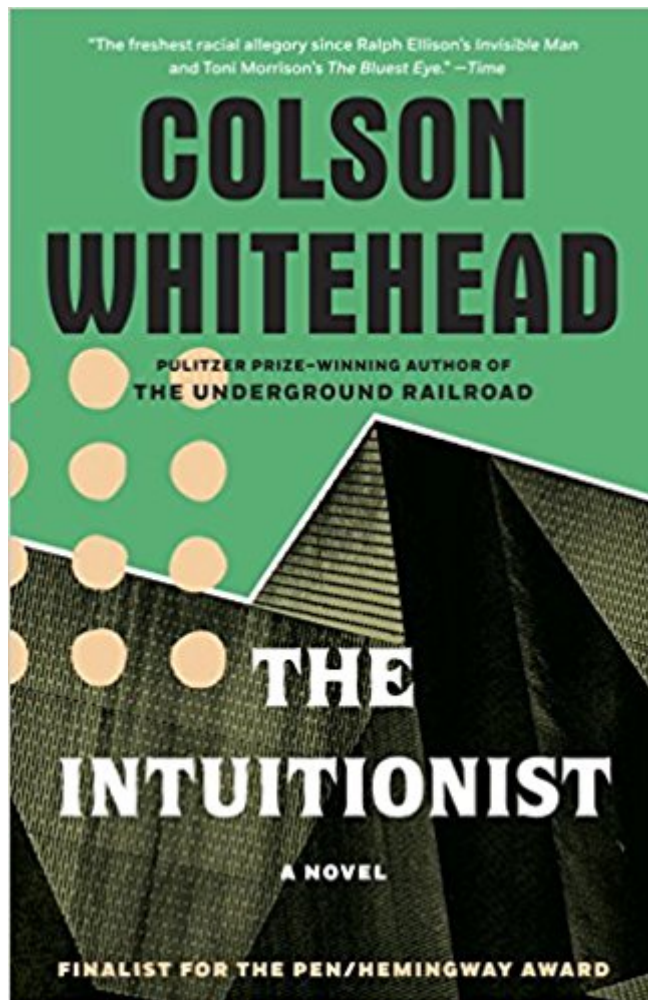


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The Intuitionist: A Novel



Synopsis

This debut novel by the Pulitzer-Prize winning author of *The Underground Railroad* wowed critics and readers everywhere and marked the debut of an important American writer. It is a time of calamity in a major metropolitan city's Department of Elevator Inspectors, and Lila Mae Watson, the first black female elevator inspector in the history of the department, is at the center of it. There are two warring factions within the department: the Empiricists, who work by the book and dutifully check for striations on the winch cable and such; and the Intuitionists, who are simply able to enter the elevator cab in question, meditate, and intuit any defects. Lila Mae is an Intuitionist and, it just so happens, has the highest accuracy rate in the entire department. But when an elevator in a new city building goes into total freefall on Lila Mae's watch, chaos ensues. It's an election year in the Elevator Guild, and the good-old-boy Empiricists would love nothing more than to assign the blame to an Intuitionist. But Lila Mae is never wrong. The sudden appearance of excerpts from the lost notebooks of Intuitionism's founder, James Fulton, has also caused quite a stir. The notebooks describe Fulton's work on the "black box," a perfect elevator that could reinvent the city as radically as the first passenger elevator did when patented by Elisha Otis in the nineteenth century. When Lila Mae goes underground to investigate the crash, she becomes involved in the search for the portions of the notebooks that are still missing and uncovers a secret that will change her life forever.

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Customer Reviews

Verticality, architectural and social, is the lofty idea at the heart of Colson Whitehead's odd, sly, and ultimately irresistible first novel. The setting is an unnamed though obviously New Yorkish high-rise city, the time less convincingly future than deliciously other, as it combines 21st-century engineering feats with 19th-century pork-barrel politics and smoky working-class pubs. Elevators are the technological expression of the vertical idea, and Lila Mae Watson, the city's first black female elevator inspector, is its embattled token of upward mobility. Lila Mae's good ol' boy colleagues in the Department of Elevator Inspectors are understandably jealous of the flawless record that her natural intelligence and diligence have earned, and understandably delighted when Number Eleven in the newly completed Fanny Briggs Memorial Building goes into deadly free fall just hours after Lila Mae has signed off on it, using the controversial "Intuitionist" method of ascertaining elevator safety. It is, after all, an election year in the Elevator Guild, and the Empiricists would do most anything to discredit the Intuitionist faction. Everyone on both sides assumes that Number Eleven was sabotaged and Lila Mae set up to take the fall. "So complete is Number Eleven's ruin," writes Whitehead, "that there's nothing left but the sound of the crash, rising in the shaft, a fall in opposite: a soul." Lila Mae's doom seems equally irreversible. Whitehead evokes a world so utterly involving to its own denizens that outside reality does not impinge on its perfect solipsism. We the readers are taken hostage as Lila Mae strives to exonerate herself in this urgent adventure full of government spies, underworld hit men, and seductive double agents. Behind the action, always, is the Idea. Lila Mae's quest reveals the existence of heretofore lost writings by James Fulton, father of Intuitionism, a giant of vertical thought, whose fate is mysteriously entwined with her own. If she is able to find and reveal his plan for the Black Box, the perfect, next-generation elevator, the city as it now exists will instantly be obsolescent. The social and economic implications are huge and the denouement is elegantly philosophical. Most impressive of all is the integrity of Whitehead's prose. Eschewing mere cleverness, resisting showoff word play, he somehow manages to strike a tone that's always funny, always fierce, and always entirely respectful of his characters and their world. May the god of second novels smile as broadly on him as did the god of firsts. --Joyce Thompson --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A dizzyingly-high-concept debut of genuine originality, despite its indebtedness to a specific source, ironically echoes and amusingly inverts Ralph Ellison's classic *Invisible Man*. In a deftly plotted mystery and quest tale that's also a teasing intellectual adventure, Whitehead traces the continuing education of Lila Mae Watson, the first black woman graduate of the Institute for Vertical Transport and thus first of her race and gender to be employed by the Department of Elevator Inspectors. In a

