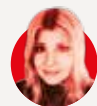


## REVIEW

# Robber soul

A playful heist tale oozes the urban vibe of early 1960s Harlem, writes **Jane Graham**



**D**ouble Pulitzer winner **Colson Whitehead's** name has a cultural presence few of his peers can match. So it's something of a surprise that *The Underground Railroad* author and revered social historian's new novel **Harlem Shuffle** treads such ostensibly light ground, presenting as an *Ocean's Eleven* meets *Ozark* heist caper, written with an air of mischief and humour and peppered with sidelong cheeky winks to its omniscient reader.

Set in early '60s Harlem, the novel tells the story of furniture shop owner Ray Carney, whose financial struggles, lower-class background and deep black skin disappoint his socially aspirational in-laws ("Alma used the word settled the way the less genteel use motherfucker"). Best then that they don't know about the violent criminal father whose lifestyle and reputation he has worked hard to rise above, cultivating his own business and finely cut accent ("hard stop on the t"). When his hapless cousin Freddie embroils him in an audacious heist the novel adopts a jaunty Cab Calloway-style tone, implying crazy scrapes among a cast with names like Miami Joe, Cheap Brucie and Tommy Lips. It's not rippling with Paul Beatty or Joseph Heller belly laughs, but *Harlem Shuffle* is notably more playful than its heavyweight predecessors.

Unsurprisingly for a political and socially alert writer of Whitehead's calibre, the mood darkens as the novel rolls through the years towards the ruinous Harlem riot of 1964, triggered by the shooting of an unarmed black boy by a white cop. The heart begins to sink as Carney's increasingly high-risk choices see him slide on to ominously thin ice, putting him and his family in jeopardy. Along the way Whitehead documents the neighbourhood changes and losses with a nostalgic melancholy, walking the reader along the razed blocks, burnt-out shop fronts and faded street signs. Carney reminisces about happier old times but notes "you get older and old jokes grow less funny".

We are kept guessing about Carney's fate until the last page. But the real draw of this novel is its loving evocation of the sounds, smells and flavours of '60s Harlem. Whitehead's almost pathological need to thoroughly describe every passing jaywalker or shop window is akin to that of unlikely bedfellow Thomas Hardy. And so we share Carney's summers of oppressive heat and spraying fire hydrants, where sidewalks reverberate to jazz filtering through nightclub doorways and tinny rock'n'roll emanating from transistor radios. We negotiate the 'sidewalk choreography' of men in pinstripe suits side-stepping soul-saving street preachers. And when it's all over and we look up from the page again, the real world looks a little more grey than it did before.

The same can said for musician Warren Ellis's remarkable **Nina Simone's Gum**, in which the Dirty Three violinist and long-time Nick Cave collaborator describes how a piece of chewing gum he grabbed from his idol Simone's piano top was transformed into, in Cave's words, "a religious artefact". The story of the gum's journey from soft palate to marble plinth is tracked, but this is also a delightful diary of Ellis's musical life and friendships, as well as a consideration of how objects become meaningful when connected to memory. A distinctly amiable and intelligent host, Ellis provides insight into some unusual creative minds. "I threw the idea out there that we could make the percussive aspect of the score using teeth and prosthetic limbs, glass eyeballs, wooden legs, and drop some melodies on top. This was greeted with enthusiasm." A joy from start to finish.

**Harlem Shuffle** by Colson Whitehead is out on September 14 (Fleet, £16.99)  
**Nina Simone's Gum** by Warren Ellis is out now (Faber & Faber, £20)  
@Janeannie

