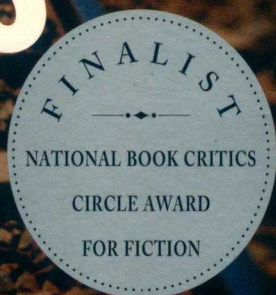


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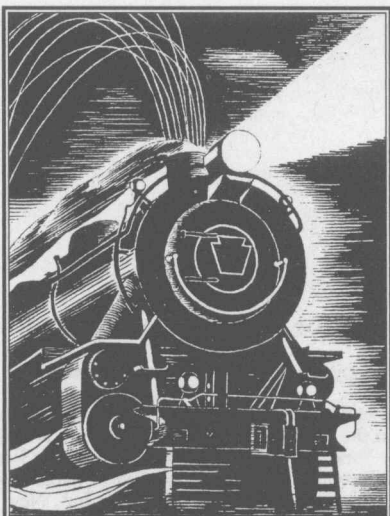
★ COLSON ★
WHITEHEAD
AUTHOR OF *THE INTUITIONIST*
JOHN HENRY
★ DAYS ★

A Novel



"Funny and wise and sumptuously written . . . compelling."

—Jonathan Franzen, *The New York Times Book Review*



JOHN
HENRY
DAYS



A NOVEL

COLSON WHITEHEAD



ANCHOR BOOKS • A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC • NEW YORK

FIRST ANCHOR BOOKS EDITION, MARCH 2002

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The following sections of the prologue are reprinted from previously published material: Sections 2, 5, 6, 9, and 11 from *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* by Guy B. Johnson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929); Sections 3, 7, 10, 12, 13, and 14 from *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study*, by Louis W. Chappell (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968); Section 4 from "John Hardy," by John Harrington Cox, published in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* (October-December 1919).

The Library of Congress has cataloged the Doubleday edition as follows:

Whitehead, Colson, 1969—

John Henry Days: a novel / Colson Whitehead—1st ed.

p. cm.

I. Title.

PS3573.H4768 J64 2001

813'.54—dc21 00-043143

Anchor ISBN: 0-385-49820-9

Book design by Gretchen Achilles

www.anchorbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6

ACCLAIM FOR COLSON WHITEHEAD'S

JOHN HENRY DAYS

"A compendium of magnificent writing, haunting images and clever phrases. . . . It is impossible to ask more from a novel."
—*Los Angeles Times*

"Richly rewarding. . . . A bold and unruly novel. . . . A phenomenal achievement."
—*The Boston Globe*

"Dazzling, dizzying and wide-ranging. . . . A kaleidoscopic overview of American social history, race relations, mythology and anthropology."
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—*The New York Observer*

“Almost always pitch-perfect. . . . Whitehead brings a serrated wit to his depiction of the junketeering life. . . . Extraordinary.”
—*Salon*

“Whitehead has crafted a true literary masterpiece. . . . *John Henry Days* is pure pleasure.”
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“A sprawling, all-you-can-eat buffet of a novel. . . . Ambitious and frequently funny.” —*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

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—*New York*

COLSON WHITEHEAD

JOHN HENRY DAYS

Colson Whitehead was born in New York City. His first novel, *The Intuitionist*, won the QPB New Voices Award and was an Ernest Hemingway/PEN Award finalist. He is also the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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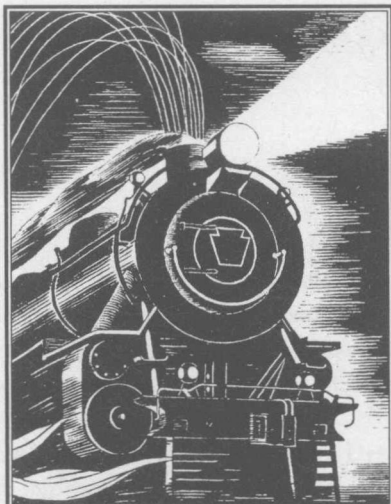
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PROLOGUE



About 45 years ago I was in Morgan County, Kentucky. There was a bunch of darkeys came from Miss. to assist in driving a tunnel at the head of Big Caney Creek for the O&K railroad. There is where I first heard this song, as they would sing it to keep time with their hammers.

