating on the humdrum.

What saves *White Noise* from terminal banality and gives credibility to its characters' free-floating fear is an all too vivid account of genuine disaster.

A deadly chemical cloud (quaintly described by the authorities as an "airborne toxic event") descends on the town, forcing its inhabitants to flee. When the townspeople are finally allowed back, they behold ominously spectacular sunsets.

But this prophetic episode is the only part of the novel that pulses with life. It returns soon enough to the bleak, blank landscape of "post-modern" fiction.

No doubt fans of French existential novels will eat this right up. The premise, after all, is that God is dead and it is DeLillo's signal suggestion that He might have OD'd on Valium. A boffo idea!

Problem is, *White Noise* makes you want to do the same.

*"Elvis fulfilled the terms of the contract. Excess, deterioration, self-destructiveness, grotesque behavior, a physical bloating and a series of insults to the brain, self-delivered. His place in legend is secure. He bought off the skeptics by dying early, horribly, unnecessarily. No one can deny him now."*

*Babette reported a front-page story. "Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons." Then turned to the designated page.*

*"Scientists at Princeton's famed Institute for Advanced Studies have stunned the world by presenting absolute and undeniable proof of life after death. A researcher at the world-renowned Institute has used hypnosis to induce hundreds of people to recall their previous-life experiences as pyramid-builders, exchange students and extraterrestrials."*

*Babette changed her voice to do dialogue.*

*"In the last year alone," declares reincarnation hypnotist Ling Ti Wan, "I have helped hundreds to regress to previous lives under hypnosis. One of my most amazing subjects was a woman who was able to recall her life as a hunter-gatherer in the Mesolithic era ten thousand years ago. It was remarkable to hear this tiny senior citizen in polyester slacks describe her life as a hulking male chieftain whose band inhabited a peat bog and hunted wild boar with primitive bow and arrow. She even spoke the language of that day, a tongue remarkably similar to modern-day German."*

*"I'm counting on you to tell me, Jack."*

*"Tell you what?"*

*"You're the only person I know that's educated enough to give me the answer."*

*"The answer to what?"*

*"Were people this dumb before television?"*

MORALITY STREETWEAR

Jamie Halburton



YEAH! IT'S TRUE!  
HU HU HU HU HU!  
WOULDN'T WEAR DA  
SHIRT UDERWISE!

