



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

Review

"Highly imaginative and stylish."

--**Vanity Fair**

"Whitehead's debut novel can claim a literary lineage that includes Orwell, Ellison, Vonnegut, and Pynchon, yet is it resoundingly original. . . The story is mesmerizing, but it is Whitehead's shrewd and sardonic humor and agile explications of the insidiousness of racism and the eternal conflict between the material and the spiritual that make this such a trenchant and accomplished novel."

--**Booklist**

"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**. . . A many-leveled narrative equally effective as a detective story and philosophical novel. Ralph Ellison would be proud."

--**Kirkus Reviews**

"Meaty and mythic. . . Whitehead has created a self-contained universe in this novel, complete with its own mythology and history. . . He has a completely original story to tell, and he tells it well, successfully intertwining multiple plot lines and keeping his reader intrigued from the outset."

--**Publishers Weekly**

"Dark, smart, funny."

--**Details**

"An elegant, erudite take on the sci-fi staples of science vs. humanity and head vs. heart."

--**Spin**

"Brilliant, funny, poetic. . . a complex mix of contemporary issues and the urban imagery of 40 years ago. . . The style [Whitehead] creates to portray this world is equally intricate and rich--a supple, jazzy instrument that can swing from deadpan satirical fantasy to a straight-ahead portrayal of the pain and stoicism of black people living in a ham-fisted white world, looking for the ultimate elevator that will take them up and out."

--**The Utne Reader**

"Colson Whitehead's **The Intuitionist** is an enormously accomplished first novel, a meditation on race and technology and imagination that is absolutely dazzling. Dazzling too is his hero, Lila Mae Watson. . . How great it would be if there were more like her in life; how wonderful that we have such a brave dame in art."

--from **Brave Dames and Wimpettes** by Susan Isaacs

"**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

"This splendid novel reads as though a stray line in Pynchon or Millhauser had been meticulously unfolded to reveal an entire world, one of spooky, stylish alternate-Americana, as rich and haunted as our own. The care and confidence of the prose, the visionary metaphor beating like a heart at the center--these do not outweigh the poignance and humor, the human presence here. **The Intuitionist** rises someplace new, and very special."

--Jonathan Lethem

"**The Intuitionist** is a fascinating novel, full of quirky insights and beautifully imagined characters."

--Gary Indiana

"A multilayered debut novel...**The Intuitionist** reads like a pure feat of the imagination, elevated by...stylistic sorcery and a gnawing sense of the narrative's urban dislocation."

--**Village Voice Literary Supplement**

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Luther Roberts:

This The Intuitionist: A Novel book is just not ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you receive by reading this book will be information inside this guide incredible fresh, you will get facts which is getting deeper you actually read a lot of information you will get. This The Intuitionist: A Novel without we comprehend teach the one who looking at it become critical in considering and analyzing. Don't become worry The Intuitionist: A Novel can bring if you are and not make your tote space or bookshelves' turn into full because you can have it in your lovely laptop even cell phone. This The Intuitionist: A Novel having very good arrangement in word and layout, so you will not truly feel uninterested in reading.

Donna Macdonald:

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Samual Larkin:

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