HAVING SEEN YOUR advertisement in the Chicago Defender, I am answering your request for information, concerning the Old-Time Hero of the Big Bend Tunnel Days—or Mr. John Henry.

I have succeeded in recalling and piecing together 13 verses, dedicated to such a splendid and deserving character of by gone days. It was necessary to interview a number of Old-Timers of the Penitentiary to get some of the missing words and verify my recollections; so I only hope it will please you, and be what you wish.

In regards to the reality of John Henry, I would say he was a real live and powerful man, some 50 years ago, and actually died after beating a steam drill. His wife was a very small woman who loved John Henry with all her heart.

My Grand Father, on my mother's side, was a steel driver, and worked on all them big jobs through out the country, in them days, when steam drills were not so popular. He was always boasting about his prowess with a hammer, claiming none could beat him but John Henry. He used to sing of John Henry, and tell of the old days when hammers and hammer men could do the work of the steam drills.

Being pretty young at the time, I can not now recall all the stories I heard, but I know John Henry, died some time in the eighties about 1881 or 1882, I'm sure which was a few years before I was born.

I am setting a price on this information; I am a prisoner here in the Ohio Penitentiary and without funds, so I will be pleased to expect what ever you care to offer.

IN 1890 PEOPLE around town here were singing the song of John Henry, a hammering man. I was working in an oyster house here in Norfolk, Va. for Fenerstein and Company, and I am 66 years old and still working for them people.

JOHN HENRY WAS a steel driver and was famous in the beginning of the building of the C&O Railroad. He was also a steel driver in the extension of the N&W Railroad. It was about 1872 that he was in this section. This was before the day of the steam drills and drill work was done by two powerful men who were special steel drillers. They struck the steel from each side and as they struck the steel they sang a song which they improvised as they worked. John Henry was the most famous steel driver ever known in southern West Virginia. He was a magnificent specimen of genus homo, was reported to be six feet two, and weighed two hundred and twenty-five or thirty pounds, was a straight as an arrow and was one of the handsomest men in the country—and, as one informant told me, was a black as a kittle in hell.

Whenever there was a spectacular performance along the line of drilling, John Henry was put on the job, and it is said he could drill more steel than any two men of his day. He was a great gambler and was notorious all through the country for his luck at gambling. To the dusky sex all through the country he was “the greatest ever,” and he was admired and beloved by all the negro women from the southern West Virginia line to the C&O. In addition to this he could drink more whiskey, sit up all night and drive steel all day to a greater extent than any man at that time. A man of kind heart, very strong, pleasant address, yet a gambler, a roué, a drunkard and a fierce fighter.

MY NAME IS Harvey Hicks and I live in Evington, Virginia. I am writing in reference to your ad in the Chicago Defender. John Henry was a white man they say. He was a prisoner when he was driving steel in the Big Ben tunnel at the time, and he said he could beat the steam drill down. They told him if he did they would set him free. It is said he beat the steam drill about two minutes and a half and fell dead. He drove with a hammer in each hand, nine pound sledge.

MY UNCLE GUS (the man who raised my father) worked on the Cursey Mountain Tunnel and knew the man. He said he was Jamaican, yellow-complected, tall, and weighed about 200 pounds.

I AM A steam shovel operator or "runner" and have heard steel drivers sing "John Henry" all my life and there are probably lots of verses I never heard as it used to be that every new steel driving "nigger" had a new verse to "John Henry."

I never personally knew John Henry, but I have talked to many old-timers who did. He actually worked on the Chesapeake & Ohio Ry. for Langhorn & Langhorn and was able to drive 9 feet of steel faster than the steam drill could in Big Bend Tunnel. Then later he was hanged in Welch, Va., for murdering a man. After sifting out the "chaff" I think I can assure you above is correct.