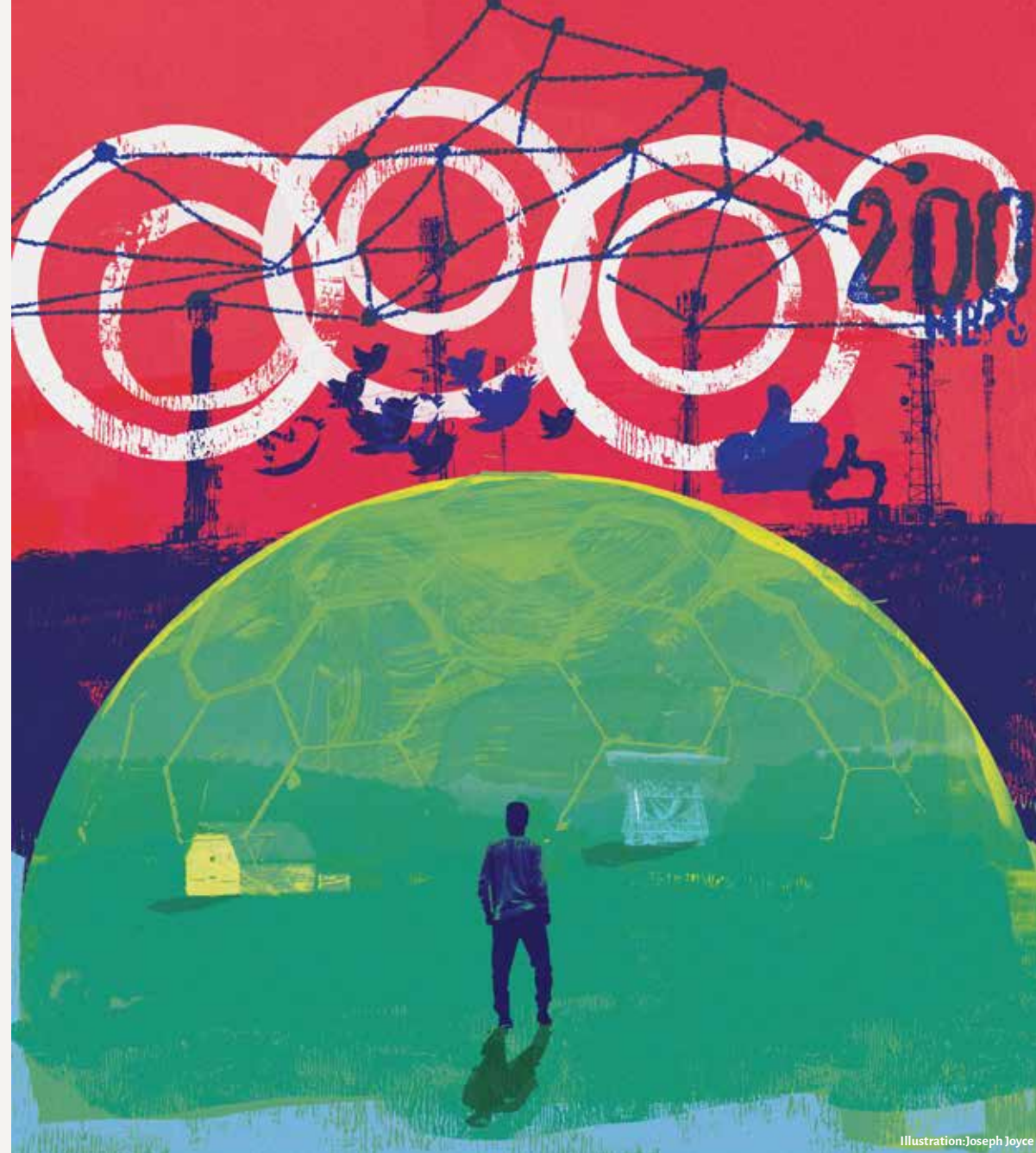


Illustration: Joseph Joyce

## AUTHOR FEATURE

## In the zone

Limited mobile reception and wifi sounds like heaven, right? Not quite, says **Stephen Kurczy**

**S**urrounded by wifi and mobile reception, you are always available, reachable and answerable to anybody and anything demanding your attention.

You try to break away. Try to take a phone-free walk. Try to change your relationships with your device by turning off notifications, imposing screen limits or visiting a digital detox retreat.

We all still feel lured back online, feel the hand instinctively reach for the smartphone, feel some crazy internal urge to check email and Twitter and check out from the reality in front of us.

I'm as guilty as anyone, even though I haven't owned a smartphone since 2009. Initially this was a decision out of frugality. It has since morphed into an obstinate refusal to carry what I believe is a devilish device that hijacks our attention with addictive apps, undermines democracy by viralising conspiracies and reinforcing

echo chambers, and inhibits our ability to live in the moment.

In search of a better way to live – or at least a place where I wouldn't be considered strange for not being married to a smartphone – I went to America's National Radio Quiet Zone. It's an area where mobile phone service and other wireless communication systems are curtailed and at times altogether restricted by state and federal laws, all for the sake of protecting the quiet around the United States' oldest national radio astronomy observatory, in continuous operation since 1956 in Green Bank, West Virginia.

