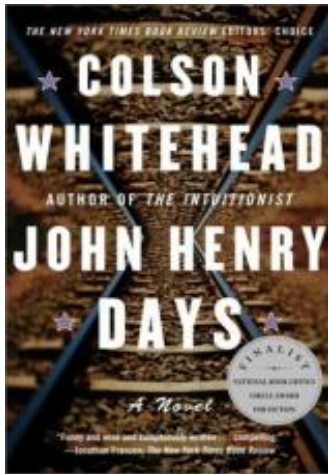


# John Henry Days: A Novel

by Colson Whitehead

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## About the Book

Immortalized in folk ballads, John Henry has long been a favorite American hero. According to legend, he was a black laborer for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, a man of superhuman strength and stamina. He proved his mettle in a contest with a steam drill, only to die of exhaustion moments after his triumph. In **John Henry Days**, Colson Whitehead builds upon this simple tale to create a contrapuntal masterpiece. The narrative revolves around J. Sutter, a young black journalist. Sutter is a "junketeer," a freeloading hack who roams from one publicity event to the next, abusing his expense account and meeting for biweekly sex with a publicist named Monica. It is 1996, and an assignment for a travel Web site takes Sutter to West Virginia for the first annual **John Henry Days** festival, a celebration of a new U.S. postage stamp honoring John Henry. And there, in a small rural town, the real story of John Henry emerges in graceful counterpoint to Sutter's thoroughly modern adventure.

As Whitehead explores the parallels between the lives of these two men, and between the Industrial Age, which literally killed John Henry, and the Digital Age, which is destroying J. Sutter's soul, he also adds multiple dimensions to the myth of the steel-driving man. **John Henry Days** is a novel of extraordinary scope and mythic power that juxtaposes history with popular culture, the blatant bigotry of the past with the more insidious racism of the present, and laugh-out-loud humor with unforgettable poignancy.

## Discussion Guide

1. The novel's protagonist, J. Sutter, is described as "this inveigler of invites and slayer of crudités, this drink ticket fonder and slim tipper, open bar opportunist, master of vouchers, queue-jumping wrangler of receipts" [p. 56]. Does the reader come to like Sutter and his fellow journalists Tiny, One-Eye, Dave, and Frenchie? What is the basis of their social bond? Is it true, as J. thinks, that "the junketeers are quintessential Americans. . . . They want and want now and someone else is picking up the check" [p. 137]?

2. J. Sutter is alert to the casual racism exhibited by many people he meets on his trip, and he is always conscious of his minority status, as when the taxi driver comments on Sutter as a name that sounds southern and Sutter answers, "Maybe my ancestors were owned down here at some point" [p. 21]. Jonathan Franzen has noted that in **John Henry Days**, "Whitehead cannily engages the interior crisis of manhood in present-day America " ["Freeloading Man," The New York Times Book Review, May 13, 2001]. How does the novel engage, more specifically, the interior crisis of black manhood in the America of the 1990s? Is this a crisis that continues today?

3. We first learn of the shooting very early in the novel, through the eyes of a young journalism intern, Joan Acorn [pp. 24?26]; we hear of it again at the end, through the voices of postal workers [pp. 366?70]. Why does Whitehead structure the novel this way? Do we assume that Sutter will be killed? We are told, "In these first few minutes a thousand different stories collide; this making of truth is violence too, out of which facts are formed" [p. 24]. What is the novel saying about the role of journalism in shaping the perception of events?

4. How does "The List" drive events in the novel? We're told that Lucien Joyce Associates "would publicize the debut twitch of a bean sprout, an unspectacular bud in a field of identical bean sprouts, if the money was right" [p. 40]. What sort of a person is Lucien Joyce? Does he truly believe in what he is doing?

5. According to one reviewer, in **John Henry Days** "there is an insistent parallel between the industrial or machine age to which John Henry was sacrificed and the digital information age to which J. is enslaved, in which information is used not to enlighten but to sell" [Maya Jaggi, "Railroad Blues", The Guardian (London), June 23, 2001]. In the novel, J.'s profession "usually called for him to justify to the people out there the indispensability of this or that artifact to their lifestyles" [pp. 332?33]. Is Whitehead correct in his assumption that publicity and advertising are a driving force in most people's lives? Is there any way out of this cultural condition?

6. Among the kitschy items at the fair are statues of John Henry that range in size "from toy soldier to lawn jockey, in a range of poses that produce an animated strip of steel driving. . . . The air does not circulate, the wares exhale something not quite breathable, a gas more fit for whatever ceramic planets these objects call home" [p. 267]. What is Whitehead saying about the relationship between the myth and the merchandise? Why does J. Sutter buy a large John Henry statue for himself? Why is it significant that this scene is immediately followed by a chapter about J. Sutter's family background?

