



The Intuitionist: A Novel

By Colson Whitehead

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The Intuitionist: A Novel By Colson Whitehead

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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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

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

From Kirkus Reviews

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 manly-leveled narrative equally effective as detective story and philosophical novel. Ralph Ellison would be proud. -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Review

"The freshest racial allegory since Ralph Ellison's **Invisible Man** and Toni Morrison's **The Bluest Eye**."

--Walter Kirn, *Time*

"Ingenious and starkly original...Literary reputations may not always rise and fall as predictably as elevators, but if there's any justice in the world of fiction, Colson Whitehead's should be heading toward the upper floors."

--*The New York Times Book Review*

"Magical. . . . **The Intuitionist** ranks alongside **Catch-22**, **V**, **The Bluest Eye** and other groundbreaking first novels. . . . Whitehead shares Heller's sense of the absurd, Pynchon's operatic expansiveness and Morrison's deconstruction of race and racism." --*San Francisco Chronicle*

"The most engaging literary sleuthing you'll read this year. . . . What makes the novel so extraordinary is the ways in which Whitehead plays with notions of race."

--*Newsweek*

"Whitehead's prose is graceful and often lyrical, and his elevator underworld is a complex, lovingly realized creation."

--*The New Yorker*

"**The Intuitionist** is the story of a love affair with the steel and stone, machinery and architecture of the city. It's not a pretty love, but a working-class passion for the stench of humanity that its heroine, Lila Mae Watson, has made her own. But as always with love there is betrayal. This extraordinary novel is the first voice in a powerful chorus to come."

--Walter Mosley

Users Review

From reader reviews:

David Gaytan:

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Timothy McKinney:

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Shawn Clay:

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Ruth Paiz:

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