I have heard three versions of the song, mostly in the same section of the country, that is West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina, seldom elsewhere except by men from one of the above states. I have worked all over the South, South West, and I have heard the John Henry song almost ever since I could remember, and it is the song I ever first remember of.

I THINK THIS John Henry stuff is just a tale someone started. My father worked for the Burleigh Drill Company and told me for a fact that no steam drill was ever used in the Big Bend Tunnel. He was a salesman for Burleigh.

JOHN HENRY WAS a native of Holly Springs, Mississippi, and was shipped to the Curzee mountain tunnel, Alabama, to work on the AGS Railway in 1880. I have been told that he did indeed beat the steam drill, but did not die that day. He was killed some time later during a cave-in.

HAVING BEEN BORN and raised in the state of Tennessee and, therefore, in sufficiently close contact with the negro element there, it happens I have heard these songs practically all my life, until I left that section of the country six years ago.

I have been informed that John Henry was a true character all right, a nigger whose vocation was driving steel during the construction of a tunnel on one of the Southern railways.

THE BALLAD, BY special right, belongs to the railroad builders. John Henry was a railroad builder. It belongs to the pick-and-shovel men—to the skinners—to the steel drivers—to the men of the construction camps. It is sung by Negro laborers everywhere, and none can sing it as they sing it, because

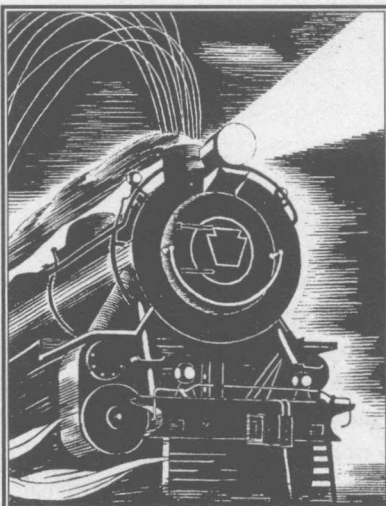
none honor and revere the memory of John Henry as much as do they. I have been a "Rambler" all my life—ever since I ran away from the "white folks" when twelve years old—and have worked with my people in railroad grading camps from the Great Lakes to Florida and from the Atlantic to the Missouri River, and wherever I have worked, I have always found someone who could and would sing of John Henry.

JOHN HENRY THE steel driving champion was a native of Alabama and from near Bessemer or Blackton. The steel driver was between the ages of 45 and 50 and weighed about 155 pounds. He was not a real black man, but more of a chocolate color. He was straight and well muscled.

THE LAST TIME I saw John Henry, who was called Big John Henry, was when a blast fell on him and another Negro. They were covered with blankets and carried out of the tunnel. I don't think John Henry was killed in the accident because I didn't hear of him being buried, and the bosses were always careful in looking after the injured and dead. I don't know a thing about John Henry driving steel in a contest with a steam drill, and I don't think I ever saw one at the tunnel. Hand drills were used in the tunnel. They were using an engine at shaft number one to raise the bucket up when we moved to the tunnel, but they didn't have any steam engine or steam drill in the tunnel.

I'VE HEARD THE song in a thousand different places, nigger extra gangs, hoboies of all kinds, coal miners and furnace men, river and wharf rats, beach combers and sailors, harvest hands and timber men. Some of them drunk and some of them sober. It is scattered over all the states and some places on the outside. I have heard any number of verses cribbed bodily from some other song or improvised to suit the occasion.

The opinion among hoboies, section men and others who sing the song is that John Henry was a Negro, "a coal black man" a partly forgotten verse says, "a big fellow," an old hobo once said. He claimed to have known him but he was drunk on Dago Red, so I'm discounting everything he said. I have met very few who claimed to have known him. The negroes of forty years ago regarded him as a hero of their race.



