



White Tears

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A PEN/JEAN STEIN BOOK AWARD FINALIST

ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR: The Washington Post - San Francisco Chronicle - NPR - GQ - Time - The Economist - Slate - HuffPost - Book Riot

Ghost story, murder mystery, love letter to American music--*White Tears* is all of this and more, a thrilling investigation of race and appropriation in society today.

Seth is a shy, awkward twentysomething. Carter is more glamorous, the heir to a great American fortune. But they share an obsession with music--especially the blues. One day, Seth discovers that he's accidentally recorded an unknown blues singer in a park. Carter puts the file online, claiming it's a 1920s recording by a made-up musician named Charlie Shaw. But when a music collector tells them that their recording is genuine--that there really was a singer named Charlie Shaw--the two white boys, along with Carter's sister, find themselves in over their heads, delving deeper and deeper into America's dark, vengeful heart. *White Tears* is a literary thriller and a meditation on art--who owns it, who can consume it, and who profits from it.

White Tears Details

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Author : Hari Kunzru

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From Reader Review *White Tears* for online ebook

Phrynne says

I always enjoy reviewing the books I have read but every so often I come up against one where I honestly cannot think what to say about it! This is one of those books.

I enjoyed it very much - the writing is beautiful - but I would have great difficulty trying to explain what it is about. I suppose it is a ghost story in part, also a bit of horror thrown in - rather like a good Stephen King really. But there is so much more - music, racism, slavery, the cultural divide between rich and poor and more.

See - I found something to say after all even if it is a bit disjointed. I can only recommend reading it to discover its meaning for yourself:)

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This was one of the books for which I had reading envy at the end of 2017, because I kept hearing good things and it ended up on so many year-end best books lists. So I cleared space for it in January after it was also shortlisted for the Tournament of Books.

This is an excellent read. It contains that rare element that I do look for, where the author takes you somewhere far from where they started. Although I had heard mentions of this being about music, and about race, I had no idea where it was headed, and it took me a few days to even wrap my brain around it.

The novel starts out focused on Seth and Carter. Carter is a rich white kid who befriends Seth over a shared love and attention to music. Seth is from a poor background but has true technological skills, and a good ear. He records what he hears walking around the city, then fragments and samples it in different ways. Carter pays for old recordings, going through phases of what he likes, and they build a library of rare sounds. They are working towards running a studio, something that Seth is more interested in. Carter has become obsessed with an old blues song that somehow ended up on one of the recordings.

Then the novel shifts. A series of tragedies twists everything around into a discussion of appropriation and ownership, creativity and race, privilege and power. The way I read it, probably because I'm a white person, I struggled to let go of feeling a connection to Seth, because of the way he is originally introduced as the underdog. I still feel a bit of a loss over the creative work he had done that he was cut off from by Carter's family.

(view spoiler)

So then there is the tangent of all the things I thought about after finishing the book. As an academic librarian, and as someone who has worked in a traditional music archive, full of recordings made by (mainly) white scholars of (mainly) non-white people groups, I started wondering about the role of archives and libraries in misappropriation of music. Especially in the 21st century where we spend so much time and energy putting obscure sound recordings online. But in the novel, much of what Seth and Carter collect and use comes from the dark corners of the internet, not just physical recordings. Are we doing the right thing?

And what would proper use of musical inspiration look like?

These are the big questions I still have.

Robin says

The song that never ends

A disorienting, uncomfortable, fascinating story that looks like one thing on the surface, but veers off into unexpected places. What begins with a couple of young white guys who are passionate about music from the past, turns into a ghostly tale of scorching revenge.

Carter and Seth, living lives of privilege afforded by Carter's wealthy family, start the nightmare when they upload a recording of an unknown blues singer to the internet. They name the singer "Charlie Shaw" - a made up name because they don't know who the singer is, as his song appeared surreptitiously on a recording Seth made, though he has no memory of hearing the singing at the time. It attracts attention from online blues aficionados as well as a mysterious collector; it possesses Carter who can think of nothing else. The wheel starts turning in a malevolent direction with deathly results.

