

Book Review: Harlem Shuffle by Colson Whitehead

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Inspiration can strike at any moment. For two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning author Colson Whitehead it was a playlist from a friend. More specifically, it was the song “Harlem Shuffle” that gave him the title for his novel, which debuted at number three on The New York Times fiction bestseller list and was named by Barack Obama as one of his favourite books of 2021. And yet it’s more than just the title. The lyrics seem light on the surface – “move to the left, move to the right, do the Harlem Shuffle” – but the arrangement of the original track has a sinister side. Add to this the discordant horns, the shrill backup singers and the sense of tension in what’s meant to be something easy-going, and it’s no wonder Whitehead found it perfect for the book and its themes.

The novel tells the story of Ray Carney, a man “only slightly bent when it came to being crooked”. As far as the people in his life are concerned, he’s just an honest salesman trying to make a living for himself and his family, especially now that he and his wife are expecting their second child. But look a little closer and you’ll realise that, thanks to his cousin Freddie, he’s living a double life by dabbling in small crimes that will eventually get out of control.

It’s hard to say more without giving too much away. At the same time, it’s hard to call the book just a heist story, even though Whitehead took some inspiration from the movie Ocean’s 11. (Zone One, his zombie novel, was inspired by The Living Dead, Planet of the Apes, Omega Man, and the 1970s science fiction movies he loved.) But instead of following the typical model where everyone is good-looking and can afford high-tech gadgets, Harlem Shuffle brings the reader face to face with desperate and dishevelled characters hoping to pull off the heist that will change their lives.

In this regard, it’s more aligned with films like Stanley Kubrick’s The Killing, the 1950s French heist film Rififi, and Jean-Pierre Melville’s crime movies such as Le Deuxième Souffle, Le Cercle Rouge, and Army of Shadows, particularly the latter’s crime procedural elements. Again, it’s less about the kind of outcome where the job goes perfectly – too perfectly as in the case of the Spanish television series Money Heist – and more about unforeseen circumstances sending everything to hell. This makes the characters a lot more earthbound and easier to relate to as real.

Another way in which Harlem Shuffle departs from genre stereotypes is by focusing on the character of a ‘fence’ – the middleman who takes the stolen goods and sells them on the black market – as opposed to the robbers who pull off the heist. These people, like Carney, usually have a legitimate shop on the street selling electronics or furniture and conduct their illegal business in the back. This separation between the honest and the criminal aspects of his life is what makes him so engaging.

On the one hand, he wants to be an upstanding member of the community – he wants more than the gangster life his father lived – but there’s also a voice in the back of his head pulling him toward crime. Over the course of the book, he continues to run from himself while also embracing himself. It might sound contradictory, but somehow it works and makes him relatable because, as Whitehead says, “we all suppress different parts of our personalities so we can be productive members of society”. Perhaps the lesson is that the two sides are not mutually exclusive, nor do they have to be in constant combat, although time will tell depending on how the saga eventually ends.

Indeed, although Whitehead initially wanted to write a single novel, he kept coming up with different adventures for Carney. That’s how it evolved into three books, all set in New York in the 1960s and beyond. (The second instalment, called Crooked Manifesto, is scheduled for release in July 2023.) What will be interesting to see is how the city continues to evolve as the characters do, as was the case for the HBO television series The Deuce, especially given how crime was at an all-time high during those years. And even though Whitehead has mentioned that he doesn’t like it when people talk about the city being a character in a book (kind of like Dublin in Ulysses) it’s hard to deny that, at least to some extent, this is the case in Harlem Shuffle because Carney’s fortunes rise and fall as the city does too.

Perhaps part of the reason for people calling New York a character in the novel is because the scenes are described in such meticulous detail, no doubt thanks to the extensive research Whitehead did. Still, he has dismissed the term “historical fiction” and has instead referred to *Harlem Shuffle* as simply “a novel set in the past”, much like he did for his award-winning *The Underground Railroad*. The same goes for the themes about race. As a Black writer, Whitehead knows that whatever he does will automatically be seen through that lens – he recently joked that if he wrote *101 Dalmatians* it would be described as “a novel about race and puppies” – but there’s no denying that race and class are two forces Carney has to face. And yet these aren’t everything. They’re just some of the many factors that increasingly expand as the novel progresses and further drive him to be and become who he is.

Still, even with what should be heavy themes, *Harlem Shuffle* manages to maintain a certain lightness and humour. Obviously, given the subject matter, there wasn’t scope for this in *The Underground Railroad*. But there’s a lot more room to play here given that so much time has passed in the crime genre, built in many ways by pioneers like Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Patricia Highsmith, Chester Himes, Elmore Leonard, Walter Mosley, and more. Beyond that, Whitehead’s ability to shift from something serious to something severe is reminiscent of comedians like Richard Pryor and George Carlin, both of whom he used to watch on TV growing up.

“These comedians could move from something funny to something terrible and back to something funny again,” he says. “I think most of us veer between optimism and feeling bad about ourselves throughout the day. Even while walking just a few blocks, our minds can roam to different places, taking us to cherished memories or moments of humiliation. I picked up from these comedians that life contains both elements, and a limber, dexterous book like *Harlem Shuffle* can capture them simultaneously.”