

A NOVEL IN 2019

Whitehead, Colson. *The Nickel Boys*. New York: Doubleday, 2019.

Multiple tragedies occur without warning, but people who are not directly injured by them get on fairly well with their lives. They do ordinary things. They call no special attention to themselves and trudge along the paths of happiness and suffering that mark off life from death. They believe themselves to be normal. They are puzzled by the not-quite-normal people they know who kill time with reading. Why can't these readers behave themselves and conform like everyone else? The minds of normal people have never been violated by such lines of poetry as

*About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along*

W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940)

Why do those who insist on being readers agonize over lines from Auden when it is more convenient to consume tweets and thereby provide evidence of one's American patriotism?

The outlaws, the readers are dangerous people who rush to read Colson Whitehead's most recent novel and give aid and comfort to his calculated exhaustion. They are sparrows in the zoo. Reading Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* is an act of rebellion; on the other hand, it is a desperate bid to discover in fiction what goes missing in "official" historical and forensic reports about the infamous Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida, about atrocities that occurred at the institution from 1900 to 2011, about what's eroded in systems of juvenile justice/injustice.. What is anticipated is not what is delivered.

At the end of her spiffy essay about presumption and fiction, Zadie Smith makes a bold assertion and throws down an imperative: "Between reader and book, there is only the continual risk of wrongness. The Internet does not get to decide. Nor does the writer. Only the reader decides. So decide." Such profit as might be derived from reading Whitehead's book is his affirmation of exhaustion. A disappointment. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/>

In a recent blog on his Cultural Front website, Howard Rambsy II opines: "Together and in separate realms, Coates and Whitehead will continue receiving considerable notice. It'll be interesting to see how the coverage shifts and how it might expand." Rambsy is hinting that motion in literary politics and history is akin to motion on Wall Street. The bull market of today becomes the bear market of a future. And *The Nickel Boys* is cultural stock delivering cultural shock, and the hyperbole of saying Whitehead is "a great American novelist writing at the height of his powers" is boring. His most recent novel is a chronicle, a pedestrian chronicle which fails to provoke robust anxiety. The book is a downward swing, a descent from the literary to the popular. A reader might decide to join the herd of indifference.

Jerry W. Ward, Jr. October 2, 2019

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *The Water Dancer*. New York: One World, 2019.