

[*Stuff White People Like: A Definitive Guide to the Unique Taste of Millions*, Christian Lander, Random House, 216 pages]

Getting It White

By John Derbyshire

OUR BRAINS PROCESS information coming from our senses. Since we are social animals, a great deal of the processing concerns social information—data about the members of the various groups we belong to, and about our own place in those groups. There is no consensus among neuroscientists about the way this is done, but a number of distinct systems—“modules,” in the jargon—seem to be involved. In *No Two Alike*, her 2006 book on “human nature and human individuality,” Judith Rich Harris suggests a three-system schema, with a relationship module managing one-on-one attachments, a socialization module for group membership and awareness, and a status module to monitor who’s up and who’s down.

Whether this is a full and correct account of our social nature, I’m not qualified to judge, but that every human brain contains a status module like the one Harris describes can hardly be doubted. We all devote considerable mental energy to assessing where we stand in this group or that, calculating who’s a rival and who an ally, trying to improve our own position, fretting over loss of status, and managing status-related emotions such as envy, contempt, triumph, embarrassment, ambition, and humiliation. Books and magazines offer a steady stream of advice, and advertisers tease and prod our status modules like the trainers of performing seals, trying to nudge us toward invidious consumption.

And then, once in a while, irony kicks in. We turn to look at our status striving and mock ourselves. It’s not that we have any intention of quitting the game. To the contrary, our self-

mockery is at once incorporated into the status-computing algorithms so that group members who are slow to get the joke lose status thereby. Probably that’s the point. Wisdom is prized in every human group, and self-awareness is a species of wisdom, if only a minor one.

British author Stephen Potter pioneered this genre of what we might call “status irony” with his 1952 book *One-upmanship*. Now comes Christian Lander with *Stuff White People Like*, a compilation of 150 one-page summaries of today’s status markers, written in a tone of gentle derision. Lander tries for the status-irony equivalent of a somersault with tuck, encompassing irony itself in his performance: “Irony” is #50 on his list.

I can’t be the first to note something wrong with the book’s title. Status striving operates within some well-defined group. What’s the group here? Certainly it is not white people at large. Most of us couldn’t care less about natural medicine (#59), Tibet (#124), Noam Chomsky (#98), Rugby football (#93), or film festivals (#3) ... while, come to think of it, there is at least a scattering of un-white people who could. I’ve been white for as long as I can remember, and I’ve never even heard of some of these items. Who or what is Mos Def (#69), LEED certification (#134), David Sedaris (#25)? Don’t ask me. So who are these “white people”?

My first guess was that to the degree there is anything racially distinctive about the sensibility on display in Lander’s book, it is Jewish: the reflexive leftism, the food faddishness, the moralizing, and yes, at #103, “Self-Deprecating Humor.” Accompanying #64 (“Recycling”) there is a picture of Lander wearing a Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto T-shirt. He tells us he’s not Jewish, though, and that first name seems indubitably corroborative.

Stuff White People Like is Jewish only in the sense, described by Yuri Slezkine in *The Jewish Century*, that we have all become a bit Jewish in the last 50 years. As Slezkine noted, quoting historian

Joseph R. Levenson, “A Jewish style of life ... may be more endangered when everyone eats bagels than when Jews eat hot cross buns.” Lander’s white people would, I am sure, want their bagels to be organically produced, but they wouldn’t be seen dead eating a hot cross bun (#2, “Religions Their Parents Don’t Belong To”).

The white people here are in fact just thirtyish grad school liberal-arts alumni, a young subset of the “bourgeois bohemians” whom David Brooks described in his 2000 pop-sociology book *Bobos in Paradise*. A pretty good way to get a fix on any group is to look at how its members make their livings. As part of #47, “Liberal Arts Degrees,” Lander lists eight careers: “Writer,” “Artist/Photographer,” “[movie] Director,” “Organic Restaurant Owner,” “Bike Mechanic,” “Nonprofit CEO,” “Professor,” and “Brand /media consultant.”

The common denominator is that these are all perfectly useless occupations, the career equivalents of conspicuous consumption. The white-people group apparently does not include civil engineers, software entrepreneurs, plumbers, farmers, the military, or the police. In fact, it hardly includes anyone without a liberal arts degree. From that same #47:

But what about the white people who study Science, Engineering, and Business? Unless they become doctors, they essentially lose white-person status (which can be regained only by working at a non-profit).