7. The key to J. Sutter's identity comes fairly late in the novel, when we learn that as a girl his mother bought a sheet of music that her own mother disdained as "gutter music" [p. 278]. Does the culture of Harlem's Striver's Row aim to mimic the white middle class and therefore to repress the sources of black cultural identity?

8. The characters in **John Henry Days** suffer from passivity and pointlessness even when they try to focus on a goal. We see this in Pamela's temporary jobs [see pp. 287?91], Alphonse Miggs's collection of railroad stamps, and Sutter's quest for the record. How is John Henry's approach to his task like or unlike that of the other characters? How do these

individual struggles contribute to the theme of frustrated human energies?

**9.** Several long passages in the novel display Whitehead's impressive talents for social satire. See, for instance, the description of the literary launch party [p. 323] or the description of Pamela's temporary jobs [pp. 287-91]. What does Whitehead make a point to emphasize? How does his writing style complement his strength as an observer of physical details and social interactions?

**10.** Why does J. Sutter respond to being in the tunnel as he does? Of what is he afraid? He thinks to himself, "Step in here and you leave it all behind, the bills, the hustle, the Record, all that is receipts bleaching back there under the sun. What if this were your work? To best the mountain. . . . This place defeats the frequencies that are the currency of his life. Email and pagers, cell phones, step in here and fall away from the information age, into the mountain, breathe in soot" [pp. 321-2]. Is this a turning point for him? Does Sutter's visit to Talcott change his life?

**11.** Why is One-Eye ultimately unable to delete himself from The List? What is the meaning of the message he leaves for Lucien on the computer screen? His inability to take himself off puts him in a position where "it will always be the same" [p. 355]. Why is it so difficult for him to imagine an alternative to his current life?

**12.** How does conversation among postal employees about the shooting exemplify the novel's comic strain [see pp. 366-70]? What details are particularly funny? Which parts of the novel best display Whitehead's sense of humor? Is there irony in his use of humor?

**13.** Is there wisdom in what Pamela's father has told her about the many versions of the John Henry song, that people fill in the gaps, and that "what you put in those gaps was you" [p. 373]? Is there wisdom also in his insight that the song declared "the power of the legend to draw so much from so many and find in so many souls one name" [p. 382]? Does it matter that no one has ever come to recognize his collection? Was his life a failure? What, in the larger context of the novel, is the meaning of his vision? Does Pamela forgive him, in the end, for sacrificing her childhood to his obsession?

**14.** While digging a hole for the urn of Pamela's father, Sutter "was tired out from this one simple task, and in the same dirt he was feebly scratching into lay dead men who did more back-breaking work in a day than he had done in his whole life. And the legendary John Henry, nearby or not nearby in the ground. He tried to think of what the modern equivalent would be for his story, his martyrdom. But he lived in different times and he could not think of it" [pp. 377-78]. Does Whitehead intend readers to see Sutter's life as a modern-day John Henry story? Is it merely an ironic equivalent, a digital-age comic version? What, if anything, does Sutter's passivity have to do with the fact that physical labor has been made obsolete in late-twentieth-century life?

**15.** As Pamela stands looking at the monument, the narrator observes, "Thousands and millions of John Henrys driving steel in folk's minds. . . . She can't fix him. He's open to interpretation" [pp. 262-63]. Whitehead has managed to develop an elaborate novel from the legend of John Henry—a legend whose basis in fact is never substantiated. If the chapters about the songwriter, the bluesman, the crack addict, the motel owners, and others show the indirect influence of John Henry's myth on many different people, they also make the structure of the novel more sprawling. Does Whitehead's decision to include so many characters dilute the central story line?

**16.** Why do Pamela and J. have a far more intimate connection to the John Henry legend than most people? Does this connection tempt the reader to assume that they are fated to be romantically linked as well?

**17.** Whitehead pointedly juxtaposes the events of the two final chapters: John Henry resolves to go through with the contest that he knows will be the death of him; J. Sutter must decide whether to continue on his quest for the record or to leave town with Pamela. What is the effect of the unresolved ending? We know that two journalists are killed and one is wounded [pp. 367, 370]. When Sutter thinks to himself, "The South will kill you" [p. 50], is it a prophetic statement?

**18.** What lessons can be gleaned from John Henry's death? Is it heroic or tragic? Is it better to give in to progress than to fight it? Are human beings at the mercy of machines? How effective is the use of the legend to illuminate the contemporary issues facing someone like J. Sutter? Is the social commentary provided by the novel ultimately hopeful, or not?

## Author Bio

Colson Whitehead is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of 11 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.

## Critical Praise

"A feast for famished readers."

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