Sociologist Dalton Conley reflects on how the ways in which society teaches us to “organize our reality” can affect our identities:

I am not your typical middle-class white male. I am middle class, despite the fact that my parents had no money; I am white, but I grew up in an inner-city housing project where most everyone was black or Hispanic. I enjoyed a range of privileges that were denied my neighbors but that most Americans take for granted. In fact, my childhood was like a social science experiment: Find out what being middle class really means by raising a kid from a so-called good family in a so-called bad neighborhood. Define whiteness by putting a light-skinned kid in the midst of a community of color. If the exception proves the rule, I’m that exception.

Ask any African American to list the adjectives that describe them and they will likely put black or African American at the top of the list. Ask someone of European descent the same question and white will be far down the list, if it’s there at all. Not so for me. I’ve studied whiteness the way I would a foreign language. I know its grammar, its parts of speech; I know the subtleties of its idioms, its vernacular words and phrases to which the native speaker has never given a second thought. There’s an old saying that you never really know your own language until you study another. It’s the same with race and class.

In fact, race and class are nothing more than a set of stories we tell ourselves to get through the world, to organize our reality . . . . One of [my mother’s favorite stories] was how I had wanted a baby sister so badly that I kidnapped a black child in the playground of the housing complex. She told this story each time my real sister, Alexandra, and I were standing, arms crossed, facing away from each other after some squabble or fistfight. The moral of the story for my mother was that I should love my sister, since I had wanted to have her so desperately. The message I took away, however, was one of race. I was fascinated that I could have been oblivious to something that years later feels so natural, so innate as race does.¹

¹ Dalton Conley, Honky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), xi–xii.
Connection Questions

1. What does Conley say about the difference between how black and white people describe themselves? Why do you think he believes that?

2. Do you agree?

3. Make a list of the adjectives that describe you. Which did you think of first? Which took longer to think of? Why were you were able to think of some adjectives more easily than others?

4. What does Conley mean when he says that “race and class are nothing more than a set of stories we tell ourselves to get through the world”? Do you agree? Write working definitions for the words race and class in your journal. You can revise or expand your definitions as you read and analyze the novel.