

## Author Spotlight

# COLSON WHITEHEAD



Colson Whitehead is the author of *The Nickel Boys* (2019), *The Underground Railroad* (2016), *Zone One* (2011), *Sag Harbor* (2009), *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), *John Henry Days* (2001), *The Intuitionist* (1999), a collection of essays—*The Colossus of New York* (2003) and a non-fiction book—*The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky & Death* (2014). He was born in 1969, and was raised in Manhattan. After graduating from Harvard College, he started working at the *Village Voice*, where he wrote reviews of television, books, and music. His reviews, essays, and fiction have appeared in a number of publications, such as the *New York Times* and *Harper's*. 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. He lives in New York City.

A work of historical and speculative fiction, *The Underground Railroad* won numerous awards including the 2017 Pulitzer Prize, the 2016 National Book Award, and the 2017 Carnegie Medal for Fiction. The book became a #1 *New York Times* Bestseller, was picked by Oprah for her book club, President Obama chose it for his summer reading list, and it was a Best Book of the Year for the *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsday*, *GQ*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Esquire*, and *Buzzfeed*.

The novel chronicles a young slave, Cora, and her adventures as she makes a desperate bid for freedom in the antebellum South. Cora is a slave on a hellish plantation owned by a cruel master. 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 by Ridgeway, a relentless slave catcher. 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 is close on their heels. Forced to flee again, Cora embarks on a harrowing flight, state by state, seeking true freedom.

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 encounters different worlds at each stage of her journey—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.

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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Source: [www.colsonwhitehead.com](http://www.colsonwhitehead.com) and [www.litlovers.com](http://www.litlovers.com)



## Discussion Questions for *The Underground Railroad*

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 the 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 Mabel'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?

Source: [www.readinggroupguides.com](http://www.readinggroupguides.com)



## **Fiction Readalikes for *The Underground Railroad***

*Alex Haley's Queen: The Story of an American Family* by Alex Haley

*The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume 1: The Pox Party* by M.T. Anderson (shelved in Young Adult collection)

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison

*The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James

*Cane River* by Lalita Tademy

*Chasing the North Star* by Robert Morgan

*The Coming* by Daniel Black

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron

*Edenland* by Kathleen Wallace King

*An Extraordinary Union* by Alyssa Cole

*A Free State* by Tom Piazza

*The Good Lord Bird* by James McBride

*Grace* by Natasha Deón

*The Healing* by Jonathan Odell

*Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler

*The Kitchen House* and sequel *Glory Over Everything* by Kathleen Grissom

*The Known World* by Edward P. Jones

*The Mapmaker's Children* by Sarah McCoy

*Slave Old Man* by Patrick Chamoiseau

*Sweetsmoke* by David Fuller

*Thomas Jefferson Dreams of Sally Hemings* by Stephen O'Connor

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe

*Underground Airlines* by Ben Winters

*Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan

*The Wedding Gift* by Marlen Suyapa Bodden

*Wench* by Dolen Perkins-Valdez

Note: check the library's catalog for availability—books are shelved under the author's last name in the young adult or adult fiction collections.

