

THINKING  
BIG

An Educator's Guide to The 19th Annual  
Chicago Humanities Festival  
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Robert Irwin *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow & Blue* ©2006. Linear polyurethane paint on 6 aircraft honeycomb aluminum rectangles, overall installed: 10'-1/2" x 54' x 22'; aluminum rectangles: 16' x 22' each. Photo by: Genevieve Hanson / Courtesy PaceWildenstein

# Author: Colson Whitehead

## Colson Whitehead, Author



Colson Whitehead was born and raised in New York and he attended Harvard College (1991).

Whitehead's work has appeared in numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, *Salon*, *New York Magazine*, *Granta*, *Harper's*, and *The Village Voice*. Whitehead has published a number of books including *The Intuitionist*, *John Henry Days*, *The Colossus of New York*, and *Apex Hides the Hurt*. *John Henry Days* (2001) won the Young Lions Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Prize, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

wikipedia.org. Wikipedia Foundation, Inc. 29 April. 2008 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colson\\_Whitehead](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colson_Whitehead)>

Whitehead, Colson. 24 April. 2008 <<http://www.colsonwhitehead.com/biography.shtm>>

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## Getting to the Core: Excerpt

### Excerpt from *The Intuitionist* by Colson Whitehead

"I'm going to have to cite you for a faulty overspeed governor," Lila Mae says. The door opens slowly in its track and the drive's idling vibration is full and strong, up here so close to the machine room.

"But you haven't even looked at it," the super says, "You haven't even seen it." He is confused and tiny pricks of blood speckle his pink cheeks.

"I'm going to have to cite you for a faulty overspeed governor," Lila Mae repeats. She's removing the tiny screws from the glass inspection plate on the left anterior wall of the elevator. The side of her screwdriver reads, Property of the Department of Elevator Inspectors. "It catches every six meters or so," Lila Mae adds as she withdraws the inspection slip from beneath the glass. "If you want, I can get my handbook from the car and you can see the regulations for yourself."

"I don't want to look at the damn book," the super says. He runs his thumbs animatedly across his fingers as she signs the slip and replaces the plate. "I know what the book says. I want you to look at the damn thing yourself. It's running fine. You haven't even been upstairs."

"Nevertheless," Lila Mae says. She opens her field binder and writes her initials at the bottom of the ID column. Even

from the twelfth floor, she can still hear the woman downstairs yelling at her children, or what Lila Mae supposes to be children. You never know these days.

"You aren't one of those voodoo inspectors are you? Don't need to see anything, you just feel it, right? I heard Jimmy make jokes about you witch doctors."

She says, "Intuitionist." Lila Mae rubs the ballpoint of the pen to get the ink flowing. The W of her initials belongs to a ghost alphabet.

The super grins. "If that's the game you want to play," he says, "I guess you got me on the ropes." There are three twenty dollar bills in his oily palm. He leans over to Lila Mae and places the money in her breast pocket. Pats it down. "I haven't ever seen a woman elevator inspector before, let alone a colored one, but I guess they teach you all the same tricks."

The door of apartment 12-A cracks behind Lila Mae. "What's all this noise in the hall?" a high, reedy voice asks. "Who's that hanging out there? What you want?"

The super pulls 12-A's door firmly shut and says, "You just mind your own business, Missus LaFleur. It's just me." The super turns back to Lila Mae and smiles again. He sticks his tongue into the hole where his two front teeth used to be. Arbo didn't lie about their QuarterPoint CounterWeight System. It rarely fails. A regrettable incident in Atlanta kicked up a lot of fuss in the trades a few years back, but an inquiry later absolved Arbo of any wrongdoing. As they say. The

model's overspeed governors are another matter, though, notoriously unreliable, and probability says their famous manufacturing defect should have emerged long ago. Sixty bucks is sixty bucks.

"You'll get a copy of the official citation in few days in the mail, and it'll inform you how much the fine is," Lila Mae says. She writes 333 in 125 Walker's inspection record.

The super slaps the door of 12-A with his big hand. "But I just gave you sixty dollars! Nobody has ever squeezed me for more than sixty." He's having trouble keeping his trembling arms still at his chest. No, he wouldn't mind taking a swipe at her.

"You placed sixty dollars in my pocket. I don't think I implied by my behavior that I wanted you to bribe me, nor have I made any statement or gesture, such as an outstretched palm, for example, saying that I would change my report because you gave me money. If you want to give away your hard-earned money," Lila Mae waves her hand toward a concentration of graffiti, "I see it as a curious, although in this case fortuitous, habit of yours that has nothing whatsoever to do with me.

Or why I'm here." Lila Mae starts down the stairs. After riding elevators all day, she looks forward to walking down stairs. "If you want to try and take your sixty dollars off me, you're welcome to try, and if you want to challenge my findings and have another person double-check the overspeed governor, that's your right as a representative of this building. But I'm correct." Lila Mae abandons the super on the twelfth floor with the Arbo Smooth-Glide. The super cusses. She is right about the overspeed governor. She is never wrong.

