

Versatile ARTIST

Genre-defying storyteller
Colson Whitehead combines
discipline with creativity



A child of comic books and television reruns, Colson Whitehead shapes his narratives with great attention to atmosphere, narrative style and philosophical tone. His thorough planning is an integral part of his writing process, assisting him in avoiding any regrets or second thoughts down the line.

"I do a lot of outlining and plotting and planning before I start writing," he explains. "What's the tone? Is the philosophical palette or atmosphere of the book optimistic, despairing or humorous? Is the narrator very terse, or does the narrator talk in five-clause pile-up sentences? Is it first person or third person? All that kind of stuff, I have to know before I start."

Whitehead's work traverses genres from realist fiction to crime novels to postmodern narrative experiments. This versatility may have cost him some readers along the way. But his commitment remains steadfast to writing what he feels driven to, prioritising his artistic and personal interest over the fluctuating tastes of his readership.

"Life is pretty short," he says. "So you should be writing the kind of stuff you want to and not what some critic thinks you should be doing. I think it helps that I've always lost and gained readers because I do switch around and switch genres a lot."

Whitehead's journey as a writer began under the influence of popular culture. In particular, he was enamoured with Stephen King's horror novels and dreamed of creating his own versions of beloved Marvel comics. His perspective broadened in college, where exposure to modernist literature and authors like Gabriel García Márquez led him to fuse the fantastic with the literary.

"When I was a kid, I didn't like leaving the house," he recalls. "While other kids played sports and enjoyed the great outdoors, I preferred reading comic books and watching *Twilight Zone* reruns. My mother would buy the annual Stephen King book, which would circulate between my room and my sister's. In seventh or eighth grade, I thought it would be cool to write X-Men or Spider-Man stories or horror novels like Stephen King."

Meandering journey

His professional writing career began at *The Village Voice*, where he wrote on a variety of topics, gradually gaining confidence and paving the way to working on his fiction. He developed a personal writing routine that doesn't stick to the common wisdom of writing every day. Instead, he uses flexible daily targets.

"Some people say you have to write every day, but that doesn't work for me," he explains. "Instead, I aim for eight pages a week – maybe one page on Monday, three on Thursday, and catching up on Friday and Saturday. If my kid has a fever and is home from school, or if I have a doctor's appointment, I might not write that day. But I try to complete eight pages a week, which amounts to about 30 a month."



200

The number of times a hedgehog's heart beats per minute.

1927

The year Georges Lemaitre came up with the *Big Bang Theory*.

When outlining a story, Whitehead considers the beginning and the end as crucial coordinates. The middle, he explains, can be "fuzzy". Certain details only reveal themselves as he approaches them in the narrative, like the characteristics of a pivotal character or the final scene. However, he advises aspiring writers to discover what works best for them, especially because the Muse, he quips, "might be trapped in a subway fire."

Whitehead acknowledges the ups and downs of his writing career. Yet his journey was not without its invaluable lessons. After many rejections, he came to understand that becoming a writer meant finding the will to improve and persist despite setbacks.

"My first attempted novel didn't sell, and in retrospect, it was kind of a dumb novel," he admits. "It was about the adventures of a Gary Coleman-esque child star. For those who don't know, Gary Coleman was a little black boy who was always being adopted by white people on TV shows and movies. So, my novel was about a fictionalised Gary Coleman character, which in retrospect was sort of dumb. I received about 25 rejections."

Expanding universe

Despite the recognition and accolades, including two Pulitzer Prizes, Whitehead remains a disciplined and driven writer who puts his work before external expectations. His self-critical approach pushes him to examine each sentence to make sure it aligns with his vision.

"I'm more critical of myself than anyone else could be," he says. "Each day when I'm writing, I'm like, 'Is this sentence how it should be? How it

needs to be? Don't mess it up, Colson. I'm already in my head saying, 'Don't slack. Keep working.'"

In terms of the novels he reads for inspiration, Whitehead confesses he's been delving into non-fiction about cities and memoirs of gangsters. He also mentions his foray into reading novellas and short novels in preparation for writing *The Nickel Boys*, a book he amusingly refers to as a "shorty" because he knew he wanted it to be compact and concise.

Whitehead also talks about the experience of writing characters that do and don't resemble him. While he admits that Cora, the protagonist of *The Underground Railroad*, has little in common with him, he does see some overlap with Ray Carney, the protagonist of *Harlem Shuffle*, which Barack Obama named his best book of 2021.

"In terms of Ray Carney, we overlap in some ways, definitely in terms of his love of real estate," he says. "Like him, I believe that the next apartment will cure all my failures and sadnesses. If I could just find the right apartment, I can unlock my happiness."

What advice does Whitehead give to aspiring writers? He emphasises the importance of planning and understanding what kind of story you want to write but also highlights the importance of flexibility and adapting your writing process.

"There are people who say they just sit at their desks and the Muse comes to the window and flaps and moves their hand on the page," he says. "It's lovely. But again, in terms of method, you should do what works for you."

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