

Thoroughly Modern White People

Stuff White People Like: A Definitive Guide to the Unique Taste of Millions
by Christian Lander

Reviewed by JOSEPH M. RAYLE

We owe a debt of gratitude to Christian Lander. In *Stuff White People Like*, he lets us know in an ultra cool and oh-so-ironic postmodern way how breathtakingly lame White middle class liberals are. His blog and book, in the parlance of the Internet age, “went viral” several months ago, and the nerve he hits no doubt drives his popularity. In a consumerist culture as bereft of meaning, connection, and “authentic” experiences as ours, many people, particularly White middle class liberals, make consumption choices that are stand-ins for these things.

The formula is fairly simple: The world faces environmental degradation, war, famine, and exploitation of labor. The solution for middle class White liberals? Buy organic, drive a Prius, don’t shop at Wal-Mart, and generally cultivate a natural fiber lifestyle, both in terms of food and clothes. Symbolism, rather than action, is the response of a disaffected and alienated public. It is enough, somehow, to think good thoughts, make “sustainable” consumption choices, and pursue “real” experiences rather than engaging in icky and inconvenient actions like community organizing, political protest, or direct action. This way, White people, as Lander points out, can express their “awareness” (#18 in the book), which “allows them to feel that sweet self-satisfaction without actually having to solve anything or face any difficult challenges.” Landers’ book is simultaneously a send-up of the pretensions of middle class White people, a

guide to what happens to be “in” at the moment, and a cultural critique. You too can be both lame and with it, all at the same time. It is irony run amok.

The first time I gained some insight into post-modernism was whilst watching the TV show *Twin Peaks* with a hipster girlfriend: She explained to me that things can get so far out and so weird that they return to a state that seems almost normal. *Stuff White People Like* has that sort of through-the-looking-glass-and-then-through-the-looking-glass-in-the-looking-glass feeling, with respect to the irony employed in this clever little book. As satirist Jon Winokur would point out, Mr. Lander is ironic about his irony. The author works in advertising, he knows his audience, and he’s tapped into something about the characteristic self-loathing of middle class White liberals.

The book, the popularity of the accompanying blog, and the book tour are all products of the system of consumption they ostensibly deride. People, presumably White middle class liberals, bought the book, subscribed to the blog, and attended the book tour appearances, no doubt because they saw the humor in the book—but perhaps also, in that cute post-ironic way, to show themselves that although they do the lame things described by the book, they’re self aware enough to realize this, and even laugh at themselves, somehow making them one of the few truly hip sheep in the flock. They’re lame, they know they’re lame, they laugh at their lameness, and so they’re not lame. Get it? This is the metaphysical tilt-a-whirl that underlies this book.

Lander enumerates a list of annoying White people trends. What they have in common, and the thing that makes these trends so rich a target for derision, are the values they represent. In a culture in which commercial discourse is the dominant mode of values creation, technological development, education, social life, art, and social change,

consumption is both a form of self-expression and political statement. The advertisers who dominate the mass media of this society have taught us that buying “stuff” can fulfill social, psychological, and even spiritual needs. Arguably, we tend to think of ourselves as consumers first, and citizens, well, rarely. You are what you consume. Your consumption choices essentially embody your ethic. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this logic would be to equate your moral fiber with the fibers in your clothing. Such is the message sent by the mass media advertisers who have effectively colonized so many of the cultural spaces in our society.

This book is an effective satire because it is an accounting of the ways in which at least one segment of our desolate and meaningless culture seeks to fill its spiritual, social, and psychological emptiness. After my year abroad in London (#72 on Mr. Lander’s list of White people’s must-have experiences), I spent a lot of time bemoaning the lack of culture (#20), authentic experience and real beer (#23) in “The States.” Obviously this was before every city of any size had a microbrewery featuring overpriced imitations of the (usually English) product. (Incidentally, every American exchange student is required by the Geneva Convention to use the term, “The States,” preferably whilst rolling his or her eyes. I did it so effectively that I developed minor eyestrain.) Mr. Lander accurately names the disease, and has some fun with it. But, as with all humor, a certain pathos underlies it.

In contemporary culture, White comedians have a narrower range of targets for caricature than they once did. Mickey Rooney’s portrayal of Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, for example, is simply off limits by today’s standards—at least for White comedians who want to have a career that gets them mainstream exposure. In accordance

with the current (mostly implied) protocol of comedy, comedians may satirize members of their own ethnicity, and members of groups higher up the social hierarchy. In this paradigm, Whites can either make fun of themselves (witness Jeff Foxworthy's shtick on Rednecks), the elderly, and occasionally people with intellectual disabilities.

The reason for this is clear: Language matters tremendously. How something is talked about has a great deal to do with how it is treated. Language, of course, makes an appearance in the book (#101 Being Offended.)

Naturally, White people do not get offended by statements directed at White people. In fact, they don't even have a problem making offensive statements about other White people (ask a White person about "flyover states"). As a rule, White people strongly prefer to get offended on behalf of other people.

It is quite reasonable to say that language, jokes, insults, etc., can create a hostile environment for an individual, or it can help maintain systems of oppression for minority groups in a culture. Unfortunately, the general understanding of this phenomenon tends to reduce this insight to a knee-jerk reaction that strives to avoid giving offense to anyone, anywhere, ever. Except maybe White people.

