



# Harlem Shuffle

By Colson Whitehead

## About the Author

Colson Whitehead was born in 1969, and was raised in Manhattan.

After graduating from Harvard College, he started working at the Village Voice, where he wrote reviews of television, books, and music.

His first novel, *The Intuitionist*, 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.

*John Henry Days* followed in 2001, an investigation of the steel-driving man of American folklore. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Fiction Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. The novel received the Young Lions Fiction Award and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

*The Colossus of New York* is a book of essays about the city. It was published in 2003 and was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year.

*Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) is a novel about a "nomenclature consultant" who gets an assignment to name a town, and was a recipient of the PEN/Oakland Award.

*Sag Harbor*, published in 2009, is a novel about teenagers hanging out in Sag Harbor, Long Island during the summer of 1985. It was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award.

*Zone One* (2011), about post-apocalyptic New York City, was a New York Times Bestseller.

*The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky & Death*, a non-fiction account of the 2011 World Series of Poker, appeared in 2014.

The Underground Railroad, a novel, was published in the summer of 2016. It won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Carnegie Medal for Fiction, and was a #1 New York Times Bestseller.

The Nickel Boys is a novel inspired by the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in Florida. It won the Pulitzer Prize, the Kirkus Prize, and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction.

Harlem Shuffle, the first book in the Harlem Trilogy, was published in September 2021. Crook Manifesto, the second installment, will appear in 2023.

Colson Whitehead's reviews, essays, and fiction have appeared in a number of publications, such as the New York Times, The New Yorker, New York Magazine, Harper's and Granta.

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.

In 2018, New York State named him their New York State Author, and in 2020 the Library of Congress awarded him their Prize for American Fiction.

He has taught at the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, New York University, Princeton University, Wesleyan University, and been a Writer-in-Residence at Vassar College, the University of Richmond, and the University of Wyoming. Apparently he can't keep a job.

He lives in New York City.

Retrieved from: <https://www.colsonwhitehead.com/new-page>

## About the Book

"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.

Retrieved from: <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/harlem-shuffle/about>

## Discussion Questions

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, walking 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 separate, the midnight him and the daytime him, and he didn’t need it anymore. If he ever had. Maybe he’d invented a separation 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?”

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## Author Interview

Ray Carney owns a furniture store and is a genius at assessing value in furniture. You somehow make all of this mesmerizing. How did you settle on used furniture?

In an illegal enterprise, a “front” is very helpful. In *The Intuitionist* and *John Henry Days*, I sort of have a thing for weird, esoteric jobs. I try to figure out ways to build them up and make them interesting, and so I think the sheer randomness of Ray Carney owning a furniture store appealed to me.

Q: Did you feel a thrill when you were creating the villain Miami Joe?

A: Compared to the villains in *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys*, Miami Joe’s pretty small potatoes. Coming down from those other books, it was a relief to have normal-size villains. I think all the supporting cast was really fun to come up with: their language, their idiosyncrasies.

Q: In the last three books, you use tight third-person limited narrators. What does that approach give you as a storyteller?

A: I think a first-person narrator is appropriate when it serves a story. *Sag Harbor* is first-person; having access to that narrator’s thoughts takes the place of a really tight plot. In *The Underground Railroad*, the book would be very different if limited to Cora’s point of view. In *Harlem Shuffle*, the book really told me to stick with Carney.

Q: You recreate civil rights–era Harlem as vividly and meticulously as Joyce does with turn-of-the-century Dublin. Was there a challenge for you when researching 1950s and ’60s Harlem?

A: I found going to the archives of the *Amsterdam News* or the *New York Times* was always helpful—a lot of newspaper research was great for this book. Also, looking at materials from the 1961 mayoral campaign. And, because of Carney’s job, furniture ads and the language of advertising. A lot of the language in the book is drawn from real ads. On one page of a newspaper you’ll find an article about the 1964 Riots, and on the facing page is an ad for a furniture store.

Q: Your fiction has turned to the past to address many of the questions we face in our present. Do you see your novels as belonging to a larger project?

A: Yeah, I don't really want to articulate it. Apart from the common themes of American history and race and the city. Pop culture. Technology. If I step back I can probably see the design, but I'd really rather just focus on the next book.

Retrieved from: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/86326-a-useful-front-pw-talks-with-colson-whitehead.html>

## Other Links and Resources:

*Character List:* <https://www.gradesaver.com/harlem-shuffle/study-guide/character-list>

Interesting Facts: **He was the first writer to win a Pulitzer Prize for consecutive books:** the historical novels *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and *The Nickel Boys* (2019). Whitehead grew up in Manhattan, and he enjoyed reading, especially comics and science fiction, from an early age.

His Story: <https://literary-arts.org/bio/colson-whitehead/>

Other Books by Colson Whitehead: <https://www.colsonwhitehead.com/books>

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DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

|      |   |              |   |           |
|------|---|--------------|---|-----------|
| 1    | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5         |
| Ugh! |   | It was OK... |   | Loved it! |

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes      No      Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: