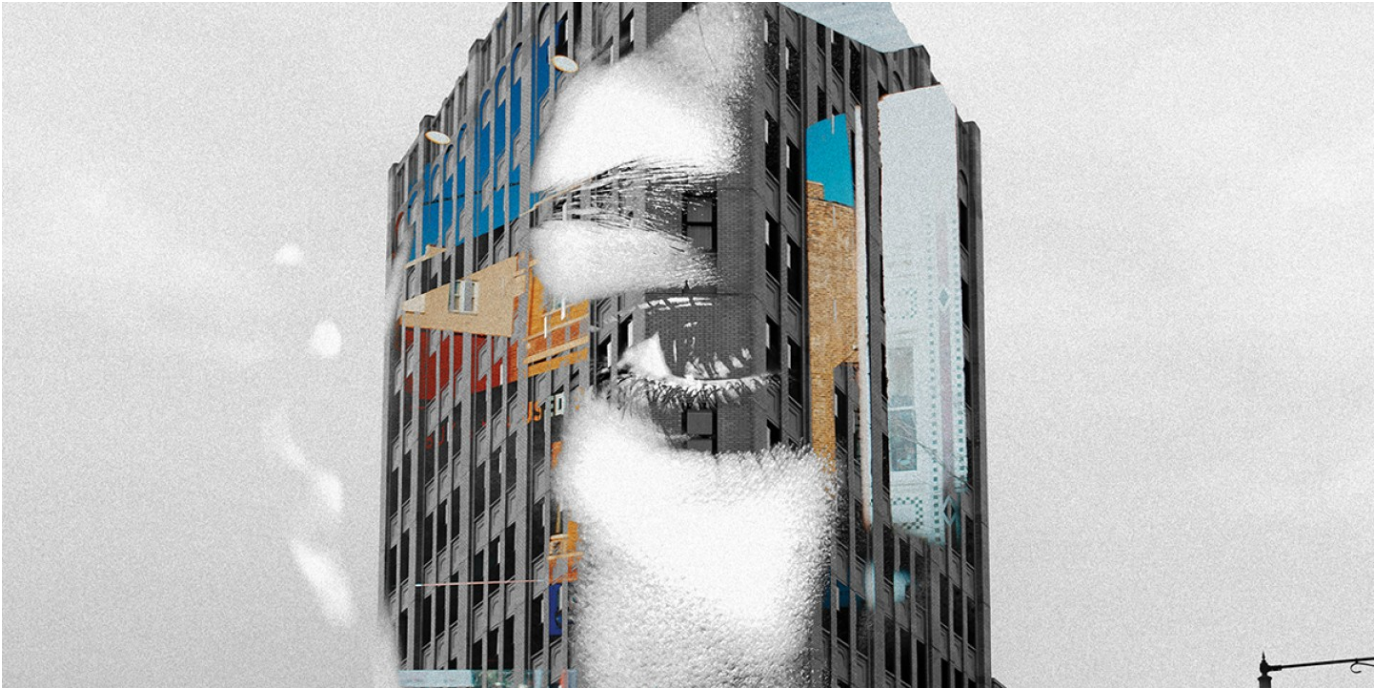


Does Nathan Hill wink at us in *Wellness*?

Why are non-White characters so absent from this urban/suburban narrative?

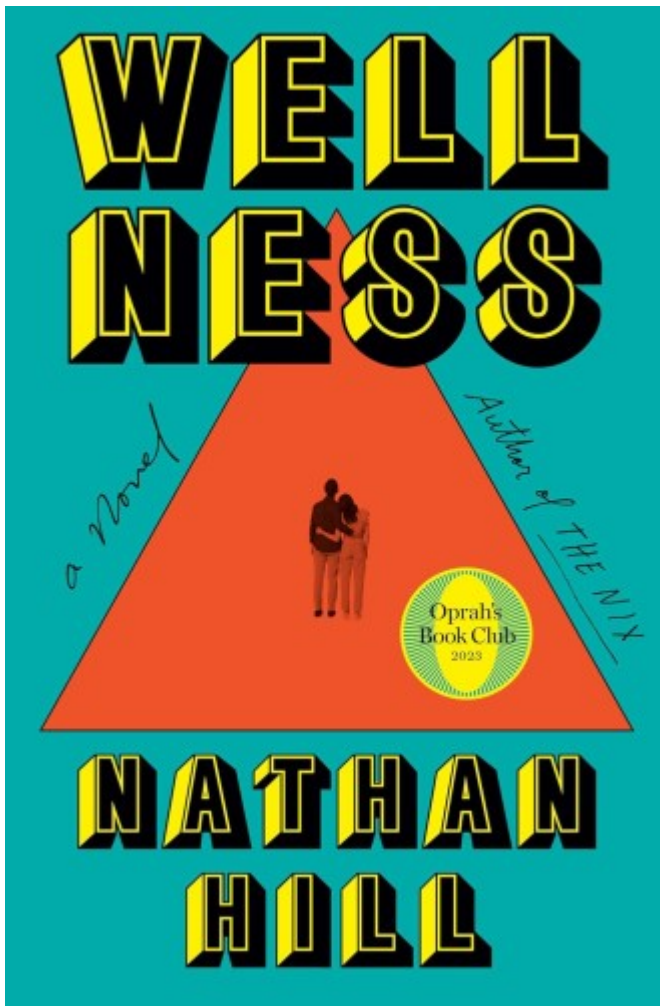
by [Ken Bigger](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