Lander himself was an English major at McGill who then studied communications at graduate school. Here, however, as with all the material in *Stuff White People Like*, you need to keep your irony detector switched on. There are hints throughout the book that those careers are not so much actual as oneiric, or at best aspirational. Most of the white people Lander is talking about are worker bees in corporate offices. From #143, “Bakeries”: “The bakery also inspires hope in white people. Many of

them dream of quitting their 9 to 5 job and opening a small bakery..."

Stuff White People Like is in fact a work of autobiography. Lander has done a clever thing: he has made a bundle of money by writing about his own tastes. The book's true title is: *Stuff Christian Lander Likes*. Our author has admitted as much in some of the innumerable interviews he's done. This from Alex Leavitt's website:

Q: How much of [the StuffWhite-PeopleLike.com web site, from which the book is taken] describes the generic white person, and how much describes you yourself?

A: Almost all of the website describes me. It's hard to fix on how pretentious I really am ...

The thing wouldn't work, of course, if there were not millions of people who like the same things Christian Lander likes and were willing to laugh at themselves. While laughing, they will quietly be checking their tastes against the zeitgeist, to update their inventory of bobo status markers. Behind the laughter, in other words, if you listen closely, will be the sound of garbage-can lids closing over Asics sneakers, Pitchfork CDs, bottles of Mateus wine or Evian water, baggy T-shirts, plastic shopping bags, and DVDs *not* from the Criterion Collection. If caught in possession of one of these sumptuary stinkers, a white person's only hope is to claim to be acting ironically, but this calls for expert-level status-management skills.

The original *Stuff White People Like* website has generated many spin-offs. Some quick googling turns up a feeble *Stuff Black People Like* (Their Momma, Big Butts, Being Good At Sports), a slightly better *Stuff Educated Black People Like* (Moving to Atlanta, Deck Shoes, Correcting Others), a far better *Stuff Asian People Like* (Cutting In Line, False Humility, Not Wearing Shoes Indoors), Christian Lander's declared favorite *White Stuff People Like* (flour, sugar, drywall), and

a host of others of various quality and irony.

Given the audacity of this book's title, it's hard not to wonder if it is a harbinger of anything, a pointer to the future direction of racial attitudes. Objections to the *Stuff White People Like* concept as racist are hopelessly wide of the mark, as witness #7, "Diversity," #8, "Barack Obama," and #14, "Having Black Friends." Lander's white people are liberal to a fault (#118, "The ACLU"). None of them owns a copy of *Camp of the Saints* or a subscription to *American Renaissance*. Probably none of them even knows what the Confederate flag looks like.

The up-front positioning of items #7, #8, and #14 suggests, however, that there is something perfunctory about the racial liberalism of Lander's white people. These gestures aside—and Obama is the grandest gesture of all—the impression one gets is that on the whole, Lander's white people are happy to live their lives as though black people—let alone Hispanics, whose lone representative in these pages is #113, "Che Guevara"—did not exist. From #7, "Diversity":

Many white people from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York will spend hours talking about how great it is that they can get sushi and tacos on the same street. But they will also send their kids to private school with other rich white kids so that they can avoid the 'low test scores' that come with educational diversity. It's important to note that white people do not like to be called out on this fact. It will make them feel even more guilty than they already do.

Can such things be said out loud? Apparently now they can, so long as they are seasoned with enough self-mocking irony.

A more interesting question is: are we looking here at the first stirrings of white tribalism? Social change often begins in the unlikeliest places. Perhaps *Stuff White People Like* is one

more melancholy milestone on the downhill road from the hopes for integration and racial harmony that were nursed by the generation of Lander's parents to the cold racial realism of 2042, when, according to the most recent report from the Census Bureau, white people will become a minority in the United States—just about the time that Lander's children's generation take power.

His white people are unhappily intermediate, raised among their parents' hopes, yet staring at a world in which those hopes have turned to dust. They can see the utter failure of racial integration—how could they not? Last week my son's football team played Commack; in two weeks' time they play Wyandanch. According to GreatSchools.com, the racial spread of Commack High School, in percentages white-Asian-Hispanic-black, is 86-9-4-1, while Wyandanch Memorial High School's is 0-0-18-82. Integration? Fuhgeddaboutit. The tension between dead hope and unwelcome reality is acute, resolvable only, as is always the case with such psychic stresses, by doublethink. Vote for Barack Obama (#8), but move to Portland, Oregon (#111), "Statistically ... the whitest metropolis in the United States."

