AUTHOR COLSON WHITEHEAD ’91 TO BE HONORED AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Pulitzer Prize-winning author will receive Harvard Arts Medal at April 26 ceremony hosted by John Lithgow, kicking off Harvard’s ARTS FIRST festival.

(Cambridge, MA)—Author and Pulitzer Prize-winner Colson Whitehead ’91 is the recipient of the 2018 Harvard Arts Medal, which will be awarded by Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust at a ceremony 4 p.m. Thursday, April 26, 2018, at Sanders Theatre, 45 Quincy St., Cambridge. The ceremony, which is presented by the Office for the Arts at Harvard and the Board of Overseers of Harvard College, is the official opening of ARTS FIRST, Harvard University’s annual festival showcasing student and faculty creativity in the arts. The medal ceremony includes a discussion with Whitehead moderated by actor John Lithgow ’67, ArD ’05.

Whitehead is the author of eight books (fiction and nonfiction) and his critical essays have appeared in such publications as The New York Times, The New Yorker, New York Magazine, Harper’s and Granta.

His blockbuster novel The Underground Railroad (2016) won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Carnegie Medal for Fiction, the Heartland Prize, the Arthur C. Clarke Award and was a #1 New York Times Bestseller. Oprah Winfrey picked the book for her Book Club 2.0, and President Barack Obama chose it for his summer reading list. It was also Best Book of the Year for The New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Newsday, GQ, Publisher’s Weekly, Esquire and Buzzfeed.

“Colson Whitehead is an extraordinarily imaginative writer whose award-winning works transcend boundaries and push the limits of storytelling into new and invigorating territory,” said President Faust. “We are excited to welcome him back to the University to bestow Harvard’s highest honor for artistic achievement.”

Whitehead is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Whiting Writers Award, the Dos Passos Prize and a fellowship at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. He has taught at the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, New York University, Princeton University, Wesleyan University and the University of Wyoming.

Whitehead’s genres are far-ranging – post-apocalyptic horror, mystery adventure, poetic riffs on urban life, an autobiographical coming-of-age story – but his literary approach is consistently imaginative and intellectual. The Underground Railroad depicts the horrors of
life on a Georgia plantation around 1850, and then follows its protagonist Cora on a suspenseful and dangerous journey North.

“Part of what we honor with any salutation of Colson Whitehead’s work after the release of *The Underground Railroad* is the power of culture to enlarge our notion of who counts, whose lives should be remembered and imagined in civic society. His work enacts a kind of representational justice,” said Sarah Lewis, Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Art and Architecture and the Department of African and African American Studies.

The Harvard Arts Medal honors a distinguished Harvard or Radcliffe graduate or faculty member who has achieved excellence in the arts and has made a contribution through the arts to education or the public good. Previous Medal recipients include photographer Susan Meiselas EdM ’71; visual artist and essayist Catherine Lord ’70; saxophonist/composers Joshua Redman ’91 and Fred Ho ’79; composer John Adams ’69 MA ’72; playwright Christopher Durang ’71; poets John Ashbery ’49 and Maxine Kumin ’41; cellist Yo-Yo Ma ’76; film director Mira Nair ’79; conductor and founder of Les Arts Florissants William Christie ’66; stage director Peter Sellars ’80; composer John Harbison ’60; National Theatre of the Deaf founder David Hays ’52; songwriter/musicians Bonnie Raitt ’72 and Pete Seeger ’40; and actors Jack Lemmon ’47, Tommy Lee Jones ’69 and Matt Damon ’92.

Whitehead joins two other novelists who are recipients of the medal: John Updike ‘54 and Margaret Atwood AM ’62.

“Margaret Atwood called *The Underground Railroad* a ‘must-read,’ and John Updike, in a 2001 review in *The New Yorker*, described the author as ‘scintillating,’ ‘strikingly original’ and ‘the young African American writer to watch,’” said Lithgow, who received the Harvard Arts Medal in 2017. “Colson Whitehead has exceeded even those laudatory expectations, making him an honoree who himself honors the Harvard Arts Medal.”

Admission to Harvard Arts Medal ceremony is free but tickets are required, available beginning in April in person at the Harvard Box Office at Farkas Hall, 10-12 Holyoke Street, Cambridge, or by calling 617.496.2222 or visiting www.boxoffice.harvard.edu (phone and online ticket orders are subject to service fees). Ticket distribution for Harvard affiliates (2 per person, with valid ID) begins Tuesday, April17; ticket distribution for the public (2 per person) begins Thursday, April 19. Some remaining tickets may be available at the door one hour prior to event start time.

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The Office for the Arts at Harvard (OFA) supports student engagement in the arts and integrates the arts into University life. Through its programs and services, the OFA teaches and mentors, fosters student art making, connects students to accomplished artists, commissions new work, and partners with local, national, and international constituencies. By supporting the development of students as artists and cultural stewards, the OFA works to enrich society and shape communities in which the arts are a vital part of life. The OFA’s Learning from Performers program brings to Harvard professional artists who interact with students through a range of educational forums, many open to the public. Information: 617.495.8676, ofa@fas.harvard.edu, ofa.fas.harvard.edu.