

THIS WEEK IN FICTION

COLSON WHITEHEAD ON HUMAN CRUELTY

By **Deborah Treisman**

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T*he Match* is adapted from your novel *The Nickel Boys*, which will be published this summer and was inspired by the true story of the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, in Marianna, Florida. Can you tell us a bit about that place and what drew you to the story?

The Dozier School was a reformatory school, and the initial idea for those places was an enlightened one: let's put juvenile offenders in their own space, where we can rehabilitate them through education and work, away from hardened adult criminals. In later years, you could also get sent there if the government had nowhere else to put you, if you were a ward of the state or an orphan.

As happens too often in places where we warehouse children—whether it's a reform school, or an orphanage, or an incarceration camp for refugees—there was rampant abuse. Physical, sexual. The Dozier staff murdered children and buried them in a secret graveyard. The school closed in 2011, and the stories the boys had told for decades were finally investigated. Bodies were dug up.



Photograph by Denis / REA / Redux

In the summer of 2014, the story hit the national press, and I first heard about Dozier. It was the summer of the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, the rise of Black Lives Matter, and the return of our periodic conversation about police brutality. Periodic as in, something terrible happens, we talk about police brutality for a little while, and then shut up about it until the next big, egregious event. What changes? I felt useless that summer, and writing about Dozier and the boys was a way for me to feel less useless.

How much of the real story did you include in the book?

I kept the general contours and the history of the school, the layout, and the culture. Then I came up with my own invented children and staff to put in there. Most of the memoirs and the stories I came across were written by white Dozier survivors, and I'm glad that they got their stories out there, but I wanted to give a voice to the other side of campus.

In "The Match," the school's segregated halves are pitted against each other for an annual boxing tournament. How did the idea for that

match come to you?

I outline a lot before I start writing, and that's when I figure out what has to go in and what doesn't. There are a number of world-building locations that have to go in so that the reader will believe she's actually reading about a "school"—a dormitory, a schoolhouse, an infirmary, a mess hall. Sites of everyday interactions for the characters.

Then I try to figure out what I can use to amplify and explore larger themes or character business. Of all the settings at the school, which will be most fruitful—the swimming pool, the ham-radio club, the annual Christmas fair? The boxing match shows what the kids did for recreation (builds the world) and is also an arena for exploring themes (the war between the races/corruption/tragic inevitability) and the protagonists' characters (mostly the character of Turner, who has only recently entered the book).

A good setting, like a good paragraph or a good sentence, hits the Trifecta—fleshes out the world, illuminates character, embroiders the larger themes. Like George Costanza, on "Seinfeld," when he eats a sandwich, has sex, and watches the Yankees at the same time. One time, back when I had a straight job, I went home on my lunch hour and ate two Katz's hot dogs, took a bubble bath, and watched a "Rhoda" rerun at the same time. (I lived in an old tenement where the bathtub was in the living room.) That was a great day, let me tell you.

The superintendent of the school, Spencer, spearheads the brutality there—doling out horrific beatings in the White House and actually murdering boys "out back." In your portrait of him, do you see him as a pathological sadist? Or as someone whose behavior was not extreme for his origins and his environment?

Both? Pathological means there's a physical or mental origin for behavior, and after writing two books about slavery and institutional racism, I understand that human beings are wired for cruelty. We are, simply, bad. Good sometimes, sure, but pretty bad. It doesn't take much of a societal nudge—state-sanctioned slavery, segregation, a police badge—for our programming to kick in. Spencer is not atypical.

"The Match" (and the novel as a whole) is told through a kind of combination of voices. We see things through the eyes of two black youths at the school, Elwood and Turner, and also from a kind of omniscient-narrative perspective. Was it difficult to come up with what felt like the right angle and tone for approaching this story?

The narrative voice is usually the last thing that clicks for me in a new project. Maybe around page thirty-five or eighty, I'll figure it out. But with my last novel, "The Underground Railroad," and "The Nickel Boys," the narrator showed up immediately. In both books, I let the terrible facts—of the plantation, of Jim Crow—speak for themselves. They don't have to be sold to the reader or over-dramatized, and this I understood from slave narratives, which can convey the most brutal event with a matter-of-fact delivery. In general, I like to have a solid rule for whose perspective gets told, and then I like to have a good rationale for breaking that main rule here and there. In the case of "The Nickel Boys," for example, I break the rule for two Spencer paragraphs late in the book, and for a few pages that focus on a runaway student.

I liked to think that I was getting better at my job, but I'm working on a new book now and on page eighty-seven I figured out something about the narrator that means I have to go back and change a bunch of crap. So it looks like I was lucky with narrators from 2015 to 2018, but that time is over.



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