Stuff White People Like is a light and frivolous book, as of course it is intended to be. It gives the reader's status module a good workout. While doing so, however, our socialization modules ("Most of the work done by this system is not available to the conscious mind," writes Harris) continue their slow, world-changing transformation. Christian Lander's mild-mannered, trend-hugging, conflict-averse (#128, "Avoiding Confrontation"), ironic leftists will spawn a generation of frank white nationalists, and they will feel unironically terrible about having done so. ■

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Consort of the Onion Queen

I am the First Man of Elba, New York, Onion Capital of the World, or so we claim, and who, really, is going to call us on it? The czarina, or technically town supervisor,

of Elba, which borders my native Batavia, is my wife Lucine, whom I believe to be, since the retirement of Gov. George Deukmejian, the highest ranking Armenian-American elected official in America. Or at least she will be until the voters of California elect Cher to the U.S. Senate.

This is one of the first things you learn upon marrying an Armenian: the list. “Famous Armenians” isn’t like drawing up a catalogue of “Famous Irish-Americans” or “Famous Jewish-Americans.” You’re not picking and choosing, selecting Pat Moynihan and Hank Greenberg but leaving John O’Hara and Neil Diamond for the next draft. “Famous Armenians” begins with the sad sentimental poet of Fresno, William Saroyan, and goes on to include the guy who played Mannix (Krikor Ohanian, aka Mike Connors), Cher Sarkisian, Dr. Jack Kevoorkian, mogul Kirk Kerkorian, Andre Agassi, and, for baseball fans, Steve Bedrosian. Well, diasporans, add to your list Lucine Andonian Kauffman, town supervisor of Elba, New York, El Dorado of the mucklands.

She was appointed to fill the uncompleted term of her retired predecessor, but when Lucine had to run her first race, I took on the job of campaign manager, a post for which I had prepared a lifetime. Rudy can’t fail, as they say, especially when the candidate is unopposed. Still, in order to minimize our vote, I had printed bumper stickers depicting onions against the colors of the Armenian flag and bearing the motto, “Ayo Gernank!” Antonio Villaraigosa

had recently run for mayor of Los Angeles boasting “Si, se puede,” or “Yes, we can,” so I asked my California father-in-law how to say that in Armenian. We lost the Turk vote, but principle has its price.

My role model as first spouse has been Pat Nixon, not Hillary Clinton, especially if the phone rings at 3 a.m. because a road hasn’t been plowed. I declined to adopt a social cause, disease, or a Just Say No campaign of my own, though one friend, mindful of his own affliction, urged the distribution of brown bracelets as part of an IBS awareness campaign. Opting, for once, for good taste, I just said no.

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Lucine has largely and astutely ignored my advice on political matters. I wanted her to be the first elected Republican official in America to come out for Bush’s impeachment, but she has instead promoted local agriculture and business and tried to ensure that revenues equal expenditures. Given the Palin precedent, I’m touting my wife for vice president in 2012. She spent a hell of a lot less on the new salt storage shed than Sarah P. did on the Wasilla ice rink.

The Republicans are indulgent of Lucine’s non-Republican husband, but then in a healthy society politics plays so small a role in our lives that who really gives a damn how others vote? Cold ideologies melt in the warmth of daily communal life. I think of the local civic organizations in which, say, Assembly of

God churchgoers and gays work side by side in the cheerful labor of neighbors. They can be friends because they are, to each other, rounded and fully dimensional. They are people, not cartoons. This is nigh impossible in larger places, where such disparate folk would never meet and would exist to each other only on the flat screen of the TV set. Instead of Kate and Dave they would be “Religious Nut!” and “Fag!” How dreary. How lifeless. How very Red and Blue.

Elected officials are encouraged to stick campaign signs in their front yards, and we have reached an accommodation. We always put signs up for friends who are running. For higher (which is to say lower) office, we agree to one apiece: this year she chose the Republican state senate candidate and I stake

my frame for the only old-fashioned patriot on the New York presidential ballot, Ralph Nader. The last Democrat sign I put up was for a Muckdogs booster who was on a mission perdu: running as a (D) for coroner in our lopsidedly (R) county. I proposed a desperate campaign promise—“No premature burials!”—but though she ran a fine race, her candidacy was DOA.

Given that the Republicans cede New York’s carpetbag U.S. Senate seat to Hillary Clinton, a friend has urged me to start the rumor that Lucine is “exploring” a run as an antiwar, pro-organic farming, pro-Bill of Rights Republican against the militaristic liberty-shredding Democratic schoolmarm. Maybe Cher would do a benefit concert? Ayo Gernank, baby. ■