We go back in time to the 1950's to hear the story of another record collector who is punished severely for his role with Shaw. We return to the present story which is getting more and more strange and involves Carter's sister Leonie. Time is starting to lose its shape. Characters begin to feel the oddest, most intense form of *deja vu* - often having the feeling that "I was *always* walking down this road" or "I was *always* ordering eggs at this diner", the feeling that this moment is permanent, unalterable, and does not disappear with the ticking hands of the clock.

Guglielmo Marconi, the inventor of radio, believed that sound waves never completely die away, that they persist, fainter and fainter, masked by the day-to-day noise of the world. Marconi thought that if he could only invent a microphone powerful enough, he would be able to listen to the sound of ancient times.

The idea that sound never stops is captivating - Charlie Shaw's song certainly seemed to bleed through the years. If only there were such a microphone that Marconi described, perhaps the characters in this book would stop to listen to the history of the music they collected, and would learn something.

Unfortunately, that's not how the lesson is learned. And it is a bouquet of tough lessons, about racism, about cultural appropriation in regards to black music, about injustices that go back generations. As Seth keeps protesting, "It wasn't me! It wasn't my fault! It wasn't me who did this to you!" But Hari Kunzru shows that history belongs to all of us, and some wounds aren't simply healed by time.

Rosh says

I can't decide if this book deserves one star or five, so I went for three. It's not a perfect novel, which isn't to say it isn't great. It reads like water while being complicated on the verge of convoluted. Hari Kunzru has written something extremely complex and thoroughly readable, but something is missing. My biggest issue with the novel is pacing. The beginning of the book is much more generous than the end-the extreme change that the book goes through in the last 50 pages is extremely intense. The main character Seth is meant to get lost for the reader, but his loss is so total you miss the character and cannot connect with him at all. It delves

into race relations in the United States but it fails to make any revelations. Black suffering is still ornamental, as much as Kunzro tries to give it a real life and texture.

There could have been a solid book here in a quieter mode about the passion young people feel for music and the journey that takes. I thought this was going to be that book but I was wrong.

Katie says

Some books accumulate merit points as they progress; others have a habit of losing them. I'm afraid this fell into the latter category for me. It's set up really well. The narrator is a nerdy guy who goes around recording ambient noise. No one likes him. Until Carter, a cool rich boy, takes a shine to him. Carter doesn't have much time for the digital age. He collects old r&b records, the older and more obscure the better. Carter carries all the ancestral guilt for the base means by which his family has built its colossal fortune. One day the nerdy guy records some street singer singing a blues song neither of them recognise. They upload it onto the internet and resurrect a vengeful ghost.

I was really enjoying this. I liked its esoteric quality and I was intrigued by the mystery it sets up. But when he introduces the twist the writing got a little too melodramatic and pretentious for my liking. The author has a bash at evoking a split personality in the manner of *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* but for me never pulled it off. I liked it when it occupied a small canvas; the minute it went out into a bigger world I often found myself rolling my eyes.

Trudie says

Whoa.

Now all the **hahahahaha's** towards the back of the book make sense.

This is truly an ambitious undertaking and deft piece of writing. It starts simply, but then slowly like the frog in the proverbial boiling water, you find your in some shapeshifting, ghostly fantasy novel and your not entirely sure what's going on. But you don't mind as it is flinging little truth bombs at you and your thinking how did Kunzru pull this highwire act off ?.

This is absolutely a novel I could turn around and read over again just to see how he constructed it. It is so easy to glance over those little odd time-slipping moments, just some weird deja vu stuff very cunningly placed while your mostly interested in other aspects. These moments gradually build up into something that you realise was there all along but the implications when the end comes are startling.

I am deliberately being vague about plot and character because the joy in reading this for me mostly came from not knowing where this was heading.

