



The Underground Railroad Reading Group Guide

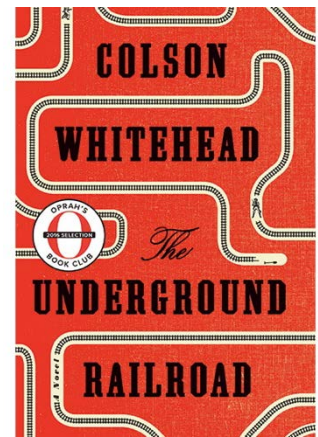
Dive into this month's *Conscious Conversation* with these questions about Colson Whitehead's novel.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your group's discussion of *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

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.



The Underground Railroad Discussion Topics

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? Do you see similar challenges within your own community?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. Does *The Underground Railroad* change the way you look at the history of America, especially in the time of slavery and abolitionism?
7. 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?
8. 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?

AFTER YOUR CONVERSATION

We would love to hear about your conversation. If you would like to share any of your discussion notes, comments or photos with Legacy Foundation, please send them to mfishback@legacyfdn.org.