

A Good Read: Nickel Boys by Colson Whitehead

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>> **Referred to by Time Magazine as, “America’s storyteller,” author and essayist, Colson Whitehead, has clinched his second Pulitzer Prize after the release of his latest novel, Nickel Boys, Doubleday (2019).**

It was 2014 when Whitehead’s discovery of reports by Ben Montgomery of The Tampa Bay Times led him to Dr. Erin Kimmerle and her archeology students at the University of South Florida, whose forensic studies amounted to an investigation concerning the savage rape, torture, murder, and burial of over 80 students of the state-run Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in the town of Marianna, Florida.

After 111-years of defining brutality and institutional racism in Southeastern, United States, the reform school’s doors were finally closed in 2011, allowing Kimmerle and her students to exhume ex-detainees’ corpses from a secret graveyard found on the school’s premises. In April of 2019, The New York Times reported an additional 27 locations had been found within the school’s 1,400-acre site during a pollution clean up in March.

Set in a post-Jim Crow, Eleanor, Fla, Whitehead’s novel memorializes Dozier in a fictional institution called the Nickel Academy. Perhaps its most chilling feature is the Nickel Academy’s stranger-than-fiction, White House, a whitewashed shed where merciless beatings were carried out.

“The white boys...called it the Ice Cream Factory because you came out with bruises of every color. The black boys called it the White House because that was its official name and it fit and didn’t need to be embellished. The White House delivered the law and everybody obeyed.”

The story follows the protagonist, Elwood Curtis, and his friend, Turner, as they attempt to make the most of their grisly and oppressive existence at Nickel. Elwood is a hopeful teenager, fueled by the words and ideas he’s learned from a recording of, “Martin Luther King at Zion Hill,” gifted to him by his grandmother, Harriet, whom he lives with.

“Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities after midnight hours, and drag us out into some wayside road, and beat us and



leave us half-dead, and we will still love you.”

He believes in education and the possibility of freedom and equality for all. Throughout the story, Whitehead demonstrates Elwood’s struggle to maintain a “capacity to suffer,” while making sense of King’s doctrine of fighting hate with love.

Meanwhile Turner, “walked into Nickel with strategies on hard-won dodges and a knack for keeping out of scrapes.” He is much more shrewd and cut-throat, doing what he needs to do at all cost to take on his country how he sees it: a country founded on murder, slavery, and genocide, and unwilling to change.

Whitehead thoughtfully depicts Elwood’s optimism and Turner’s cynicism as opposing methods of combatting the daily injustices they experience in order to highlight a much deeper and grotesque truth: sure you can try and cope, be it through love or hate, but there is no real resolution to the constant that is the inequality experienced by people of color in this country.

Nickel Boys quite literally unearths the ugly consequences of the principles on which this nation is based. In turn, begging the question, were there more than Dozier that have yet to be discovered? And if so, why has it taken so long? Whitehead writes, “if there was one, there were hundreds, hundreds of Nickels and White Houses scattered across the land like pain factories.”

Aside from social and political commentary, this novel is riddled with powerful language masterfully sculpted by Whitehead, proving yet again the author’s willingness to tackle tough topics with writerly bravado. He uses plain language and vivid metaphor to cut deep into the emotional truths of the story he is trying to tell. Lines like, “it was crazy to run and crazy not to run,” or, “the worst thing that ever happened to Elwood happened every day,” when describing the horrors of Nickel, and, “sometimes laughter knocked out a few bricks from the barricade of segregation, so tall and so wide,” when portraying the boys’ small joys. In addition to reports by Montgomery and Kimmerle, Whitehead flexes his journalistic research chops and recasts telling quotes from members of The Whitehouse Boys, survivors of Dozier, and inmates who suffered solitary confinement, giving volume to their voice that has for so long gone unheard.



Oscar Grant, 22, Oakland, California (2009); Michael Brown Jr., 18, Ferguson, Missouri (2014); Ahmaud Arbery, 25, Atlanta, Georgia (2020). The systematic oppression of people of color in our country is not only its original sin but its inhuman normative. It is no wonder Whitehead is the recipient of not one, but two Pulitzer Prizes. There could not be more important novels of fiction regarding the issue concerning race in America than Whitehead's, *Nickel Boys*, and, *The Underground Railroad*, Doubleday (2016).

In his closing chapter, Whitehead suggests one last question: "Who spoke for the black boys?" To which he answers, "It was time someone did."

As a white man, don't take my word for it, take Colson Whitehead's, go and read *Nickel Boys*.

"The immense exertion white people put into grinding them down—and then it all returned in a rush, set off by tiny things, like standing on a corner trying to hail a cab, a routine humiliation she forgot five minutes later because if she didn't, she'd go crazy, and set off by the big things, a drive through a blighted neighborhood snuffed out by that same immense exertion, or another boy shot dead by a cop: They treat us like subhumans in our own country. Always have. Maybe always will."

- Excerpt from, *Nickel Boys*, by Colson Whitehead