

Elwood Curtis knows he is as good as anyone – growing up in 1960s Florida, he has taken the words of Dr Martin Luther King to heart. He is about to enrol in the local black college, determined to make something of himself. But given the time and the place, one innocent mistake is all it takes to destroy his future. Instead of embarking on a college education, Elwood arrives at the Nickel Academy, a segregated reform school claiming to provide an education which will equip its inmates to become ‘honorable and honest men’.

In reality, the Nickel Academy is a nightmarish upside-down world, where any boy who resists the corrupt depravity of the authorities is likely to disappear ‘out back’. Elwood tries to hold on to Dr King’s ringing assertion: ‘Throw us in jail, and we will still love you.’ But Elwood’s fellow inmate and new friend Turner thinks Elwood naive and worse; the world is crooked, and the only way to survive is to emulate the cruelty and cynicism of their oppressors.

When Elwood’s idealism and Turner’s scepticism collide, the result has decades-long repercussions. *The Nickel Boys* is a devastating, driven novel by a great American writer whose clear-sighted and humane storytelling continues to illuminate our current reality.