

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Nickle Boys

by Colson Whitehead

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Colson Whitehead is a New York-based novelist and nonfiction works. He was born and raised in New York City, attending Trinity, a private prep school, in Manhattan. He graduated from Harvard College in 1991.

After leaving college, Whitehead wrote for *The Village Voice* and while there began working on his novels. His first, *The Institutionalists*, published in 1999, concerned intrigue in the Department of Elevator Inspectors, and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway and a winner of the Quality Paperback Book Club's New Voices Award. In addition to his books, Whitehead's reviews, essays, and fiction have appeared in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *New York Magazine*, *Harper's* and *Granta*, and others.

He has taught at Princeton University, New York University, the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, Wesleyan University, and been a Writer-in-Residence at Vassar College, the University of Richmond, and the University of Wyoming. In the spring of 2015, he joined *The New York Times Magazine* to write a column on language.

He has received a MacArthur Fellowship, A Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writers Award, the Dos Passos Prize, and a fellowship at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers.

BOOK SUMMARY

From the publisher

Colson Whitehead brilliantly dramatizes another strand of American history through the story of two boys sentenced to a hellish reform school in Jim Crow-era Florida.

As the Civil Rights movement begins to reach the black enclave of Frenchtown in segregated Tallahassee, Elwood Curtis takes the words of Dr. Martin Luther King to heart: He is "as good as anyone."

Abandoned by his parents, but kept on the straight and narrow by his grandmother, Elwood is about to enroll in the local black college. But for a black boy in the Jim Crow South of the early 1960s, one innocent mistake is enough to destroy the future.

Elwood is sentenced to a juvenile reformatory called the Nickel Academy, whose mission statement says it provides "physical, intellectual and moral training" so the delinquent boys in their charge can become "honorable and honest men."

In reality, the Nickel Academy is a grotesque chamber of horrors where the sadistic staff beats and sexually abuses the students, corrupt officials and locals steal food and supplies, and any boy who resists is likely to disappear "out back."

Stunned to find himself in such a vicious environment, Elwood tries to hold onto Dr. King's ringing assertion "Throw us in jail and we will still love you." His friend Turner thinks Elwood is worse than naive, that the world is crooked, and that the only way to survive is to scheme and avoid trouble.

The tension between Elwood's ideals and Turner's skepticism leads to a decision whose repercussions will echo down the decades. Formed in the crucible of the evils Jim Crow wrought, the boys' fates will be determined by what they endured at the Nickel Academy.

Based on the real story of a reform school in Florida that operated for one hundred and eleven years and warped the lives of thousands of children, *The Nickel Boys* is a devastating, driven narrative that showcases a great American novelist writing at the height of his powers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions issued by the publisher

1. In the prologue, the narrator observes that after the truth about Nickel Academy comes out, “even the most innocent scene—a mess hall or the football field—came out sinister, no photographic trickery necessary.” Can you think of a time in your life when discovering the history of a place (a particular building, a statue, a historical landmark, etc.) dramatically changed your perception of it?
2. Elwood says that both he and Yolanda King “woke to the world,” or discovered racism, at six years old. How old were you when you became aware of racism and inequality? How do you think this experience is different for different people?
3. While in the infirmary, Elwood reads a pamphlet about Nickel that details the contributions the school has made to the community, including bricks from the brick-making machine “propping up buildings all over Jackson County.” What do you think of the ways that the wider community seemed to benefit from labor performed by Nickel students? Do you see any historical or modern-day parallels to this symbiotic relationship?
4. One student, Jaimie, is half-Mexican and constantly shuffled between the “white” and “colored” sections of Nickel Academy. Why do you think the author included a character with Jaimie's ethnic identity in this story?
5. One of Elwood's takeaways from Dr. King's speeches is the importance of maintaining one's dignity in the face of oppression. Is Elwood's decision to escape (and risk the consequences of capture) rooted in the realization that he can no longer maintain his dignity in a place like Nickel?
6. At one point, the narrator writes that “laughter knocked out a few bricks from the wall of segregation, so tall and so wide.” Does humor truly lighten the burden for the boys? Or is it merely one of the very few things that can't be taken away from them?
7. Who do you think was the true “villain” of the story? The teachers? The school itself? Something or someone else?

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