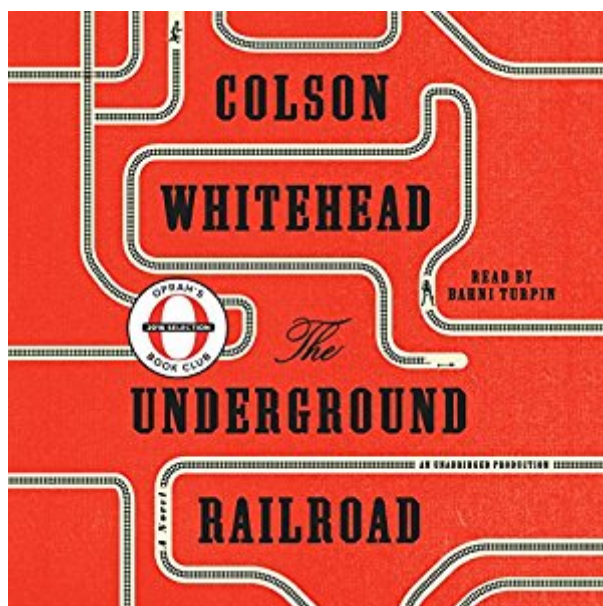


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The Underground Railroad (Oprah's Book Club)



Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize, Fiction, 2017 The Newest Oprah Book Club 2016 Selection From prize-winning, bestselling author Colson Whitehead, 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I chose this book, frankly, because Oprah chose it for her book club. As a lower middle class white child, educated in the '60's, I was well aware of the segregated south, but I had no idea the depth of the degradation and depravity of what people of color had endured in this country. The land of the free, home of the brave.....unless you were a person of color. Kidnapped from your village in Africa, sold into bondage.....IF you had survived the arduous journey from the Dark Continent to the Americas. Seeing your heritage stripped from you, as surely as your dignity and humanity as you stood on the auctioneers' block. Bearing children, only to see them torn from you to satisfy your master's debts. I am sure that these atrocities were part of my education, but this novel brings them more to the forefront than any textbook ever did. Even my college textbooks were circumspect in their description of man's inhumanity to man. For example, I did not know that all abolitionists were not involved in the underground railroad for purely altruistic reasons. Some actually used the newly "freed" slaves for medical research, delivering them from one sort of subhuman bondage to another. This book is a real Eye-opener for anyone educated in the public school system. Our textbooks did NOT tell the whole story. This novel gives a glimpse into the hardships and injustices we really never grasped in our American History class. An easy, if unsettling, read for this white girl!

If all Colson Whitehead's remarkable *The Underground Railroad* had to offer was its central conceit in which the Underground Railroad, a covert, loose organization that worked to help slaves in the Confederacy get to freedom, becomes a literal subterranean rail network that might almost be enough to capture the imagination and make the book great. Because, in short, what this allows Whitehead to do is tell an age-old story the efforts of a runaway slave to escape in a way that feels like little else out there, bringing new life to a story that none of us can ever afford to forget. It's a minor tweak to reality, but it gives the story a unique, odd feel, making literal the astonishing work that went into saving these people. So, yeah, that might be enough. But luckily for us all, Whitehead has more on his mind than just that one conceit. Instead, Whitehead turns this flight for freedom into a modern day Odyssey, letting each stop along the way become an entirely different narrative in the life of slavery, America's race relations, prejudice, and fear. And the result is a sprawling, strange, haunting novel, one whose separate episodes combine to make something far more fascinating and complex than any one story might have been able to do on its own. For instance, a more traditional

slave escape narrative could never contain the subtly wrong paradise that feels at first like heaven on Earth, only to have Whitehead slowly turn that world on its head. You wouldn't have the nightmarishly violent community that has purged itself of African-Americans in the most horrific way possible; nor would you have the beauty of acts of kindness that come when least expected. In Whitehead's capable hands, the journey becomes a more complex one, echoing back and forth through time as he takes on racism not just as an explicit force of slavery, but as a much more insidious, subtle evil that can hide behind people's smiles. In other words, it's not just the slave catchers we need to fear; it's those for whom help means condescension and manipulation. Make no mistake, though; this is undeniably a book about slavery, and one that deals with the horrors of the institution without blinking or flinching. Violence is casual and brutal, with torture being commonplace and almost barely worthy of mention. And while our heroine's plantation is known for its cruelty, that doesn't mean that it's any more cruel than half of what she sees in her journeys. Whitehead doesn't allow us the luxury of thinking this place is the worst; it's just a particularly bad one, but nothing special. And even if it were somehow worse, it barely compares to some of the psychological and emotional horrors to come, and the wanton cruelty and disregard that we see on display throughout the book. And yet, for all of that, *The Underground Railroad* is still a slave escape narrative, one in which we're invested in our heroine's success, and one that keeps us reading in the face of all of the potential horrors, hoping for something good. Whitehead never lets *The Underground Railroad* become crushing or so bleak as to be unpalatable; he tempers it, mixing the good and the bad, and investing us in the characters so that we need them to succeed and feel it all the more when some of them don't. In other words, *The Underground Railroad* is something remarkable—a look at history that finds its truth through fiction, a dose of magical realism that serves to emphasize hard facts, a novel that explores ideas that many of us wish we had left in history. That it does all this is no small feat; that it does so in such a complex, powerful way without ever becoming didactic or simplistic, even less of one. But the fact that it manages to do all of that while still telling a gripping, exciting story? That's what makes it such an incredible novel, and worthy of its reputation.

LOVED THIS. So in full transparency, I was skeptical about it, because as a U.S. history major, I have read so many books about slavery, I just wasn't sure what Whitehead could possibly do that would be fresh, enthralling, unique to the genre and subject matter. Let me tell you something. I was up late, gripping this book, white knuckling it if you will. There were times when I was terribly afraid

for the protagonist and my heart was pounding wildly as she faced any number of situations. I would have to put it down, and think, this isn't even real! The thing is, though the premise is imaginary, clearly slavery was not. Being a young black woman, this hit close to home. What if this was me? Would I have been strong enough to stay focused and calculating. Would I have been picked as an ideal partner to escape with? The end is strong, though absolutely infuriating in some aspects. I realize this was done intentionally, as ultimately this isn't Disney so you're not supposed to close with the happily ever after. I'd strongly suggest this novel if you're looking for a powerful read.

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