

## **Harlem Shuffle, by Colson Whitehead**

*Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy*

Colson Whitehead, one of only four writers to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction twice, is a master storyteller. The acclaimed author's latest novel, *Harlem Shuffle*, is a page-turning blend of crime caper and family drama.

*Harlem Shuffle* begins in bustling 1959 Harlem, where Ray Carney owns a furniture store on 125th Street, catering to the African American community. A solid family man, Ray is married to Elizabeth, who had grown up in affluent Strivers' Row, one of the most beautiful stretches of Harlem.

Ray, on the other hand, had a challenging childhood. His father, Big Mike, was a notorious hoodlum, and his mother had died when he was nine. For a time, Ray lived with his Aunt Millie and cousin Freddie. The cousins, born a month apart, "were mistaken for brothers, but distinguished by many features of personality. Like common sense. Ray had it. Freddie's common sense tended to fall out of a hole in his pocket—he never carried it long." Whenever Freddie involves Ray in a dubious scheme, he ends up apologizing, "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

After Ray put himself through Queens College, he started working in a furniture store. When he serendipitously acquires \$30,000 in cash, Ray buys his own establishment. Carney's Furniture "was all his, his unlikely kingdom, scabbled together by his wits and industry. His name out front on the sign so everyone knew."

Ray strives to run a legitimate business, but he can't seem to avoid shady individuals in his cousin Freddie's orbit. In one amusing scene, Pepper, Big Mike's former crime crony, finagles a dinner invitation to the Carney family's apartment. Pepper squeezes himself in between the kids at the table like an eccentric uncle. When Elizabeth asks Pepper what he does professionally, he replies, "Odd jobs." Ray muses: "Pepper was a relative, this crook, part of his father's clan. It was Wednesday night, family supper, both sides of him at the table, the straight and the crooked, breaking bread."

In an interview, Colson Whitehead noted that writing the character of Ray Carney was a relief. "After the darkness of *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys*," he said, "the levity, Carney's humble charm, is fulfilling a psychological need for me. I could explore the world in a different way. I'm writing a second volume of Carney stories. We're following him in the 1970s. This is the first time I've had a character and a world that I'm not finished with."

(Note: *Harlem Shuffle* is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 9.)