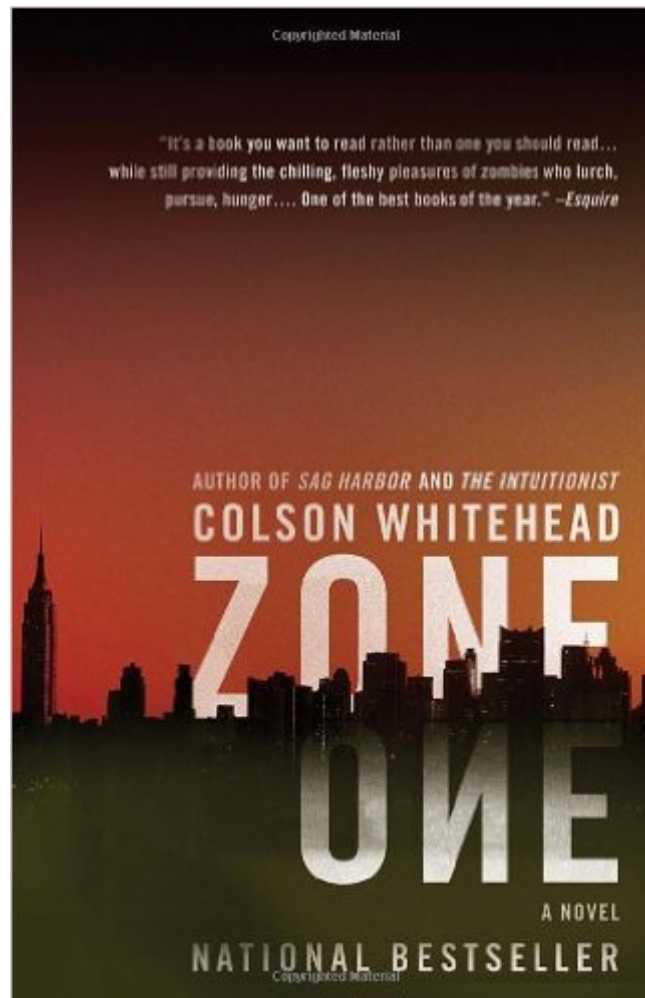


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Zone One



Synopsis

A pandemic has devastated the planet, sorting humanity into two types: the uninfected and the infected, the living and the living dead. After the worst of the plague is over, armed forces stationed in Chinatown's Fort Wonton have successfully reclaimed the island south of Canal Street—aka Zone One. Mark Spitz is a member of one of the three-person civilian sweeper units tasked with clearing lower Manhattan of the remaining feral zombies. Zone One unfolds over three surreal days in which Spitz is occupied with the mundane mission of straggler removal, the rigors of Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder (PASD), and the impossible task of coming to terms with a fallen world. And then things start to go terribly wrong. At once a chilling horror story and a literary novel by a contemporary master, Zone One is a dazzling portrait of modern civilization in all its wretched, shambling glory.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Did I like this book? Yes, actually. Instead of splatter, gore and terror, the author chose to think out (which seems to trouble some reviewers no end) what it would be like to try to live within a collapsed society, with a collapsed psyche and collapsed dreams. Instead of inventing heroic and invincible characters to slash and crash their way through hopeless situations, Whitehead's characters, each one flawed and vulnerable, bumble and stumble their way to another day of survival, which is how most real human beings are, after all. The idea of this zombie book was not to be like the other ones, but to work out daily life in which all norms have been shattered, and in which the common

and regular are - then as now - the pawns of the great and mighty. That said, Whitehead is this book's worst enemy. He takes every opportunity to show off his inventiveness, preen his considerable literary plumage and display his intimate acquaintance with the thesaurus. In playing with the narrative thread and timeline, sometimes just because he can, he adds unnecessary stress to what is not a terribly sturdy plot in the first place. Perhaps as he matures, he will write to make the story the thing instead of himself. If this book had 35% less exhibitionism and 30% more plot, it could have been a real showpiece. Instead, it is a pleasant, if sometimes tedious diversion written by an obviously talented, but all-too-self-indulgent author.

If like me you were excited to hear that a well-respected, intellectual author has ventured into the apocalypse genre, I should warn you, *Zone One* is not *The Road* (Oprah's Book Club). *The Road* had characters and a relationship that you could connect to and an engaging plot. *Zone One* has none of that. It has a main character whose most notable feature is his mediocrity, a few moments of mild suspense, and an unbearably tedious pace. It seems that the reviews for this book are distinctly divided. Fans of the zombie/apocalypse genre have offered some pretty scathing reviews and low ratings. Fans of "literary fiction" are giving it a bit more credit. I'm generally more aligned with the literary fiction readers, but I think the zombie fans have some legitimate criticisms. The main criticism against this book seems to be the lack of plot, and I can't disagree. A lot of the book is mildly amusing; it's just not very compelling. Even the (rare) engaging passages are frequently interrupted by reflections about the past, which significantly slow the pace. It took me about three times as long as it should have to finish the book, because I literally fell asleep within a few pages nearly every time I picked it up. Although there's little plot, the book's main character is somewhat interesting. He's survived a long time since the "Last Night." His survival, though, is not due to his courage, strength, or cleverness. He's completely average with the exception of his cockroach-like survival instinct. Although readers are unlikely to fall in love with Mark Spitz, he provides an amusing lens for this story.

I think Whitehead suffers from a problem which is all too common among those who hold their own intellect in the highest regard. He's boring, and he doesn't know it. He holds forth like an armchair philosopher at a dinner party while his audience is secretly hoping for another drink. He also apparently suffers from a complete lack of knowledge of humanity. Perhaps this is an unfortunate philosophical commitment on Whitehead's part. His characters are fixed, static, cesspools--they do not change; they do not learn; they do not grow. Perhaps he thinks this is the way in which all

people really operate. If so, I feel badly for him. Worse yet--a post-apocalyptic tale involving zombies (and involving even zombies that do not move or threaten harm) offers a wide range of philosophical and ethical issues with which to grapple. Somehow, the author misses most of these and chooses to focus on one issue--that the protagonist is mediocre and therefore somehow apt for the situation at hand. It's infuriating and ultimately demoralizing. John Gardner put it best: "Fiddling with the hairs on an elephant's nose is indecent when the elephant happens to be standing on the baby." I really wanted to like *Zone One*. I forced myself through to the end in the hopes that at some point it would move beyond mere character sketch and into the realm of story. It never did. This likely results from what I just mentioned--his characters never learn, change, or grow. If they did, this sketch would move towards story. In *Zone One*, Whitehead demonstrated that he can obviously write, but he cannot tell a story.

I would give a half star if I could. I have never reviewed a book before, but I just had to with this one. It just dawned on me that the book is a critique on the American lifestyle and bland social norms and ironically, we have all of the critics from magazine publishers and high minded newspapers giving this book good reviews. It is embarrassing. The book absolutely oozes with the author's presence and no plot presence. You can't even make the protagonist interesting? Not ONE interesting thing about Mark Spitz other than his name perhaps. It read with so many opportunities to create some excitement, only to fall into some verbose tangential languid (author's style here) soliloquys of rather extending proportions through ever winding dimensions of creative prose.... etc. etc. Don't buy this book unless you are having trouble sleeping.

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