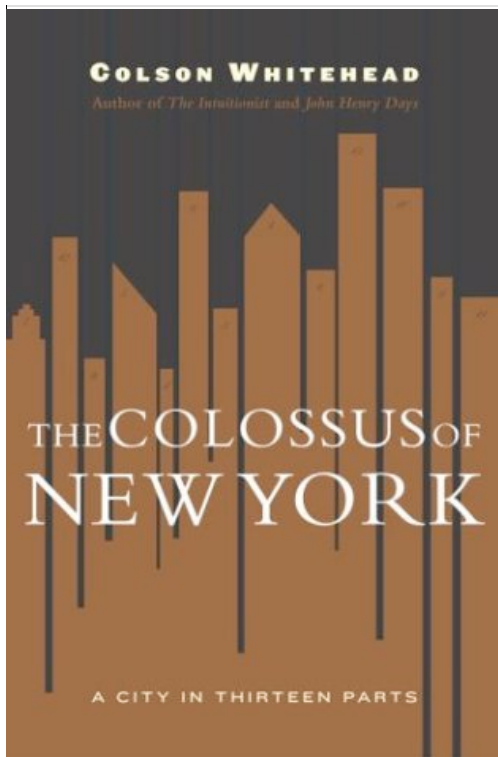


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Thirteen Snapshots of Thirteen Snapshots of a  
City: Colson Whitehead's New York



The Colossus of New York: A City in Thirteen Parts

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The Colossus of New York: a City in Thirteen Parts

Colson Whitehead

Doubleday

Reviewed by Wendy Walker

The list of awards Colson Whitehead has received is, to say the least, striking. He was the recipient of a famed "genius grant" by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in 2002, winner of the QPD New Voices Award, and finalist for the Pen/Hemingway Award for his first novel "The Inventionist." Following those honors, Whitehead was chosen as a finalist for the 2001 National Book Critics Circle Award AND the Pulitzer Prize. His latest effort, "The Colossus of New York," describes the city in thirteen snapshots. Taking us from the Port Authority to Central Park, along the Brooklyn Bridge, and beneath to the rumble of the subway, Whitehead offers readers a slim, 164-page, nonfiction ode to his native home, assisted in the material by various New Yorkers.

Perhaps the definitive strength of this book is Whitehead's ability to drift from first to third to second person in single sentences (a technique honed in "John Henry Days") that creates an all-encompassing perspective. Evoking a windy morning in the city he writes, "Things are set fleeing. Hands pat down. Determination sets. This wind will mug you of everything, make you look ridiculous as you try to maintain. It's these tall buildings and their architectural tricks. Shade in summer, cruelty in winter and truth be told it is this season they savor. Bang fingers against thighs to beat warmth into them, give up on ears. Note to self: Get Gloves. Vendors of papers and muffins haunt their staked-out corners. The same greetings to each customer."

Still, the most able of writers could not save the lackluster New York conjured in this book. Somehow, the end result of "The Colossus of New York" is hollow, touristy, or, dare I say, kitschy. In his introduction, Whitehead exonerates himself from the vision he created by stating, "What follows is my city. Making this a guidebook, with handy color-coded maps and miniscule fine print you should read very closely so you won't be surprised. It contains your neighborhoods. Or doesn't. We overlap. Or don't."

Colson Whitehead's New York seems a vague, colorless, and classless city. In fact, save for a few landmarks, it could be London, or Chicago, or Boston. In a vignette on the subway, he writes, "There's a culture for platforms and a culture for between stations. On the platform there are strategies of where seats will appear when the doors open, of where you want to be when you get off, of how to outmaneuver these impromptu nemeses. So many variables, everyone's a mathematician with an advance degree." Later, in a snapshot of Coney Island, he writes, "All tomorrow's sunburns gather in wait. Heads dart to and fro as they seek the right spot. Homestead and land grab. This must be the place. Try to remember your personal formula for comfort on a beach, the whole towel thing. Sizzle on the griddle."

Manhattan, since before the Guiliani administration, has been transformed into a wealthy borough, absent of ghettos. Gone are the days when you could rent a cheap studio on the Lower East Side or The East Village — and forget searching uptown unless you're willing to walk to Inwood or Spanish Harlem. So, in many ways, the soul of Manhattan, the mixed ethnicity we've always boasted, the starving artists and writers who once littered the downtown area, has crept off to its outer limits, in pursuit of the promise of more space, cheaper rents, and in some cases, hipper crowds. Colson Whitehead doesn't show you these New Yorkers, save for a brief jaunt to Coney Island on a summer's day, but even that doesn't really count. It would seem Whitehead's New York is one of privilege or invention, rather than of people and hard truths.

As a fellow New Yorker, I must say to Mr. Whitehead: Your city doesn't contain my neighborhoods. Indeed, we don't overlap. My New York, to quote Mr. Whitman, "contains multitudes."