These proscriptions place limits upon which White comedians can satirize, so many of them save their bitterest vitriol for their own group. Lander is ostensibly making fun of Whites, but there are aspects of this book that serve to re-inscribe the White supremacy that underlies the cultural *habitus* in which he operates. For example, because White people are so lame, it is almost pitiable that they must go on to become professionals or artists (#56 and #47, respectively), which, compared with most jobs out there today, are highly desirable. Sure, I, in my alternative rocker days (I play guitar, #77

on his list), sneered at “squares” and “yuppies” who had the kind of careers that Lander alleges are favored by White people, but these jobs really beat the hell out of factory work, stocking grocery shelves, cleaning carpets, making pizzas, and other things I did to get by over the years before I began teaching. These weren’t terribly rewarding jobs even with the aegis of White privilege easing my way. These jobs may have been authentic in some sense, but lucrative and dignified they were not. Full disclosure: I must admit that one of the eight career paths (#47) he limned stung a bit. “**Academic:** English Major>Unemployed>High School Teacher>Graduate Student>Professor.” The only difference in my case is that I was a psychology major.

A whiff of counter-feminism pervades the satire in this book. Many of the things parodied by Lander were advanced by the feminist movement, particularly, environmentalism and social equality. So, religious diversity, Barack Obama, multiculturalism, environmentally responsible transportation, labor rights, clean water, and healthy food are now suspect, not to mention lame. I do not suggest here that the author is in any way racist or otherwise intolerant. His humor reflects the cultural *milieu* in which he lives and works. As an advertiser, he is in the business of drumming up customers, and the most successful in his trade employ commonplace ideas and icons without subjecting them to much scrutiny. His treatment of the issues serves as a reminder that White people, particularly men, can often opt in or out of these movements, without much personal consequence. Humor, more often than not, is more intuitive than it is intellectual. Nevertheless, by making fun of certain White pretensions and ignoring others, the humor in this book reflects some of the racism, sexism, and classism inherent in American culture. Where is NASCAR, hunting, and trips to Graceland? Wrong kind

of White people, apparently. *Maybe* you could do Graceland if you're ironic about it. I can report from personal experience that ironic participation in the other two activities'll get the irony smacked right out of you.

Speaking of hostility to irony, particularly when it involves me, my parents happened to visit when I was reading this book, and one of them found it in the living room. They'll read anything, even taking a run at whatever obscure academic stuff I have lying about. It is from both of them that I got the curiosity and lust for knowledge that led me to an academic career. Neither of them has any responsibility for my smarmy attitude. Both of them read this book, more or less taking it for what it seems to be: a light-hearted look at the culture of narcissism that characterizes White liberals who live in the "Blue States." What was interesting is that there ensued a discussion of the author's race. Was he White? Was he Black? It was not entirely clear from the picture on the back of the book. This mattered to these children of 1940's and 50's America, who had careers that were profoundly affected by the Civil Rights Movement, Affirmative Action (both the real and imagined aspects of it), the War on Poverty, and Political Correctness. My father in particular is fond of asking things like, "If they can make a movie called, *White Men Can't Jump*, what happens if we make a movie called, *Black Men Can't Count*?" We have this conversation over and over again, with me trying to convince him that White supremacy is built into the fabric of our society, and him arguing that Political Correctness, Affirmative Action, and all the rest have placed severe restrictions on what he can say, where he can work, and what he can do. We live in a culture of offense, in which it seems that everyone is ready to take issue with even

commonplace turns of phrase, and the reaction has become for those with (unexamined) privilege to take offense at the offense of others.

And so we heave and pant our way through the tangle of contradictions and tautologies lurking beneath the surface of this book. In the culture of offense in which we live, the title, *Stuff White People Like* is a little provocative. As it turns out, Lander is not only White, but he embodies many of the very characteristics he skewers. The discussion about his ethnicity was interesting to me because it was a variation on this theme of what is in and out of bounds for a satirist of a given ethnicity. What if Lander were Black? How would that single fact change this book? Would one read it the same way? Would Whites be offended by the tone and nature of this book, had the author been Black? I got the impression that my parents were prepared to protest. The book is written with the ironic distance of an outside observer, to the point that it sounds like a travelogue for those seeking to travel to some exotic place among restless and superstitious natives. At bottom, this book is an extended riff on the social capital of White, liberal, middle class culture.

In the course of doing a little research on this book and its author, I had the curious experience of encountering a connection of Lander's blog with a White supremacist website. As readers of this journal no doubt comprehend, a system as complex as the Internet can have some strange unintended consequences and connections. Everyone White seems to relate to this book in one way or another, even those as congenitally incapable of humor as White supremacists. To wit, Odin Patrick, writing on the *Stormfront.org* website, links to the *stuffwhitepeoplelike.org* website. There was at least one comment on Lander's blog that said "being with their own kind"

was something White people like. (This was not written by Lander, but by one of the visitors to his site). Obviously, these are the “wrong kind of White people” (#125) Lander mentions in his book; but it is somehow strange that a website as blatantly liberal and satiric as this one would attract the attention and even approval of White supremacists.

Stuff White People Like provides us a with light-hearted romp through the pretensions and follies of White folk, mainly White liberals. As a cultural artifact, it provides a window on White America’s uneasy relationship with both itself and various minority groups. It unwittingly brings to the fore issues of power, gender, class, and race, but does not go much beyond snarky, if amusing, commentary. The book is a clever satire, written by someone who clearly understands marketing and did his homework. Respondents to his website have expressed disappointment that Mr. Lander has not published much on his blog since he hit the road for his book tour. I can only marvel: Did these people seriously believe that Lander intends some kind of challenge against the things he makes fun of? Now that he has named the disease, he’ll lead lame White people into the millennium of authenticity? The fact that anyone could have such expectations only demonstrates the extent to which we (as a culture, not just White people) have been conditioned to look outside of ourselves for answers to those nagging existential questions that keep us up at night.

Lander, C. (2008). *Stuff White People Like: A Definitive Guide to the Unique Taste of Millions*. New York: Random House.