*Use of this excerpt from The Intuitionist by Colson Whitehead may be made only for purposes of promoting the book, with no changes, editing, or additions whatsoever, and must be accompanied by the following copyright notice: Copyright © 1998 by Colson Whitehead. All rights reserved.*

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29 April. 2008 <<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/1298/whitehead/excerpt.html>>

## REFLECTION: Poems

excerpted from *For the Confederate Dead* by Kevin Young

"I go with the team also.  
—Whitman

These are the last days  
my television says. Tornadoes, more  
rain, overcast, a chance

of sun but I do not  
trust weathermen,  
never have. In my fridge only

the milk makes sense—  
expires. No one, much less  
my parents, can tell me why

my middle name is Lowell,  
and from my table  
across from the Confederate

Monument to the dead (that pale  
finger bone) a plaque  
declares war—not Civil,

or Between  
the States, but for Southern  
Independence. In this café, below sea-

and eye-level a mural runs  
the wall, flaking, a plantation  
scene most do not see—..."

excerpted from *For the Union Dead*  
by Robert Lowell

"*Relinquunt Omnia Servare Rem  
Publicam.*  
(*They leave behind everything to save the  
Republic*)

The old South Boston Aquarium stands  
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken  
windows are boarded.  
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half  
its scales.

The airy tanks are dry.

...

My hand draws back. I often sigh still  
for the dark downward and vegetating  
kingdom  
of the fish and reptile. One morning last  
March,  
I pressed against the new barbed and  
galvanized

fence on the Boston Common. Behind  
their cage,  
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were  
grunting  
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass  
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic  
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.  
A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin  
colored girders  
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces  
Colonel Shaw  
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry  
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,  
propped by a plank splint against the  
garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through  
Boston,  
half the regiment was dead;  
at the dedication,  
William James could almost hear the  
bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone  
in the city's throat.  
Its Colonel is as lean  
as a compass-needle..."

As noted in his biography, prize-winning author **Colson Whitehead** attended Harvard College and has appeared in numerous publications. *The Intuitionist* is his most recent work of fiction.

## Lesson Plan: Making Inferences About *The Intuitionist*

**Essential Question:** How can the literary depiction of an interaction convey more than what is spoken, and how can a writer give us a feel for the historical environment without being overtly explicit?

### Goals

This lesson is most suitable for English/Language Arts, Drama, and Social Science classes. It addresses the skills of inference-making, using textual evidence to support an argument/assertion, creative writing, and performance.

### Objectives

Students will closely read an excerpt from Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, making inferences from what the characters say and do about the characters and the nature of their relationship; to do this, they will have to use text from the story itself to logically support their arguments/assertions. Students will then write and perform a short skit in which, again, the characters' personalities, and the nature of their relationship, is implied rather than directly stated.

### Materials & Resources

- Excerpt from Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*

### Timeframe

This activity will take two to three days.

*Optional Alternative Assignment:* Students could compare the two poems, "For the Confederate Dead" by Kevin Young and "For the Union Dead" by Robert Lowell. Young overtly references Lowell through the title of his poem; in his poem, too, Young's narrator says, "No one, much less / my parents, can tell me why / my middle name is Lowell." But beyond these overt connections, the poems share the themes of race, war, and self-examination. What similarities do Young, a contemporary African-American poet, and Lowell, a white poet of the late 50s/early 60s-era Confessional School (which also included Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman, among others) share? And, importantly, what are their differences?

### Process and Procedure

1. On the first day, the teacher and students will read the excerpt from *The Intuitionist* together. Students will then use text to support a statement about protagonist Lila Mae's personality. Their assertion and text should then be woven through additional explanation of their reasoning, including any assumptions they have made.

**Example:** As a character, Lila Mae is very tough in a matter of fact sort of way—one could almost call her icy. When the super attempts to reclaim his bribe from her, she says to him, with little emotion,

*"You placed sixty dollars in my pocket. I don't think I implied by my behavior that I wanted you to bribe me, not have I made any statement or gesture, such as an outstretched palm, for example, saying that I would change my report because you gave me money."*

Later she challenges him to reclaim the money by forcibly taking it from her. Normally, one would assume Lila Mae, who is in the position of elevator inspector, would defer to the building's super, a client; she defies our expectations by turning the super's advances back onto him and, furthermore, calling into question his assumptions about the kind of person she is.

**Note:** For a more advanced class, you could look at the implied assumptions the characters seem to be making about each other, again following the same form of using text to support assertions.

2. On the second day, students in groups of two to four will write a script depicting an interaction between two characters. One character wants something from the other, and who is really in power is in question. After brainstorming a situation and the personality traits of two characters, students should write a script that reveals the two distinct character types and reveals something about the assumptions the characters make about each other.
3. At the completion of each skit, performers will lead their classmates in a discussion about the nature of their characters and their relationships.

### Assessment

Character assertion notes; script (and notes on the characters and situation they have developed).

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