“famous city” that appears to be a future New York, Lila Mae compiles a perfect safety record working as an “Intuitionist” inspector who, through meditation, “senses” the condition of the elevators she’s assigned. But after an episode of “total freefall” in one of “her” elevators leads to an elaborate investigation, Lila Mae is drawn into conflict with one of the Elevator Guild’s “Empiricists,” those who, unlike Intuitionists, focus their attention on literal mechanical failures. Furthermore, it’s an election year for the Guild, pitting Intuitionist candidate Orville Lever against crafty Empiricist Frank Chancre, who has surreptitiously enlisted the muscle of mobster Johnny Shush. Hoping to escape these distractions while proving herself innocent, Lila Mae goes “underground” and makes some dangerous discoveries about the ideas and the life of Intuitionism’s founder, James Fulton, a visionary known to have been working on a “black box” that would revolutionize elevator construction and alter the nature of urban life forever. Lila Mae’s odyssey involves her further with such mysterious characters as Fulton’s former housemaid and lover, her circumspect “house nigger” colleague Pompey, a charmer named Natchez, who claims he’s Fulton’s nephew, and sinister Internal Affairs investigator Bart Arbogast. Whitehead skillfully orchestrates these noirish particulars together with an enormity of technical-mechanical detail and resonant meditations on social and racial issues, bringing all into a many-leveled narrative equally effective as detective story and philosophical novel. Ralph Ellison would be proud. -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It does not take long for the reader to realize that this book is about a parallel universe, a universe with a city comparable to New York City and a social class structure full of racism and union struggles. It is a parallel universe of gender inequity and stereotypes similar to our own. It is a parallel universe where ideologies begin to take on a life of their own, directing human thought and perception, until the ideologies are put to the test of reality. I don’t mean to be mysterious here but this is in many ways a mystery story, a classic story of the set-up, the innocent must prove their innocence in a dark and unfair world. The novel is original and at the same time very familiar. It is familiar in that anyone who has watched television has seen the age old plot of the innocent person set up by the corrupt. The innocent must go on an underground quest to find out who and why they were set up. In this book, Lila Mae Watson, a black woman elevator inspector is the innocent, the patsy, and her race and gender and barrier breaking job of being the first black female in the field offer some evidence of why she was set-up in the free-fall of an elevator she had just inspected. Beside being black and female, Lila Mae is an intuitionist who senses the problems with

elevators rather than goes through complex checklists, which is the strategy of the empiricists. Like any mystery quest novel, Lila Mae meets many characters on her journey to prove her innocence. This is a new twist of social commentary integrated with the age old successful plotlines of Bogart detective films.

"What does the perfect elevator look like, the one that will deliver us from the cities we suffer now, these stunted shacks?" -The Intuitionist, Colson Whitehead This is a near perfect book with striking language - Colson Whitehead's metaphors are worth pausing over and re-reading. He writes such gems as "In person he is too flesh, a handful of raw meat. Dogs have been known to follow him, optimistic." Centering around the elevators we all must ride in to rise up, quite literally, allows for allegory on so many levels - the concept's brilliance comes from its simplicity. A black female elevator inspector tries make it in a white elevator inspector's world, intuitionist trying to make it in a rationalist's world, all of us built up on top of each other in these big cities waiting to take the ride up to that next level. I think this is a book that kids will be reading in high school in America when all of us are long gone.

An interesting premise and a beautifully written novel, but I was bored until the halfway point. Part of the problem is the elevator theme, which I found much less interesting than the author; the rest is that the protagonist, Lila Mae Watson, is undeveloped and rather dull. Fortunately the second half was much better; I'm glad I read it.

Who would have guessed that a book about elevator operators and the theory of elevators could be entrancing! Colson Whitehead achieves this. Recently, he said, in an article in The New Yorker, that it was his first novel, written after growing up watching an enormous quantity of B-movies. Colson is a card, so he may have been kidding. But whether B-movies got transformed into this astonishing book is not the point. The point is - it's a great and imaginative read! One of my very favorite books!

Colson Whitehead creates a world that is simultaneously ridiculous--a world in which elevator inspectors wield an incredible amount of power in the local government--and treated so seriously that one starts to forget that silliness. The novel follows a fairly predictable noir framework (there's an accident, a potential framing, a mysterious stranger who has more to him than he's letting on . . .) but never once does this make The Intuitionist any less enjoyable. In addition to that, Whitehead has created an interesting allegory/setting for the struggle towards racial equality. Halfway through

you won't be able to put the book down, or to ever look at an elevator the same way again.

This is a wonderfully creative look at race relations in a segregated world where custom and rules limit the possibilities of living fulfilling lives. It's the transcendent intuitionist living in a world of verticality who sees a future world that rises above racial oppression. Brilliantly written.

I was surprised how much I liked. I want to know more about elevators. The prose struck me as though James Baldwin had written *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* - that's not entirely accurate but true in a poetic sense.

This was an original story and excellent writing. A very worthwhile book. Loved it.

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