It is possible I loved this book so intently because I was predisposed to the music. Currently wrestling with the guitar on a daily basis, I appreciated that this novel could also double as a primer in the history of the early blues. I spent so much time listening to Willie Johnson's *Future Blues* and other old recordings referenced in this novel. You can absolutely hear the influence this Delta blues style has had on modern music and it is a testament to Kunzru skill as a writer that he makes all this old music come alive as well as to use it as a hook to pose questions on cultural appropriation (I delved down an interesting rabbit hole here with The Rolling Stones and Robert Wilkins song *Prodical Son* which is worth mulling over) and the dark

history that influences the blues style. Making the time to track down some of these songs adds an extra layer of haunting melancholy to the reading experience.

White Tears in my opinion absolutely should be discussed with some of the other big-hitting novels of 2017 namely *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* - all with a similar "ghostly" element to them.

It feels like panning for gold sometimes, finding these 5-star reads but I am very happy to have found my second one for the year.

Read it, read it even if your not into the blues !

Sam says

This book isn't what you think it is. This book wasn't what you thought it was. This book has always not been what you thought it would be.

I felt like there were two books in *White Tears*, but the final, can't stop reading for anything 50 pages force the halves into sides A and B of the record, completing each other, forming a whole, forcing me to appreciate more of what had come before. Early parts are occasionally irritating but gave me enough interest as we come to know Seth and Carter and Carter's sister Leonie, get background on their backgrounds, are introduced to their passions and the personal demons that follow each of them are hinted at. Seth and Carter have graduated from a liberal arts college: Seth is our narrator, a somewhat spineless, introverted guy with a prior psychotic break in high school, and he marvels at and is made important by his friendship with rich Carter Wallace who seemingly has the world on a string and anything and everything available to him, but who is ashamed of his wealth and privilege (though not above using both carelessly and thoughtlessly) and is endlessly searching for something that will help him feel, connect, be a more authentic version of himself. Their shared love for the world of sound bind them, and then Carter's obsession with blues and preserving and recreating that music fuses Seth to him more firmly.

Then something dramatic occurs - no spoilers here, better to go in a bit unprepared and green - and Kunzru shifts the ground beneath the reader's feet. It's hard to say and probably will change depending on the reader, but you'll find either the book goes off the rails, or the book finally gets onto the track it needed to be on. For me, it seemingly takes a horrifying acid trip that blurs and transcends the boundaries of time and ends up shrouded in darkness. It's disquieting, uncomfortable, violent, surreal. And it reaches its most critical, important moments in those final pages that tie what came before together, the past we can't escape and can't form to our will, no matter if we long to escape it or are obsessed with it as a more authentic, real time.

While the early parts of the novel indeed invoke and discuss, American white privilege, there's an absence of black voices or authority or agency. At first I thought this was a miss on Kunzru's part, and was beginning to grow tired of the ignorance and tacit ownership Seth and Carter assume. But it turns out that erasure of the black perspective was a deliberate choice, and it comes back with a (literal and figurative) vengeance in the second half, a stinging indictment of past transgressions and present structure that perpetuates white appropriation of black culture, white exploitation of black bodies: once as slaves, then as sharecroppers and work release for petty misdemeanors, now feeding the coffers of private prisons and white wardens and owners, black bodies fueling the engine of a broken criminal justice system. And we, watching Seth, let Kunzru take us from the early perspective:

We really did feel that our love of the music bought us something, some right to blackness, but by the time we got to New York, we'd learned not to talk about it. We didn't want to be mistaken for the kind of suburban white boys who post pictures of themselves holding malt liquor bottles and throwing gang signs.

To later:

On your record deck, you played the sound of the middle passage, the blackest sound. You wanted the suffering you didn't have, the authority you thought it would bring. It scared you, but you thought of the swagger it would put in your walk, the admiring glances of your friends. Then came the terror when real darkness first seeped through the walls of your bedroom, the walls designed to keep you safe and dreaming. And finally your rising sense of shame when you admitted to yourself that you were relieved the walls were there. The shame of knowing that you would do nothing, that you would allow it all to carry on.

