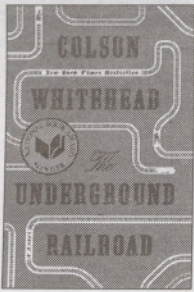


A horrific journey to the bottom of our soul



"The Underground Railroad" by Colson Whitehead

BY ELLIOTT BRONSTEIN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The Underground Railroad is bigger than its operators — it's all of you, too. The small spurs, the big trunk lines."

Then Colson Whitehead was a child, he thought the Underground Railroad was an actual train that ran underground. Funny how those childhood confusions stick around. Decades later, the author of "The Intuitionist" and a MacArthur Fellow returned to that childhood fantasy to tell a fable of life in hell.

There's a once-upon-a-time quality to the novel's opening pages, as Whitehead guides us through the initial back story of a woman named Ajarry sold in Ouidah by Dahomeyan raiders in the late 1800s. Soon — several decades and a few pages later — we are deep inside an American slave compound, a timeless succession of miseries meted out by white slave owners and the people who work for them.

We meet 15-year-old Cora, the granddaughter of Ajarry, daughter of Mabel, who disappeared on a run for freedom when Cora was 11. Now Cora is a stray, living in the Hob, a shack for damaged women. More unspeakable miseries, a morass of depravity. And then when Cora is 15, she makes a run for it, too, with a man named Caesar. "The Underground Railroad" is Cora's story, as she travels from Georgia to the Carolinas, from Tennessee to Indiana, pursued by the implacable slave patroller, Ridgeway. Ridgeway pursues Cora to ease his failure to snare Cora's mother, who vanished, possibly, into the North and freedom.

The novel's hook — the twist that makes anyone who hears it want to pick it up and start reading — is that in this parallel universe of the past, the Underground Railroad is real: just like in Whitehead's

young dream, actual locomotives and flat cars rattle deep underground through endless tunnels, tunnels pulsing northward like arteries under the brown skin of the American heartland.

The Underground Railroad that Cora rides is only there to take her in the general direction of a safe place that she and all other travelers have to take on faith — since no one ever returns to confirm it exists. Whitehead makes us see and feel what it's like to be hunted and chased across an unfamiliar country with few roads, no maps and never knowing whom to trust — or rather, knowing you can't trust anyone.

And the stops and turns along her way unfold like successive rooms in an open-air House of Horrors. There's no turning away from the violence and the threat, the tension of anticipated violence, like the opening scene in Quentin Tarantino's "Inglourious Basterds" or Joe Pesci in "Goodfellas." There's no turning away because the horror is in every direction, including the North.

What makes the novel work so well, what keeps you reading, is Whitehead's deft characterization and heart-stopping explanations. Listen to this:

"Round white faces like an endless field of cotton bolls, all the same materials."

"Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth."

"It was still the south, and the devil had long nimble fingers."

"The other patrollers were boys and men of bad character; the work attracted a type. In another country they would have been criminals, but this was America."

Whitehead's writing bubbles over with small, strong touches like these. His voice fills in a delicate detail to help you see the story as real, but at the same time reminding you that this is a made-up tale written by a hardcore dude.

And this:

"Unstoppable racial logic. If niggers were supposed to have their freedom, they wouldn't be in chains. If the red man was supposed to keep hold of his land, it'd still be his. If the white man wasn't destined to take this new world, he wouldn't own it now. Here was the true Great Spirit, the divine thread connecting all human endeavor — if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent. The American imperative."

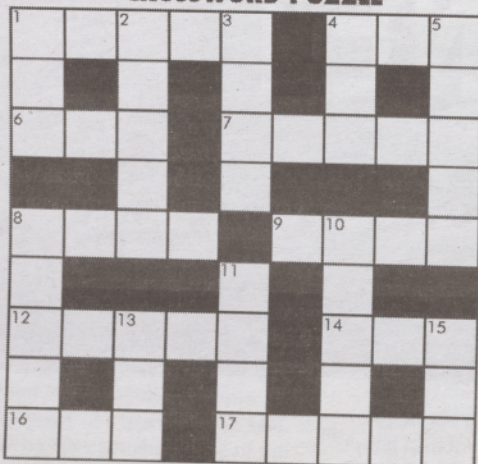
Cora's journey also takes her to a black-run farm in rural Indiana, an isolated haven from oppression, where she receives a glimpse of what life could be like if malevolence were not actively stalking them. Here the newly assembled group debates their age-old questions: to isolate themselves as a community or to trust in relations with the white townspeople.

You probably want to know what happens next: Does the farm survive? Do Cora and Caesar make it North? Is Cora's mother, Mabel, there to greet them? Does Ridgeway earn the death he deserves? Is fictional justice served? Can we dream of a happy ending?

Well, you know I can't tell you that; you'll just have to take the trip yourself. And if you're white like me, be prepared to see yourself as the villain of the story. On this planet, we're Darth Vader. In this holocaust, we're sieg heiling the Führer. It's taken a while, but many of us are finally starting to comprehend the enormity of what happened and what keeps happening in and beneath this crazy land of ours. "The Underground Railroad" has tracks and tunnels pretty much everywhere now. We'd best get on board.

Courtesy of Street Roots sister paper Real Change News, Seattle.

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ACROSS

1. Fermentation agent
4. Have a bite
6. Tree fluid
7. Cake ingredient
8. Three-ply cookie
9. Hook's henchman
12. Ground grain
14. The gift of ___
16. Tease or ridicule
17. Francis or Kevin?

DOWN

1. Affirmative!
2. Type of fritter
3. Analyze or try
4. Cake ingredient
5. Tres
8. Deal
10. Potter's practice
11. Nosh!
13. Late rapper; abbr.
15. ___ appétit



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