

Colson Whitehead goes all in

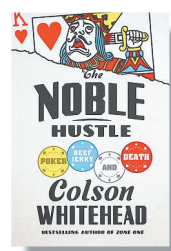
BY ALEXIS BURLING

Every once in a blue moon, an established author publishes what might be considered a side project — work inspired by a passion for a particular hobby or interest. Haruki Murakami’s “What I Talk About When I Talk About Running” comes to mind, or Joyce Carol Oates’ essay collection “On Boxing.” It’s not to say these books aren’t worthwhile reads, but they’re often a chance for authors to indulge in a little fun by expounding on a subject they love.

With that said, “The Noble Hustle,” Colson Whitehead’s exposé on his foray into high-stakes card playing, isn’t just a snoozer about gambling, though it is riddled with strategies and lingo. Instead, it’s a sometimes bewildering, often fascinating training manual-memoir mash-up for aficionados and rookies alike that boasts nail-biting play-by-plays from the World Series of Poker. And for fans of Whitehead’s more literary novels or for those of you who think a game of hold ’em refers to something unseemly, there’s something for you as well.

“The Noble Hustle” is an expanded version of a piece Whitehead wrote for Grantland, an ESPN-affiliated web magazine started by veteran sports columnist Bill Simmons in 2011. In exchange for Grantland footing the \$10,000 entry fee, Whitehead — sure-handed in the art of penny poker after 20 years of Sunday tournaments between friends and boosted by occasional jaunts to poker halls around the country — would compete in the Vegas big leagues. All he had to do was write about it — and maybe win a few rounds, if he was lucky.

Whitehead was rarely lucky — and maybe that’s what makes this crass, sardonic tour through America’s wasteland of bright lights, overpriced all-you-can-eat menus and windowless banquet hall behemoths so funny. He sets out on a six-week boot camp that includes schlepping back and forth to Atlantic City as well as enlist-



The Noble Hustle

By Colson Whitehead, Doubleday, 237 pages, \$24.95

ing the help of a personal trainer and a professional card shark turned poker coach. He crams from poker legend Dan Harrington’s “Expert Strategy” books. And as he makes the rounds during a seven-day period of the World Series of Poker, it’s clear from Whitehead’s many rants on casinos as “multifarious pleasure enclosure(s)” populated by “Big Mitches” — or pot-

bellied loud-talkers with trophy wives and disposable incomes — that the author half-hates the over-the-top experience. Still, he can’t help but get swept up in the thrill of the game.

Neither can we. Following Whitehead, clad in sunglasses and a red track jacket adorned with the slogan “Republic of Anhedonia” (Anhedonia is the inability to experience pleasure), we witness the author hobnob with hotshots and curmudgeonly fumble as he just barely outlasts 2,324 players to advance to Day 2 of the World Series of Poker. It’s hard not to root for the underdog; maybe he could somehow win the coveted championship’s diamond-encrusted bracelet and take home the entire pot.



Phil Velasquez/Tribune photo

Aside from reportage from the front lines of the main event, Whitehead stuffs the book with historical factoids to provide context for his narrative. Some readers’ eyes might glaze over from detailed explanations of hand rankings or cringe at sentences describing moves like No Limit as “where you get the ladies and gentlemen dropping their genitals on the table, declaring ‘All in!’ ” But his commentary on the progression of poker from 1970’s inaugural World Series, where seven entrants competed for an engraved silver cup (no prize money), through the rise and fall of online gambling holds interest.

Whitehead’s life outside the poker table — a recent divorce, juggling the publication of his latest novel with fatherhood, stories of old college buddies now in high places (film director Darren Aronofsky) — is on display too. Sure, his self-deprecating asides can be a bit much at times (he graduated from Harvard and won a MacArthur Fellowship, so he’s clearly doing something

right). But it all comes out in the wash in the end.

Leafing through Colson Whitehead’s body of work isn’t a consistent experience. The zombie-a-thon “Zone One” is far different than “John Henry Days,” his heady sophomore novel and Pulitzer Prize finalist centered on the 19th-century black railway worker of lore. But why else do great authors experiment in different genres? To prove they have range.

Then again, it could all be much simpler than that. Maybe reading a book about poker is enjoyable because it’s just like Whitehead says: “We are all a bit Vegas now, more comfortable exposing ourselves in all our weaknesses and appetites.”

Whitehead will appear at Printers Row Lit Fest; visit printersrowlitfest.org for details. Alexis Burling is a book critic based in Portland, Ore. Her work has been published in The New York Times Book Review, The Washington Post and elsewhere.