Published on October 8, 2024



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In Review



Wellness: A Novel

By Nathan Hill

Knopf

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

In his excellent debut novel, *The Nix*, Nathan Hill drops the trenchant and timely line: “It’s no secret that the national pastime is no longer baseball. Now it’s sanctimony.” Along with being accurate and hilarious, the line may be an invitation to humility and de-escalation in approaching the work of criticism.

I will take that invitation seriously as I explore a curious dimension of Hill’s sophomore effort, *Wellness*, which came out last fall. Pivotaly, Hill inserts a sly wink that none of the book’s initial reviews mentioned. This wink might be intended to provide an insight to the story outside the story, but it also holds the potential to flip

readers' sympathies. It either explodes the scope of the satire or transforms the work into a broader allegory on a kind of blindness.

Wellness, like any good novel, is not any one thing, or even about any one thing. It opens more than it closes, making it fiction rather than polemic. Its center is the love story of Jack Baker and Elizabeth Augustine, two young White people who move to Chicago to attend university. As the novel begins in the early '90s, Jack and Elizabeth join a wave of students and artists moving into the near northwest side neighborhood of Wicker Park. The origin story of their relationship is a quintessential meet-cute. The rest of the book explores the complicated interplay of myths, metaphors, and manipulations that lend meaning to their love story, marriage, parenting, and lives.

The title provides the focus of how most reviewers sum up the novel—as a satire of aspirational, positive-thinking wellness culture and the power of creative fictions in our lives. It is a turn of the millennium update of George Eliot's line in *Middlemarch*, “for we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them.” One crucial metaphor that entangles Elizabeth and Jack throughout the book emerges from their first meeting.

Hill's narrative mastery is clear, and the book is alternately hilarious and deeply moving as it goes back in time to the early life traumas that sent Jack and Elizabeth on their trajectories to Chicago. At face value, the story is a generally empathetic elaboration of a range of themes that simultaneously give our lives meaning and leave us feeling ridiculous—sometimes vaguely, sometimes acutely and painfully. Hill captures some hard and familiar truths about relationships and parenting. I finished the book feeling, in part, seen and broadened, validated and gently lampooned.

I also, however, finished the book feeling deeply unsettled, even irritated. Although *Wellness* held up a mirror to several elements of my experience, it felt as if I were peering into a funhouse mirror.

I moved to Chicago when Elizabeth and Jack did, although in my case it was for graduate school. Although I'm White like them, my family background was neither as outwardly privileged as Elizabeth's nor as challenged as Jack's. Unlike them, I moved to Woodlawn, a South Side community adjacent to Hyde Park—a neighborhood largely defined by the University of Chicago's midcentury “urban renewal” efforts.

These efforts created one of the few neighborhoods in Chicago with meaningful racial integration—although that success is generally thought to have been accomplished by moving most of the poor people out to Woodlawn and other surrounding neighborhoods.

Jack and Elizabeth move into Wicker Park apartments directly across from one another, from which they furtively survey each other's space and activities—building voyeuristic crushes on one another before they meet. Although many of Hill's references to the cultural aspects of that era in Chicago ring true to me, the city that Elizabeth and Jack move to is startlingly different from the one I moved to. Regardless of the composition of the actual community surrounding them, they effectively live in what one might call White Chicago. They occasionally wring their hands about gentrification, but the novel contains no moment when either of them—or any principal character—interacts substantively with an explicitly described person of color. That this is plausible in Chicago could well be part of Hill's satire.

Jack and Elizabeth largely focus their attention on themselves, both individually and as a couple. If they worry about their place in broader systems of cultural and structural racism, they appear to do so mostly out of a concern for how people view them, and with little effort to figure out what they should do about it. My point is not to argue that Hill styles Jack and Elizabeth as uncritical of their privilege, but rather to wonder what's going on in a story in which they never have to confront racial or ethnic differences in their personal lives. In the novel's 600 or so pages, only two pages involve a handful of non-White characters speaking.