Kunzru's writing is quite fine, very readable even in the acid trip half of the book, with for me quite a few revelatory phrases and ideas, and some great descriptive elements. But it's that unsettling feeling and atmosphere that shook me and will stay with me. His writing explicitly and implicitly invokes the crossroads, the fine dividing line, between life and death, between sanity and madness, between existence and erasure, the various devils that serve us and take hold of us and master us.

It's hard for me to rate this book: I ran through myriad reactions. But a few hours after finishing it, I am still unsettled, still disquieted, still satisfied by the weaving of the narrative and the force of the message about black erasure in our past and present. It may weigh on my mind in the most disturbing way possible for awhile. So I'll go with **4 stars**. It's definitely not a book for everyone, it's for sure flawed and sometimes difficult to read but I could not put it down and it ultimately crawled under my skin.

-received an ARC on edelweiss, thanks to Knopf

Michelle says

Seth is obsessed with music. He hears it in the everyday cacophony of the city street. Each sound emancipating itself, bits parceled into musical arrangements. Awkward around people, he is befriended by Carter, a cock-sure socialite with an obsession for collecting rare Blues recordings. On his travels Seth records a chess player singing in the park. Carter posts it online and passes it off as the lone copy of an unheard of musician by the name of Charlie Shaw. A haunting song, the lyrics become the backdrop of what is to come. The first half of White Tears is about the music and White appropriation of Black culture.

“The names were traded by collectors, but no one seemed to know a thing about them. No information, not a scrap. They were like ghosts at the edges of American consciousness. You have to understand, when I say no one knew, I mean no one. You couldn't just look something up in a book. Things were hidden. Things got lost. Musicians got lost.”

The second half of the book has alternating chapters of past and present running parallel courses. Like

locomotives barreling forward, at times the storylines collide as their tracks cross. The reader is left disorientated, jarred, unable to set themselves right.

A ghost story? A horror? White Tears defies conventional labels. It is a testament to our times. Haunted by the sins of our past, horrified by our present condition in a ~~post-racial~~ society, Kunzru's White Tears is an indictment of the systematic racism in America. I believe Kunzru means to make the reader uncomfortable. Too many times we as citizens are complacent -- idle bystanders who feel justified in our inactivity.

Phenomenal! Phenomenal Read.

Jessica Woodbury says

I don't like to read the summary of a book before I read it. I started WHITE TEARS knowing Kunzru from some of his previous works and expecting a smart book on race in America. That is what I got, but it came in a package I wasn't expecting, a literary horror novel, a ghost story with a Blues soundtrack, a tale of class and the evil so much of the country was built upon.

They may call this book a "ghost story" or "magical realism" because those tend to be more literary-friendly words, but I think it definitely falls into the category of Horror. I don't really separate my genre fiction from literary fiction, and this was yet another excellent book that does both.

It starts with biting commentary on snobbery, the habits of collectors, and privilege. A familiar story of a nobody who becomes friends with a somebody who gets to see a new way to live first-hand. But things start to go wrong. Things fall apart. The book slowly turns into something very different and the end of the book bears little resemblance to the beginning.

Kunzru sucked me in and I could've read it in a day if I'd been awake enough to keep going.

Ace says

Whoa, that was awesome. I don't normally get into the supernatural but if they were all written like this, then I'd have a lot of catching up to do. Another book exploring the intense passion of creativity (which reminded me of *The Animators*) and the intense cruelty and injustice of slavery and the music industry just after the turn of the century. How Kunzru crammed so much history and commentary into this little book is astounding. Now, if only he had used quotation marks, he would have been my new favourite author.

Emma says

Before writing this review, I HAD to read what others had said to know if it was just me. This feeling of total disconnection and confusion. As so many reviewers have noted, the first half of the book had me; the complexity of relationships with both family and friends; the history of music and what it can mean to people in their search for self; just who is allowed/able to appreciate a specific style or period of art, in this case blues music of the 20s/30s by a (lovingly?) obsessive, rich, white collector; privilege and its lack; attitudes towards and the experience of mental health issues.

