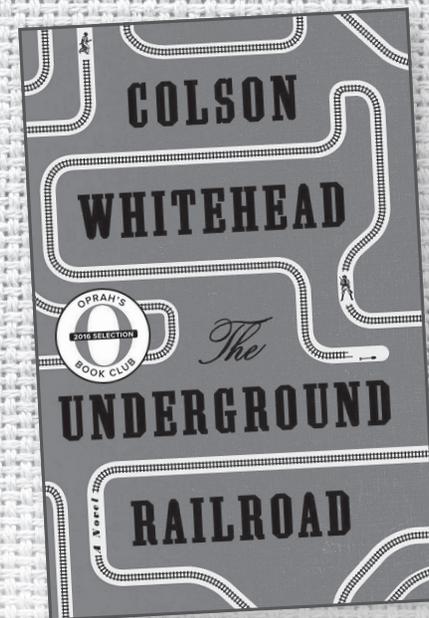


Discussion Questions

1. How does the depiction of slavery in *The Underground Railroad* compare to other depictions in literature and film?
2. The scenes on Randall's plantation are horrific — how did the writing affect you as a reader?
3. In North Carolina, institutions like doctor's offices and museums that were supposed to help "black uplift" were corrupt and unethical. How do Cora's challenges in North Carolina mirror what America is still struggling with today?
4. Cora constructs elaborate daydreams about her life as a free woman and dedicates herself to reading and expanding her education. What role do you think stories play for Cora and other travelers using the underground railroad?
5. "The treasure, of course, was the underground railroad ... Some might call freedom the dearest currency of all." How does this quote shape the story for you?
6. How does Ethel's backstory, her relationship with slavery, and Cora's use of her home affect you?
7. What are your impressions of John Valentine's vision for the farm?
8. When speaking of Valentine's Farm, Cora explains "Even if the adults were free of the shackles that held them fast, bondage had stolen too much time. Only the children could take full advantage of their dreaming. If the white men let them." What makes this so impactful both in the novel and today?
9. What do you think about Terrance Randall's fate?
10. How do you feel about Cora's mother's decision to run away? How does your opinion of Cora's mother change once you've learned about her fate?
11. Whitehead creates emotional instability for the reader: if things are going well, you get comfortable before a sudden tragedy. What does this sense of fear do to you as you're reading?
12. Who do you connect with most in the novel and why?
13. How does the state-by-state structure impact your reading process? Does it remind you of any other works of literature?
14. The book emphasizes how slaves were treated as property and reduced to objects. Do you feel that you now have a better understanding of what slavery was like?
15. Why do you think the author chose to portray a literal railroad? How did this aspect of magical realism impact your concept of how the real underground railroad worked?
16. Does *The Underground Railroad* change the way you look at the history of America, especially in the time of slavery and abolitionism?

Book Club in a Bag



“The Underground Railroad reanimates the slave narrative, disrupts our settled sense of the past and stretches the ligaments of history right into our own era ...”

Ron Charles – Washington Post



The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

Summary

A magnificent tour de force chronicling a young slave's adventures as she makes a desperate bid for freedom in the antebellum South.

Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. Life is hell for all the slaves, but especially bad for Cora; an outcast even among her fellow Africans, she is coming into womanhood—where even greater pain awaits.

When Caesar, a recent arrival from Virginia, tells her about the Underground Railroad, they decide to take a terrifying risk and escape.

Matters do not go as planned—Cora kills a young white boy who tries to capture her. Though they manage to find a station and head north, they are being hunted.

In Whitehead's ingenious conception, the Underground Railroad is no mere metaphor—engineers and conductors operate a secret network of tracks and tunnels beneath the Southern soil. Cora and Caesar's first stop is South Carolina, in a city that initially seems like a haven.

But the city's placid surface masks an insidious scheme designed for its black denizens. And even worse: Ridgeway, the relentless slave catcher, is close on their heels. Forced to flee again, Cora embarks on a harrowing flight, state by state, seeking true freedom.

Like the protagonist of *Gulliver's Travels*, Cora encounters different worlds at each stage of her journey—hers is an odyssey through time as well as space. As Whitehead brilliantly re-creates the unique terrors for black people in the pre-Civil War era, his narrative seamlessly weaves the saga of America from the brutal importation of Africans to the unfulfilled promises of the present day.

The Underground Railroad is at once a kinetic adventure tale of one woman's ferocious will to escape the horrors of bondage and a shattering, powerful meditation on the history we all share.

Discussion questions are on the back ...



Author: Colson Whitehead

- Birth—November 6, 1969
- Where—New York City, New York (USA)
- Education—B.A., Harvard University
- Awards—PEN/Oakland Award; Whiting Writers Award
- Currently—Lives in Brooklyn, New York City, New York

Colson Whitehead is a New York-based novelist and nonfiction works. He was born and raised in New York City, attending Trinity, a private prep school, in Manhattan. He graduated from Harvard College in 1991.

Teaching and Writing

He has taught at Princeton University, New York University, the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, Wesleyan University, and been a Writer-in-Residence at Vassar College, the University of Richmond, and the University of Wyoming.

In the spring of 2015, he joined *The New York Times Magazine* to write a column on language.

Honors

He has received a MacArthur Fellowship, A Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writers Award, the Dos Passos Prize, and a fellowship at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers.

Adapted from the author's website and Wikipedia. Retrieved 9/6/2016.

Books

After leaving college, Whitehead wrote for *The Village Voice* and while there began working on his novels. His first, *The Institutionalists*, published in 1999, concerned intrigue in the Department of Elevator Inspectors, and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway and a winner of the Quality Paperback Book Club's New Voices Award.

Next came *John Henry Days* in 2001. The novel is an investigation of the steel-driving man of American folklore. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. The novel received the Young Lions Fiction Award and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

The Colossus of New York followed in 2003. A book of essays about the city, it is a meditation on life in Manhattan in the style of E.B. White's well-known essay "Here Is New York." *Colossus* became a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

Apex Hides the Hurt, released in 2006, centers around a fictional "nomenclature consultant" who gets an assignment to name a town. The book earned Whitehead the PEN/Oakland Award.

Sag Harbor, set in 1985, follows a group of teenagers whose families (like Whitehead's own) spend the summer in Sag Harbor, Long Island. Published in 2009, the novel was a finalist for both the PEN/Faulkner award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. In 2010 came *Zone One*, a post-apocalyptic story set New York City.

In 2014 Whitehead published his second work of nonfiction, this one about the 2011 World Series of Poker—*The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky & Death*. Two years later, in 2016, his novel *The Underground Railroad*, was released. Widely acclaimed, many critics agree that it is destined to become an American masterpiece.

In addition to his books, Whitehead's reviews, essays, and fiction have appeared in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *New York Magazine*, *Harper's* and *Granta*, and others.