However surprising it is that these two White characters living in a diverse, urban environment have no direct engagement with people of color, it is not necessarily a narrative sin on the author's part. Hill has the right to tell the story he needs to tell with the characters that make sense in it. The lack of visibility of non-White characters does not mean Hill is being racist or uncritically perpetuating White privilege, nor does it necessarily suggest that he's characterizing Jack and Elizabeth as especially racist. Although *Wellness* is about many things, it can't be about everything. I respect Hill's need to tell the story that emerges from his pen and restrain the novel to a manageable narrative scope.

Is the book's satire so thorough as to undermine—or even to poke fun at—the empathy I felt for the characters?

But Hill winks. He winks in a way that makes me think his choice is intentional. He winks in a way that potentially opens up a further dimension of the novel.

Without giving excessive spoilers, here is the wink: from Elizabeth's perspective, her relationship with Jack changes fundamentally at the end of a pivotal eight-day period in the fall of 2008, which the novel calls "The Unraveling." It begins (on October 28, readers can infer) with a comically mortifying, yet familiar, episode in which Elizabeth tries to manage their toddler's tantrum in a grocery store. The culmination happens one week later, on a Tuesday that Elizabeth later identifies as the day she stopped believing in the organizing fiction or original metaphor of her relationship with Jack. That date happens to be November 4.

Any reader from Chicago will likely recall what happened on that day. Tuesday, November 4, 2008, was the date that Barack Obama became the first Black person to win the popular election to the United States presidency. The biggest story in Chicago was his victory party in Grant Park—a party with countless satellite mini-parties across the city. Not everybody celebrated, to be sure, but it was socially the air Chicagoans breathed.

Wellness, however, does not mention it, nor have I seen any reviews that mention the significance of the date. Nothing in the plot compels Hill to pick November 4, 2008, for Elizabeth's personal revelation. It could have happened a day, week, month, or year later, maybe before. Yet I can't believe that Hill selected it arbitrarily or randomly.

This curiously specific choice of date compounded my irritation with *Wellness* as a story of White Chicago. Is Hill making fun of Elizabeth, or of the reader who doesn't catch the historical significance of the date, or both? Is the book's satire so thorough as to undermine—or even to poke fun at—the empathy I felt for the characters? I read the novel twice, and each time my irritation was mitigated by the deeply painful backstories that brought Jack and Elizabeth to each other. They won me over through their suffering. Still, something continued to nag at me.

At the end of my first reading of *Wellness*, I recalled only one explicitly described non-White character speaking in the entire book. When I reread the book, however, I

realized I was wrong. Five men, all unnamed Japanese survivors of Nagasaki in 1945, each speak the same single word (*mizu*, which means “water”) within five paragraphs in the short backstory of Elizabeth’s grandfather. That anecdote is part of the family’s larger history of financial exploitation, with greater or lesser degrees of embedded racism, of which Elizabeth is clearly ashamed. (That my memory initially compressed these five Japanese men into one character perhaps proves a larger point.)

It’s possible that figures elsewhere in the story may be people of color. However, Hill provides no concrete signifiers to that effect, and he frequently inclines to the contrary. Jonathan Lee, in his *Guardian* review, notes Hill’s odd tendency to describe people’s hair. This tendency may be a part of a disciplined commitment to White signifiers. In one scene, Elizabeth’s friend identifies other parents arriving to drop off their kids at the country day school where Jack and Elizabeth start sending their son as they prepare to move into their “forever home” in the fictitious (and likely much Whiter than Chicago) North Shore suburb of Park Shore. The list of names is persistently, almost comically Anglo-Saxon. It would have been easy for Hill to include names from a wider range of ethnicities, but he doesn’t. In any event, these folks don’t have anything to say in the story.

Why are people of color so absent from this urban/suburban narrative? Why does it seem like Hill almost goes out of his way to keep them out of view? And why would Hill then choose that November 4, 2008, date?

I’m led to wonder if Hill’s secret working title for the novel was not *Wellness* but *Whiteness*. Perhaps that is the true satire afoot here. Perhaps Hill is telling us, by not telling us, that all or most works of contemporary American literature are footnotes to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

Perhaps Hill is illustrating for us some dimensions of Whiteness’s pretense that one can carry on a human existence “not seeing color” or isolated from real repercussions of structural racism. I don’t know that non-White people ever have the luxury of such self-absorption and such pervasive avoidance of difference as emerge in the lives of Jack and Elizabeth. Hill might make artistic decisions along these lines if he doesn’t feel that he can relate encounters with characters of color with authenticity and integrity. But I suspect that’s not what he’s up to here—merely avoiding a tricky challenge of equitable representation. I think he’s braver than that. Hill has acknowledged that Elizabeth as a character was very difficult to write, but

he plunged across the boundary of gender difference with her and other characters in the book.

