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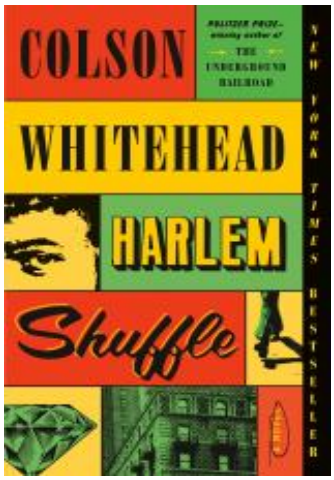
Harlem Shuffle

by Colson Whitehead



About the Book

From the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning author of THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD and THE NICKEL BOYS, a gloriously entertaining novel of heists, shakedowns and rip-offs set in Harlem in the 1960s.

"Ray Carney was only slightly bent when it came to being crooked..." To his customers and neighbors on 125th Street, Carney is an upstanding salesman of reasonably priced furniture, making a decent life for himself and his family. He and his wife Elizabeth are expecting their second child, and if her parents on Striver's Row don't approve of him or their cramped apartment across from the subway tracks, it's still home.

Few people know he descends from a line of uptown hoods and crooks, and that his façade of normalcy has more than a few cracks in it. Cracks that are getting bigger all the time.

Cash is tight, especially with all those installment-plan sofas, so if his cousin Freddie occasionally drops off the odd ring or necklace, Ray doesn't ask where it comes from. He knows a discreet jeweler downtown who doesn't ask questions, either.

Then Freddie falls in with a crew who plan to rob the Hotel Theresa --- the "Waldorf of Harlem" --- and volunteers Ray's services as the fence. The heist doesn't go as planned; they rarely do. Now Ray has a new clientele, one made up of shady cops, vicious local gangsters, two-bit pornographers and other assorted Harlem lowlifes.

Thus begins the internal tussle between Ray the striver and Ray the crook. As Ray navigates this double life, he begins to see who actually pulls the strings in Harlem. Can Ray avoid getting killed, save his cousin and grab his share of the big score, all while maintaining his reputation as the go-to source for all your quality home furniture needs?

HARLEM SHUFFLE's ingenious story plays out in a beautifully recreated New York City of the early 1960s. It's a family saga masquerading as a crime novel, a hilarious morality play, a social novel about race and power, and

ultimately a love letter to Harlem.

But mostly it's a joy to read, another dazzling novel from the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning Colson Whitehead.

Discussion Guide

1. Carney is described as being ?only slightly bent when it came to being crooked, in practice and ambition? (page 31) --- suggesting a more nuanced understanding of seemingly criminal activity. How does his placement on the crooked spectrum change throughout the course of the novel? How does his crookedness compare to others he does business with?

2. As much as the people in the novel embody their environment, New York City is a formidable character itself that evolves with its inhabitants. Which changes more, the city or the people, and how do the scenes of New York in the novel compare to those of the present day?

3. What do the Riverside Drive apartments represent to Carney? What did you make of his change of heart about Strivers? Row at the end of the novel? Consider Freddie?s comment that on Riverside, ?There?s us, there?s water, and then there?s more land, we?re all a part of the same thing. But Park Avenue, with those big old buildings facing one another, full of old white people, there?s none of that feeling, right? It?s a canyon. And the two sides don?t give a shit about you. If they wanted, if they so decided, they could squeeze together and crush you. That?s how little you are? (page 268).

4. We learn that ?Carney avoided the block he grew up on. He only found himself there if he was preoccupied with the store, or money, and his homing mechanism misfired. Safer to direct nostalgia for those days toward his cousin?s place on 129th Street? (page 169). What does this suggest about the intensity of his efforts to change his fate? How does the city itself prevent him from doing so?

5. What is the value for Carney in being able to leave his mark on the city through his furniture or other trade? Consider the line: ?Carney imagined himself inside because he was looking for evidence of himself. Was there an Argent wingback chair or Heywood-Wakefield armoire in one of them, over by the window, the proof of a sale he?d closed? It was a new game he played, walk-ing around this unforgiving town: Is my stuff in there?? (page 124).

6. What elements of the race protests that are depicted in the novel remind you of the more recent Black Lives Matter activism? How have things changed, or not, regarding the relationship among protesters and non-protesters, police and black people, and the struggles of the black community to be treated with justice and equality? Consider the words on the leaflet on page 295. Did they sound familiar to you?

7. Describe Carney?s family and role as a husband and a father. How do his personal and professional lives bleed into each other? How do memories of his own father shape his relationship with his wife and children?

8. What does the Dumas Club represent for Carney? How does his denied admission shape what comes next for him?

9. Discuss the significance of the ?dorvay? for Carney and his business partners, including how it shaped his early days of studying and work. Which side of the day do you think he prefers to be on, and how does it reinforce the multiple ?roles? of the characters, given this reflection? ?He finally went down near dawn and when he woke he was back on schedule, in sync once more with the straight world. Cast out from the forgotten land of dorvay, as if he?d never been there. What had they meant, those dark hours? Maybe it was a way to keep the two sides of him sepa-rate, the midnight him and the daytime him, and he didn?t need it anymore. If he ever had. Maybe he?d invented a separa-tion where none existed, when it was all him and always had been? (page 203).

10. What are the roles of women in the novel? Consider especially how Elizabeth and Marie are depicted, and Carney?s sympathy for Marie in having the ?burden of carrying an apartment on your back; you stagger sometimes but you take the weight, what else can you do?? (page 149).

Author Bio

Colson Whitehead is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of 12 works of fiction and nonfiction, and is a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, for THE NICKEL BOYS and THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, which also won the National Book Award. A recipient of MacArthur and Guggenheim fellowships, he lives in New York City.

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