

## Nickel Boys [12A]

2024 USA 140 mins

UK release **3 January 2025**

Director **RaMell Ross**

Screenplay **RaMell Ross; Joslyn Barnes (book by Colson Whitehead)**

Cinematography **Jomo Fray**

Music **Scott Alario; Alex Somers**

Cast **Ethan Herisse (Elwood); Brandon Wilson (Turner); Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor (Hattie – grandmother); Daveed Diggs (adult Elwood); Hamish Linklater (Spencer); Fred Hechinger (Harper)**

An unwritten rule of cinema is that great books very rarely make great movies. It's not inevitable that a film adaptation of a literary classic will turn out to be a stinker, but plenty do: RaMell Ross's astonishing Nickel Boys is something else altogether. A version that is true to the book, honouring both its spirit and its structure, while also managing to be a genuinely groundbreaking cinematic work. This is a sublime piece of film-making.

The central character in the story is Elwood (Ethan Herisse), an early 1960s African American teenager in racially segregated Tallahassee, Florida. Raised by his doughty, loving grandmother Hattie (Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor), Elwood is on track for academic excellence. Although still a high school student, he has been accepted on to a programme of classes at a college in a neighbouring town. On his way to the first of these, fate deals a devastating blow. Elwood accepts a lift in a flash car but the vehicle is stolen and Elwood soon learns that his plea of being in the wrong place at the wrong time isn't going to cut any ice with the cops. He is shipped off to a state-run reform school, the Nickel Academy, where the brutality and cruelty experienced at the hands of the racist guards is mitigated, in part at least, by the close friendship he forms with another boy, Turner (Brandon Wilson).

It's a wrenching, enraging story. But what gives the film its savage potency is Ross's radical and daring formal approach. This is a picture that on a fundamental level demands that we relearn our way of looking. The most immediately striking of Ross's techniques is his decision to shoot the film almost entirely from the point of view of its two central characters, Elwood and Turner.

This POV device is disorientating at first, but it soon becomes clear just how effective it is. We experience the sickening challenge of the bullet-eyed stare of a white man locking on to the lens and looking for a reason to attack; we share Elwood's instinctive response, to drop his gaze to his shoes and avoid confrontation. In another bruising glimpse of casual discrimination, an elderly man with a smirk of triumph and the tacit backing of a cop prods his walking stick just below the camera lens and into Elwood's guts. Our glimpses of Elwood's face, caught in reflections in the polished chrome of an electric iron, or the glass of a shopfront, are treasurable moments.

The POV shooting style would not be nearly as effective, however, were it not for the quality of the craft elsewhere. The sound design, for example, is a delicate, intricate tapestry that is every bit as meticulously detailed as the production design. And the scrapbook collage of archive footage is crucial to the film's potency – a device that adds weight and context to the story, and which tightens the threads between timelines that extend almost up to the present day. A masterpiece.

**Wendy Ide**, *The Observer*, 5 January 2025 (abridged).

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