Then there's a dramatic, defining incident. All of a sudden the tone and content of the book turns. And for me, was lost. It's bizarre and otherworldly, jittery and dark. It felt like the thrashings of a trapped, damaged mind. Other people have seen something in this section that I could not. Yet what is very clear is the talent of Kunzru in his ability to evoke the strange and labyrinthine paths of the mind. I'm not sure whether I disliked the second half of the book because it clashed so much with the first, because it left me with unresolved questions, or because it was so unsettling. All of the above, i'm sure, but I leave it feeling unsure and I don't like it.

ARC via Netgalley

Lark Benobi says

An unnerving read that pulls the reader in nearly as many uncomfortable directions as it does its characters.

The main narrator has a glib and superficial way of describing events, where the very dark currents of the novel are camouflaged for a time, only slipping into view intermittently. The foreshadowing is so subtle that it can be mistaken for misdirection, but it was the perfect way to disarm me in the beginning, and to prevent me from accurately predicting what was in store for me.

Music doesn't behave as it should in the novel. This thematic leitmotif--of music not quite behaving as it should--grows more insistent as the book progresses. Music can be soul-felt and soul-revealing, a cry from the past that connects with the present in sometimes-uncanny ways; but the power of music to connect this way, across time, is perverted by the main characters, who are more interested in collecting original 78's than they are in understanding the music or appreciating the artists who created it.

The last pages of the novel are heartbreaking and unexpected. Somehow this UK author of Kashmiri and British ancestry has written a scathing indictment of racism in America, approaching the topic in such an oblique way in the beginning that I was not prepared for the message when it came, and was not able to equivocate or hide from it.

Diane S ? says

3.5 Seth, our narrator is somewhat of a misfit, many are surprised when Carter, the son of a wealthy family, picks him to be his mate, best friend. They share a love of music, and both are avid collectors, though this collecting will soon turn into obsession when Seth, who takes to the streets to record street noises, records part of an old, unheard of song from a black man playing a chess match. Sparking a switch in Carter's brain, he starts searching for lost, blues music recorded from blacks, know by number, recorded on old 78's, and not easy to find.

A difficult book to review, it is innovative, imaginative and sometimes frustrating. It starts out innocuously enough, friendship, music, collecting but half way through morphs into something different, stranger shall we say. The past becomes the present, or the present becomes the past as we are taken back to the Jim Crow South. Has all this happened before? There are deaths that propel the novel forward. There is a musician

from years before, now dead, but feels the need to be heard. So things become muddled, everything mixing together but all surrounded by the music, the records, the blues. The black culture and their music being approbated by whites, a warning, a telling, a showing. The treatment of blacks in the old South, the obsession of collectors, a friendship between two different young men and a strange twist of fate, are all enfolded within this story.

Not for everyone, a challenging read but an interesting one. I liked it because it was something completely different from anything I have ever read.

ARC from publisher.

Jill says

What is the connection between the listener and the musician? Does it matter that one of you is alive and one is dead? And which is which?

In this brilliant new novel, Hari Kunzru explores these questions. The narrator, Seth, is a dweeby young man who is obsessed with recording sounds during his walks in New York City. One day he happens across an old chess player who is singing a haunting blues song that he can't get out of his mind. He brings the song to Carter, his bestie who comes from an obscenely rich family and has his own obsession with old blues 78s from the 1930s. Together, they "authenticize" the song, making it sound like it's the real deal from the birth of the blues, and "put it out there", driving collectors mad. In fact, they even name the blues singer: Charlie Shaw.

But did Charlie Shaw ever really exist? And if so, why is his ghost so unsettled and what unfinished business does he have? The novel veers from a paen to the blues to the mystery and ghost genres, as time becomes fluid and everything that's happening already happened. As the novel becomes more hallucinatory, the theme of cultural appropriation becomes clearer. One question says, "The anmes were traded by collectors, but no one seemed to know a thing about them. They were like ghosts at the edges of American consciousness... Things were hidden. Things got lost. Musicians got lost."