What are we to make then of November 4, 2008, being the date on which Elizabeth sheds the central belief that has guided her marriage? Might Hill's work migrate, through this choice of date, from the satirical to the allegorical? If we miss this reference, or we fail to notice the invisibility of non-White characters, is the satire on Jack and Elizabeth—or is it on us as readers? In one scene, Jack's art teacher tells him: "You don't need to paint every detail. . . . Try to provide a gap for the viewer's mind to cross." Within a novel about both the importance of beliefs and their inevitable collapse, perhaps the November 2008 date stands on the other side of a gap, inviting us to consider what other organizing beliefs, fictions, or self-understandings might have justifiably evaporated that Election Day.

For me, this enigma at the core of the narrative winds up slicing through almost every other theme. Some of the themes connect again, more or less intact, but others become Janus-faced, causing me to doubt whether any empathy I feel for the protagonists is justified. As I read Hill's narrative, I become both observer and subject of the satire, never entirely sure of that line. (I use the first person here deliberately; non-White readers may be clearer about where they stand relative to that line.)

None of us is perfect, and perhaps this is where Hill leads us: to realize that our meaning and our absurdity are bound up with each other, and to urge people to question what role their engagement with their neighbors—truly, diversely, and inclusively constituted—plays in that entanglement. We can sympathize with Jack and Elizabeth in their flaws, farces, and founding traumas, but the story that Hill doesn't tell also presses upon us the realization that those dimensions of these characters' lives exist within a false, if pervasive, pretense of separation, a bubble of Whiteness. What we do with that insight should continue to trouble us—ideally in productive rather than cynical ways.

Near the end of my second reading of *Wellness*, I read two other novels. The first, Donna Tartt's 1992 debut *The Secret History*, also tells an almost entirely White and privileged story, set at an elite liberal arts college in Vermont. Tartt's story, however, is not as jarring as Hill's in failing to account for racial diversity in its setting. It contains a more overt speaking role by a character of color objecting to the racist public speculation about the mystery at the heart of the novel. I don't believe that

novels that tell entirely or mostly White-populated stories are necessarily shirking their narrative duty in our current age. Hill, though, makes a peculiarly large number of choices throughout *Wellness* to keep people of color off the stage—particularly in light of the November 4 reference and the reality that personal encounters with people of other races would have been a realistic element in a story of two people moving to Chicago from rural and suburban homes. Again, I think Hill is giving us a space to leap across.

I started *The Secret History* on a flight to Oakland for a conference and finished it at the hotel there. I then picked up Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to begin on the flight back. In that book, it becomes rapidly clear that its Black protagonists, Leonie and Jojo, never have an option of moving through a world without racial and ethnic diversity, or indeed without racism.

The Oakland conference was called Literacy and Justice for All, sponsored by the Oakland Literacy Coalition. The opening speaker, Sabrina "Bri" Moore, a network supervisor for the Oakland Unified School District, told her story of learning to read at the age of 30. There are different forms of literacy, she explained, and "to live in a Black body requires you to learn to read the world." Indeed, the stakes of our life together in this country are such that the "literacies" of people and power dynamics provide no option to be in a bubble. Moore's story shows a contrast with the invented lives of Jack and Elizabeth, who don't have to be adept at reading the whole world and whose nonreadings or misreadings have much less severe consequences.

After I returned home from Oakland, I started reading Melvin L. Rogers's *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought*. Rogers articulates the importance of both the normative influence of the democratic people we aspire to become and the responsibility we have for the people we have been. Commenting on the second chapter of *Darkwater*, Rogers explains that for W. E. B. Du Bois, the proprietary model of whiteness—a model that shapes so much of the contemporary analysis of racial capitalism—is housed within an ethical-religious framework.

Whiteness is a religious worldview in the sense of providing those who inhabit it with idioms for constructing reality, ways of understanding their lives within it, and giving their lives purpose and meaning. "A nation's religion," Du Bois says, "is its life."

Rogers then lays out the stakes: “The insidious dimension of whiteness is that it depends, for its intelligibility, on the denial to others of the opportunity to fashion their own lives and communities.”

However successful Hill is in accomplishing the ambitions of *Wellness*’s central narrative, however much it helps us chart the modern human heart and the various absurdities of contemporary life, it is effectively a controlled experiment. The metaphors Elizabeth and Jack construct and deconstruct emerge as a function of the forms of racial privilege they inhabit, whatever their real and devastating personal challenges are.

Wellness is a story in which the White characters can plausibly, if artificially, navigate a world bereft of real encounters across certain dimensions of difference. The possibility of that kind of separation and cultural malnutrition represents an underlying delusion—a kind of disbelief we suspend at our own collective peril. Perhaps that’s part of what Hill is also trying to tell us. The novel’s whole meaning may be transformed by our recognition of a wink and a gap for our minds to cross.