Colson Whitehead tries his luck at the World Series of Poker: book review

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Special to The Oregonian By Special to The Oregonian

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THE NOBLE HUSTLE

Colson Whitehead

Doubleday, $24.95

234 pages

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

When the editor of Grantland magazine offered to pay his $10,000 entry fee for a seat at the World Series of Poker in exchange for an essay on his experiences, novelist Colson Whitehead, who has played penny ante poker since college, went all in. He read self-help texts by poker greats David Slansky, Doyle Brunson, and Dan Harrington, hired Helen Ellis, a WSOP veteran, as his coach, practiced in Atlantic City, and then made his way to Las Vegas.

In "The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky, and Death," Whitehead describes his "bizarre" adventure. A self-described "anhedonic personality" (who doesn't derive pleasure from activities usually found enjoyable), he tries, as so many before him have, to draw larger significances from the game – and his encounter with it. Alas, many of them are predictable. Sanctimony and self-regard, Whitehead writes, "are as American as smallpox blankets and supersize meals." The "mere fact of Las Vegas," its necessity to Americans "who shuffle under fluorescent tubes in offices" every day and dream of the Big Score at night, is "an indictment of our normal lives." And Whitehead concludes with a lesson he has learned since childhood: "do not hope for change, or the possibility of transcending your everyday existence, because you will fail."

That said, Whitehead redeems "The Noble Hustle" with a self-deprecatory and subversive tone that allows him to have just about everything both ways. At its best, his book is seriously, edgily funny. Helen, he hopes, will teach him about poker and life, as in one of those racial harmony movies he never watches, like "The Blind Side," where "a Southern white lady teaches a weirdo black guy how to use a fork" and the black man teaches her something in return. Whitehead has no idea, however, "what that would be." And when he reviews tactics and strategy at the poker table, he recommends picking your fights "like you pick your nose: with complete awareness of where you are."

Thanks to his coach and perhaps the pink flip-flop his kid designated as his good-luck charm, Whitehead makes it to Day 2 of the tournament. As his stack of chips dwindles, you get the feeling that for a moment at least he believes
that "the next card, the next card is the one that will save me."

It was not to be, of course. It is probably worth noting that when this citizen of Anhedonia, who knows that there's only one way to leave the table ("Absent of dignity, full of shame"), gets to the airport he buys a souvenir mug, a refrigerator magnet that looks like a flip-flop, and a bottle opener that reads "Win Lose or Draw." After all, Whitehead confesses, "I'm the sentimental type."

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