In an important way, the novel is about boundaries: the fluid boundary of time, the boundaries between musician and listener, the so-called living and the so-called dead, white and black, and the Side A and Side B of life (Side A is for the talented; Side B is just a joke for those who understand nothing). For a while, I admired the book enormously, but during the last 50 pages, the admiration turned into real love.

J. Kent Messum says

*Review originally published in the New York Journal Of Books: <http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-...>

There's a lot going on in White Tears . . . maybe too much.

The story starts off well. Two young white men meet in college and make a strong, but unlikely, connection through their shared love of music. Seth, from whose perspective the story is mostly told, is the low income antisocial kid who proves to be great at making equipment and recording with it, but little else. Carter, a

charming and handsome trust-fund kid, fancies himself a connoisseur focusing on African American music, the older the better. With Seth's studio talents hitched to Carter's money and music tastes, the pair embarks on a journey to create sonic art in New York City.

Seth spends his time walking around NYC with a hidden microphone/recorder, capturing busker performances and sampling the sounds of the street. Carter indulges in record collecting, searching out B-sides and rarities that the pair can mix into their productions. As they immerse themselves more in the music world, Seth becomes more focused, and Carter becomes more obsessed. They make a mock-up of an old blues song and credit it to a mystery musician that Carter invents named Charlie Shaw. Then they put the tune on the Internet and watch it disseminate, fooling every listener into thinking their song is a long lost gem from the South. For all the positive attention they receive, some bad hoodoo starts coming their way as well.

An old record collector claims Charlie Shaw is real and that the pair has unearthed a great danger. When they contact the elderly man and investigate his claims, tragedy soon strikes and a dark downward spiral into America's music history begins, one where abuse and theft ran rampant and the rightful futures of genius black artists were denied by racial barriers and widespread bigotry.

White Tears is definitely a book of two halves. The first half is enjoyable; great character building for the two mains, plus an exploration of the themes of wealth, privilege, class systems, and cultural appropriation.

However, midway through the novel changes gears and the second half suddenly becomes a vehicle for a paranormal-esque thriller/horror tale of revenge that hasn't been primed properly by the first half. As a result it often doesn't work very well. There is a shifting of perspectives as well as a shifting of time and place to try and achieve an unsettling back-story that parallels parts of the main story. Instead of tumultuous and disjointed, it comes off confusing and incomprehensible.

Within this pinball mechanism of a plot, the novel ricochets toward an end most readers won't see coming, but that has more to do with increasing incoherence and sudden revelations that come very late in the game. Our suspension of belief is sorely tested by weak plotting and messy mechanics.

Furthermore, on the surface it might seem that Kunzru has done his homework, but it becomes apparent that he has never been immersed in music to the degree that he should be writing so in depth about it. People in the music business will sense and spot faults in this novel; the weak grasp of audio engineering, incessant name-dropping, and what amounts to a scratching of the surfaces of studio, music, and production work. There are some interesting ideas, such as radio pioneer Guglielmo Marconi's theory that sound never actually dies (instead continuing on indefinitely, becoming forever quieter and drowned out by newer sounds), but it isn't enough to keep the idea behind Charlie Shaw's revenge afloat.

There's no denying that Kunzru can write. His prose has great flow, and the pace of his storytelling has a compelling urgency. Dialogue is mostly on the strong side, and he tackles some tough questions (and even harder answers). But the delivery of his message is heavy-handed and often poorly executed.

That being said, this book will receive much positive attention due to the author's pedigree and for taking on the tender subject matter of American cultural appropriation and racism, but that fact remains that this novel staggered under the weight of its own ambitions, and the narrative suffered from its own intentional confusion. When all is said and done, White Tears is a great book to get into . . . but not such a good one to get out of.
