

DON DELILLO • *White Noise*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DON DELILLO

Don DeLillo's parents came to America from Italy. He was born in the Bronx in 1936 and grew up there, in an Italian-American neighborhood. He attended Cardinal Hayes High School and Fordham University, where he majored in "communication arts", and worked for a time as a copywriter at Ogilvy & Mather, a famous advertising agency. He now lives just outside New York City. He is one of the titans of American fiction. In his novels he portrays an America ruined by material excess and by empty mass culture and politics. He has been defined as a writer in love with words, perhaps because he was in love with masters of words such as Joyce, Hemingway and Faulkner. This love for words helped him when he began working as an advertising copywriter.

ABOUT THE NOVEL

WHITE NOISE

White Noise (1985) describes an academic year in the life of its narrator, Jack Gladney, a college professor in a small American town where he serves as the department chair of Hitler studies. Jack invented the discipline of Hitler studies in 1968, and he acknowledges that he capitalises on Hitler's importance as a historical figure which lends Jack an air of dignity and significance by association. To his great shame, he can't speak German, so when a Hitler conference is **scheduled** at the College-on-the-Hill, Jack secretly begins taking German lessons. He is married to his fourth wife, Babette. Together they have four children from several previous marriages. The central question obsessing them is death. Death is everywhere in the story: on TV, on the radio, in Hitler studies and at home. The novel portrays a sterile shopping mall culture as one of the dominant forces in American life. *White noise* is a metaphor of the background noise representing consumerism. Then a toxic accident hits Jack. After a series of complicated events involving



experimental pills, Jack closes the novel with a description of the supermarket, which has rearranged its aisles, throwing everyone into a state of confusion.

THE TEXT

Jack Gladney's family is going to have lunch in front of the TV, watching the news.

That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were **floods**, earthquakes, **mud slides**, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not **sullen**, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. Babette tried to switch to a comedy series about a group of racially mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was startled by the force of our objection. We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages **crackle** and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, **grandier**, more **sweeping**.

flood: *alluvione*

grand: *imponente*

mud slide: *colata/slavina di fango*

sullen: *imbronciato, di cattivo umore*

sweeping: *distruittivo*

COMPREHENSION

- 1  Read the text and say whether these statements are true or false, justifying your answers by quoting the text.


- | | T | F |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. A catastrophe is portrayed as mass consumption. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. The idea of having more, extra, or a surplus can be traced in the passage quoted in the listing of plural nouns and in the comparative adjectives. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Apart from Babette, the others want more. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. The first line doesn't include any irony on the American way of life. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. The narrator can't stand that kind of TV. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- 2  Read another extract from the same novel and think about any analogies with the lockdown due to the coronavirus in 2020. Then, try to describe it in your own words.

Look at us in this place. We are quarantined. We are like lepers in medieval times. They won't let us out of here. They leave food at the foot of the stairs and tiptoe away to safety. This is the most terrifying time of our lives. Everything we love and have worked for is under serious threat.

- 3  De Lillo once said he wanted his readers to be critical of the realities he described. Do you think books still have the power to change consciousness?

ANALYSIS

- 4  Read the following lines taking from *Lost in the Supermarket* by The Clash. Then, follow the given steps.

"I'm all lost in the Supermarket,
I can no longer shop happily,
I came here for that special offer
Guaranteed Personality."

1. Underline words and phrases containing irony.
2. Answer these questions:
 - a. to what extent is the final line of interest for a marketer?
 - b. do things for sale have anything to do with death?
 - c. how does marketing try to hide this possible association?

leper: *lebbroso*
to tiptoe away: *andare via in punta di piedi*



- 5  Look at the sculpture by Duane Hanson *Supermarket Lady* (1969), then complete this description of it, choosing the right word.

food • trolley • convey • curlers • smiling • cheerful • denounce • skirt

The sculpture represents a woman who is overweight. She is unattractive and doesn't seem **1.**, because she isn't **2.** She's wearing a blue **3.**, and light blue slippers and has got **4.** in her hair. In her **5.** she has a lot of junk **6.** Duane Hanson wanted to **7.** mass consumption in the USA in the Sixties. Housewives shopping are a central motif in this American artist's oeuvre. Hanson's largely middle- and lower-middle-class figures **8.** the late 20th-century nothingness beneath the appealing surface of consumer culture.



DISCUSSION

- 6   **PAIR WORK** In this text De Lillo thinks we consume news just as we consume goods. Answer the questions.

1. Do you agree or disagree?
2. Look up the word "infodemic" and say whether or not you think an excessive amount of information about the same issue can represent a problem.
3. How would you represent today's average housewife? What would she have in her trolley?
4. What couldn't today's average housewife do that the Hanson's woman is doing?
5. Why do you think Hanson has been defined as "an artist tailor-made for the age of selfie"?
6. Why could Hanson's housewife be a character of De Lillo's novels?