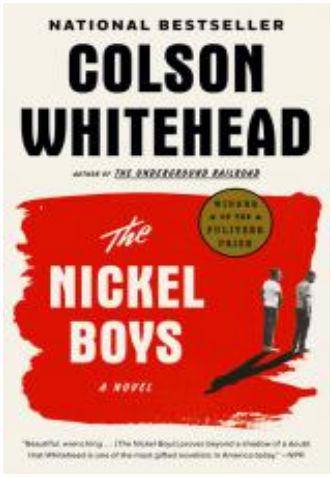
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Nickel Boys

by Colson Whitehead



About the Book

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

In this bravura follow-up to the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning #1 *New York Times* bestseller THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, 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.

When Elwood Curtis, a black boy growing up in 1960s Tallahassee, is unfairly sentenced to a juvenile reformatory called the Nickel Academy, he finds himself trapped in a grotesque chamber of horrors. Elwood?s only salvation is his friendship with fellow ?delinquent? Turner, which deepens despite Turner?s conviction that Elwood is hopelessly naive, that the world is crooked, and that the only way to survive is to scheme and avoid trouble. As life at the Academy becomes ever more perilous, the tension between Elwood?s ideals and Turner?s skepticism leads to a decision whose repercussions will echo down the decades.

Based on the real story of a reform school that operated for 111 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 Guide

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?

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.

The Nickel Boys
by Colson Whitehead

Publication Date: June 30, 2020
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 224 pages
Publisher: Anchor
ISBN-10: 0345804341
ISBN-13: 9780345804341