



***The Nickel Boys*, by Colson Whitehead  
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy**

Earlier this year, Colson Whitehead won his second Pulitzer Prize for his searing novel *The Nickel Boys*. His first Pulitzer winner, *The Underground Railroad*, also dealt with racial injustice, albeit a century earlier.

*The Nickel Boys* is set in the Jim Crow south of the early 1960s. Its title characters are boys who were sent to Nickel Academy, a brutal reformatory. (Mr. Whitehead based his novel on the infamous Dozier School for Boys in Florida.) Nickel Academy's malevolent Superintendent Maynard Spencer oversaw a corrupt and abusive staff. Although the reform school had a mixed-race population, its segregated Black boys faced harsher punishments.

Central to the novel's plot is the friendship forged between two Black boys, Elwood and Turner, who bond at Nickel Academy. Elwood, a studious high school senior from Tallahassee, aspired to attend college. Raised by his widowed grandmother, Elwood was inspired by the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to see the best in people.

Hitching a ride to take a night class, Elwood was picked up by an African American man driving a brilliant-green '61 Plymouth Fury. As the man careened down the country road, the red lights of a cop car flashed in his rearview mirror. Pulled over, the driver was arrested for car theft, and Elwood was sent to Nickel Academy.

Told "if you go along, you'll get along," Elwood resolved to follow the rules and get released early. Soon after his arrival at the reformatory, Elwood met Turner, a rough-edged orphan from Houston who lived by his wits. At first, Elwood mystifies him: "Turner had never met a kid like Elwood before. *Sturdy*, even though the Tallahassee boy looked soft, conducted himself like a goody-goody, and had an irritating tendency to preach. He talked like a white college boy and read books when he didn't have to."

Superintendent Spencer concocted a crooked kick-back scheme, directing his employee Harper to sell boxes of the school's food supplies and necessities to town merchants and then give him the profits. Harper ordered Elwood and Turner to work with him on the "Community Service" project. As the boys transported the stolen goods, Elwood kept a running list of the transactions. Hoping to expose the dishonest Superintendent, Elwood wanted to write to local newspapers, but the more cynical Turner tried to dissuade him. What the boys ultimately agreed to do would determine their fates.

*The Nickel Boys*, indeed, is a disquieting tale. During an interview, Colson Whitehead explained his motivation for writing it: "There are corners of America that we never see, never think about and never hear about. There are people walking around with stories no one cared to listen to. And if we put the effort in, maybe we can discover them."