PART ONE

TERMINAL CITY



Now he blesses the certainty of airports. His blessings, when he has occasion to perform them, are swift and minimal, thoroughly secular, consisting of a slight nod to no one present, a chin dip that no witness will mark. He nods to luck mostly, to express gratitude for whatever sliver of good fortune drops before his shoes. The day's first blessing is occasioned by a solemn white rind, a little feather, that J. Sutter notices a few yards away on the carpet and immediately recognizes, without a shade of doubt, to be a receipt.

He looks left and he looks right. He waits for one of those dull marchers to open a fanny pack, turn rigid in horror, and retrace steps to rescue the lost receipt as the wheels of their plastic luggage carve evanescent grooves in the purple carpet behind them. It could belong to any one of these folks. The anxious dislocation of travel causes them to compulsively pat pockets for wallets and passports, to stroke telltale ridges in canvas bags that most definitely must be the ticket and boarding pass, but not so definitely that the ridge must not be checked again, the bag unzipped and inspected for the hundredth time that day. In this queasy awareness of their trifling, they might notice the disappearance of a receipt more readily and start searching for it. He factors this consideration into his calculation of how long it will take him to salvage the receipt from its immediate peril in the walkway.

It taunts him, vibrates flirtatiously. What does it record? There are all sorts of things you can buy at an airport, they are becoming more and more like cities every day, one lumbering transcontinental metropolis. Double-A batteries, a teddy bear, a toothbrush to replace the one forgotten back home on the sink. A nourishing lunch—he hopes for lunch because he is hungry and the next best thing to an actual sandwich right now is the paper trail of a sandwich. Something nonspecific, even better, just a fat total at the bottom, he can tell them it records anything he wants it to. Within the elastic confines of reimbursable expenses, of course.

The receipt flutters and taunts. He is at Gate 22, at the mouth of Termi-

nal B, and any one of the laden and harried pilgrims might be searching for the receipt at this very moment and contest his ownership should he in fact make his move. Witnesses at the counter. J. dislikes scenes. As if airport security would take his word over some middle-aged mom from Paramus. Pharmacy bin sunglasses hooked askew into the neck of her striped outlet T-shirt, her faded Cancun souvenir baseball cap, those taxpayer details, he'd have no chance.

This little boy in bright green robot gear, merchandise from whatever kids' show is big now, contemplates the stray receipt just as intently as J. from across the walkway in the opposing camp of Gate 21, Flight 702 to Houston. He reckons the boy is waiting for one of the travelers to step on it, to relish that dinosaur foot carnage, and when this image occurs to J.—the receipt mangled by designer sneaker tread or so smudged that it would be useless to him—he immediately evacuates the plastic bucket seat, strides confidently out into the walkway with nary a guilty twitch, and after one quick glance back to make sure that no one is stealing his stuff, he bends down and grips the lonesome shaving between his thumb and index finger as gingerly as an entomologist stooping for a rare moth. No one raises a ruckus. The little boy sneers at him and performs a baroque martial arts move.

J.'s neck eases, his chin dips and he makes his blessing as he sits back down. For this is pure luck, a pristine receipt newly plucked from the great oak of consumption, and deserves a blessing. Airports bloom receipts as certainly as standing water bubbles up mosquitoes. He chides himself for waiting so long to pick it up. Why would anyone want it besides him? It is litter. Early afternoon in terminal city: most of these people are civilians, off visiting relatives or wherever normal people go, Disneyland. Not executives who will log every transaction on their corporate expense forms, and definitely not junketeers like him. No one was going to fight him over a receipt lost on the floor, tumbleweeding from gate to gate as footfall gusts urged it to some far corner. He feels foolish, but glad nonetheless that he still has his instincts. There is sure to be some hectic receipt wrangling over the next few days.

J. inspects his bounty. He brushes purple carpet fiber and a curlicue hair from the paper, runs his finger over the serration at its head. He makes a wish and scrutinizes. The printer of register #03 at Hiram's News could use some new toner; only twenty minutes old and the receipt is already affecting a world-weary languor. Not a great haul, it won't rank up there with the great found-receipt frauds he's perpetrated over the years, certainly not another