Green Bank sits in one of the most sparsely populated counties east of the Mississippi River, an area 21 times the size of London but with only three traffic lights, one newspaper, one high school and about 8,000 people. There's no highway. It's mostly forest, surrounded by a ring of mountains that help block the outside world's radio waves. If you want to get away from it all – as the astronomers needed for their work – then Green Bank is calling.

After my first visit in early 2017, over the next several years I spent about four months living in the area, discovering a much more nuanced place than has been reported in the media, as I tell in my book, *The Quiet Zone*.

Turns out, lots of people have wanted to get away from it all, giving the Quiet Zone a kind of magnetising pull. Around the same time the astronomers settled in, the US military established a nearby base where to this day the National Security Agency (NSA) operates half a dozen radio antennas that intercept millions of calls and texts every hour. It's considered the country's largest eavesdropping bug, and its work is only possible because of the quiet.

The area also attracted a wave of hippies and back-to-the-landers in the 1970s, among them a clown physician named Patch Adams (later made famous by a 1998 film starring Robin Williams). Then came a notorious white supremacist named William Luther Pierce, leader of a neo-Nazi organisation that was soon operating a multimillion-dollar business out of the Quiet Zone, selling racist literature and hatecore music. Pierce's writings – notably *The Turner Diaries* – have inspired dozens of hate crimes worldwide, and in many ways his influence can be credited to the fact he was able to retreat to a quiet area where he wouldn't be bothered by law enforcement.

The latest group to seek refuge are people with a mysterious illness called electromagnetic hypersensitivity who believe they are physically harmed by mobile phone towers, wifi routers, smartphones and many other modern devices emitting electromagnetic radiation, be it a microwave or a coffee maker. To them, Green Bank is perhaps the last place where they can get away from the world's noise.

I spent hundreds of hours with each of these groups, as well as the everyday farmers, teachers, students and families that populate the area, in an effort to understand life in an ultra quiet place. I climbed atop the world's largest fully steerable radio telescope. I snuck a glimpse of the NSA's spy facility. I tracked the neo-Nazi organisation's bumbling efforts to launch a revival.

And I found trouble in the Quiet Zone. Locals want wifi, smartphones and mobile phone reception, to the chagrin of both the electrosensitives and the astronomy observatory, which is also battling waning financial support. It's getting harder to police the Quiet Zone, leading to an erosion of the quiet that many people have sought.

Rather than finding an antidote to the ills of modern society, I found an eclectic community at the crossroads of an older way of life and the new forces of technology. What does it mean to live quietly today? And can that quiet endure? If an isolated community deep in the Appalachian mountains can't resist the wireless revolution, what does that mean for anyone wishing to live a quieter life?

**The Quiet Zone: Unraveling The Mystery Of A Town Suspended In Silence** by Stephen Kurczy is out on September 16 (Dey Street Books, £20)



## Top 5 books about faceless bureaucracies



By **John D Rutter**

### 01 *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

Created by one of the greatest living authors, Gilead is a dystopian version of the USA; women are subjugated in a patriarchy with religious undertones. Penned in the Eighties, the novel reflects on attitudes of the time as much as it imagines a different one.

### 02 *1984* by George Orwell

The archetypal novel about a controlling bureaucracy, and as relevant now as when it was first published in 1949. It gave us Big Brother and doublespeak. Never have media control and the idea that "ignorance is strength" been more dangerous.

### 03 *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller

Set during the Second World War and written in the 1960s, *Catch-22* is now the phrase for any self-contradicting rule; in this, the number of required bombing missions changes every time the number is met. Contradictions in language expose the silliness of war and any form of absolute authority.

### 04 *The Trial* by Franz Kafka

A century old, this influential novel follows Josef K as he is arrested and tried for unstated offences. From start to end character and reader are bewildered by the lack of reason or logic from authority.

### 05 *The Machine Stops* by EM Forster

Imagine a world where every person lives alone in a standard box and only speaks to others through a screen and instant messaging under the control of an omniscient Machine. Life is limited to recycling old ideas. Sound familiar? Astonishingly, this long short story was first published in 1909.

Approval by **John D Rutter** is out now (Saraband, £9.99)

