

# color is ...

BY JUDE STEWART

## White Fills Us With Hope, Terror & All Points Between

### White Moments of Life

The Romans marked happy &/or fortunate days on their calendars with a white stone or piece of chalk, the darker days with charcoal—a practice neatly caught in the phrase *Notare diem lactea gemma* (or *alba*), meaning to mark a day with a jewel, or as white. The 1835 tome *Roman Antiquities* traces the custom back to either Thracians or Scythians, “who every evening before they slept, threw into an urn or quiver a white pebble, if the day had passed agreeably; but if not, a black one: and at their death, by counting the pebbles, their life was judged to have been happy or unhappy.”



HAPPY/SAD PEBBLES

### SOMEWHERE IN-BETWEEN

“I think it was Montherlant who said that happiness writes white: It doesn’t show up on the page. We all know this. The letter with the foreign postmark that tells of good weather, pleasant food and comfortable accommodation isn’t nearly as much fun to read, or to write, as the letter that tells of rotting chalets, dysentery and drizzle. Who else but Tolstoy has made happiness really swing on the page? When I take on Chapter 3 ... I’ll have to do, well, not happiness, but goodness, anyway. It’s going to be rough.”—Martin Amis in *London Fields*, 1990, a novel of degradation and betrayal

### HOPE

“White has a tendency to make things visible. With white, you can see more of a nuance; you can see more.”—Robert Ryman, the minimalist artist of paintings that are mostly white

A BLANK CANVAS



### Assorted Whiter Shades of Pale

Names plucked at random from Benjamin Moore’s 140 shades of white paint reveal the possibilities that reside within: Cloud Cover, Opaline, Niveous, Albescent, French Canvas, Old Prairie, Halo, Pompeii, Mayonnaise, Ivory Tusk, Desolate, Minced Onion, White Down, Berber White, Celery Salt, Temporal Spirit, Ice Formations, Man on the Moon



BENJAMIN MOORE’S ALBESCENT

TELEFONI BIANCHI



### “White Telephone” Films

Pre-WWII Italian *telefoni bianchi* films painted a giddy picture of the upper classes in high-toned elegance, dashing through nightclubs, penthouses and yachts to answer the slim, glamorous white telephone, just a click away from the gods.



STONES OF HOSPITALITY

### The White Stone of Hospitality

Revelations 2:17 offers a white stone as a clean, if intriguingly vague, token of Christian rebirth: "To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone. On the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the person who receives it." *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* attempts to solve this biblical riddle with a small antediluvian hospitality backstory: "When the guest left, the host gave him a small white stone cut in two; on one half the host wrote his name, and on the other the guest's; the host gave the guest the half containing his [host's] name, and vice versa. This was done that the guest at some future time might return the favour, if needed. Our text says, 'I will give him to eat of the hidden manna'—i.e., I will feed or entertain him well, and I will keep my friendship, sacred, inviolable, and known only to himself."

### A Cowardly White Feather (or Four)

If you spy a white feather amid the downy folds of your fighting gamecock's tail, its blood—and its spirit—may not be as pure as you'd like. Similarly, mailing a white feather to a British man not in uniform during wartime amounts to a very pointed, if itself craven, message: The 1902 British novel *The Four Feathers* by A.E.W. Mason (filmed five times!) encapsulates that Brit's ultimate revenge: Go to the Sudan, kit yourself up as an Arab, fight a covert war on Old Blighty's behalf, hurry home and hand each of those four feathers back to the low-slunk, very wrong bastards who gave them to you. The villains!



WHITE FEATHER



WHITE VAN MAN

### White Van Man (WVM)

The Oxford English Dictionary defines this British colloquialism as "a male driver of a (typically white) delivery or workman's van, esp. when regarded as an aggressive or bad driver ... a social type, usually characterized as an ordinary working man with forthright views." So invidious had the media image of WVM apparently become in England that the U.K.'s Social Issues Research Centre commissioned a comprehensive study in 1998 to probe the WVM's softer side on his own, perhaps tackily upholstered turf. And to delve into the WVM's snappy dressing, his fondness for pets and his occasional sing-alongs to opera tapes alone in his cab, read the report's findings at [http://www.sirc.org/publik/white\\_van\\_man.html](http://www.sirc.org/publik/white_van_man.html).



WHITE WHALE

"It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me ... whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows ... ? And when we consider that ... all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within ...

Of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?"—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 1851, Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale"

### TERROR

### Anti-Flash White

A brilliant shade of white paint with uncommon super powers: In the 1950s and '60s, British and U.S. militaries coated their nuclear bombers in anti-flash white to deflect thermal radiation from a nuclear explosion—to protect both the airplane and its occupants.



ANTI-FLASH WHITE