Name That Town

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APEX HIDES THE HURT

By Colson Whitehead

Doubleday. 212 pp. $22.95

"Apex Hides the Hurt," Colson Whitehead's third novel, is so deceptively simple that it risks sounding like just another skirmish in the ongoing conflict between young, cerebral novelists and our consumerist culture. Whereas Whitehead's "John Henry Days" (2001) was a sweeping and formidable campaign of realistic satire, it's tempting to regard this new novel as a minor and predictable allegory. The book, however, deserves a better reading than that.

The unnamed protagonist is a "nomenclature consultant." He names things, products mostly, but in this case he's been hired to rename a town. It is currently known as Winthrop, after the barbed-wire magnate who incorporated it (and, presumably, after the Puritan preacher John Winthrop, who called America the "city on a hill" and in so doing became our first national PR flack). The current representative of the Winthrop clan is Albie, an effete and comically hapless blueblood who would prefer that the name stay as is. Lucky Aberdeen, a cartoonish new-economy type who runs a local software company looking to attract talent, has proposed New Prospera as an alternative. Regina Goode, a descendant of the former slaves who founded the town, suggests they revert to the settlement's original name, Freedom. The nomenclature consultant has been brought in to adjudicate.

He is unsurprisingly cynical about his job. As he explains in a typical spiel, "You have some kind of pill to put people to sleep or make them less depressed so they can accept the world. Well you need a reassuring name that will make them believe in the pill. Or you have a new diaper. Now who would want to buy a brand of diaper called *Barnacle* ?" He can only condescend to the multitudes, the "Great Unwashed, the clueless saps who came to his names and connotations seeking safe shores and fresh starts. Try This, it will spackle those dings and dents in your self. Try New and Improved That, it will help keep your mind off the decay."

He enjoys celebrity status in the trade for having christened Apex, the first multicultural adhesive bandage, and he is both fixated on his greatest success and haunted by it. Apex's chromatic range atones for years of "flesh-colored" Band-Aids. "In the advertising, multicultural children skinned knees, revealing the blood beneath, the commonality of wound, they were all brothers now, and multicultural bandages were affixed to red boo-boos."

The symbolic drift is obvious: Over the past two generations, African Americans have been welcomed into the shoals. They've been invited to palliate their injuries, personal and historical, with products that "hide the hurt."

Whitehead lays it on pretty thick here, but this thickness is precisely the book's point. His protagonist compulsively deconstructs the spin he is paid to proliferate. He's moved by contradictory impulses: He takes great pleasure in both embroidering fantasy and unweaving it. He insists on his status as a corporate cog yet relishes his work. He devises increasingly ingenious least-common-denominator slogans, but his own observations are thoughtful and original, if ponderous. He is given to ruminations on the significance of, say, shuttle buses: "As perfect containers of that moment between anticipation and event, as roving four-wheeled or six-wheeled conveyances of hope, shuttle buses cannot be blamed if the destination disappoints, if desire is counterfeited, if after all that dreaming all we have to show are ashes." His expertise is in such counterfeiting: He knows that the promise in a name such as New Prospera is, at best, nominal. He is well aware that Apex only hides the hurt.

He knows these things all too well; that is his limitation. He clings to his cynicism. The great intelligence of this book is in Whitehead's sympathetic understanding of this character's abiding faith in his own incredulity. If he can successfully identify the con, if he can be sure it's all counterfeit, he can inoculate himself against expectation and disappointment. But, of

course, he also has warned off hope. In choosing a name for Winthrop, he begins to acknowledge the way his skepticism has become his credo.

Whitehead explores this territory keenly, but it's familiar ground for much contemporary American fiction. It's the racial dimension that distinguishes his work. Whitehead's white contemporaries often allow themselves to contrast media-age irony with some bygone moment of sincerity. But African Americans do not have the luxury of that nostalgia. The narrator remarks that Apex bandages sell because they "so efficiently permitted the illusion of a time before the fall." Whitehead's protagonist knows too much about history to buy such myths, but he also knows too much about the present to suffer the guileless. By the time he makes his decision regarding the town's new name, he understands that naming can be canny without being manipulative: This river town's name could conjure meaningful associations rather than just manufacture fantasy. Names can acknowledge history instead of effacing it, and they can do so without reverting to the overly literal. "What did a slave know that we didn't?" he asks himself before he makes his decision. "To give yourself a name is power." A name cannot be transformative on its own, but it can serve as one bold act in an ongoing struggle.

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