



TEEN SERVICES COMMUNITY SERVICE TEEN BOOK REVIEW

The Underground Railroad By Colson Whitehead Reviewed by Jacob Vanlue

Name: Jacob Vanlue

Grade: 10

Book Title: The Underground Railroad

Author: Colson Whitehead

Number of Pages: 320

Rating (on a scale of 1-5): 5/5

Character List:

- **Cora** – Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia and is an outcast even among her fellow slaves. She has been through hell and back being beaten, raped, worked to sickness, and even watching fellow slaves be beaten to death. As she comes into womanhood, even greater struggles await.
- **Caesar** – A new arrival slave from Virginia who helps Cora plan, and succeed (mostly) in escaping.
- **Ridgeway** – Ridgeway is the novel's protagonist. With a necklace made of human ears on his assistant, his authority and psychopathy are not to be questioned. This notorious slave catcher is after Cora and will seemingly rest at nothing to prevent her from reaching freedom.

Review:

Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. Life is a living hell for all of the slaves. Being abandoned by her mother and having lost her grandmother, when approached by Caesar, a recent arrival from Virginia, with the idea of escaping, Cora cannot resist. Matters, of course, do not go as planned however. A young white boy tries to capture Cora and she ends up killing him. Although Cora and Caesar have managed to find a station on the Underground Railroad and head north, they are being hunted and making it to their destination alive is harder than ever. Travelling through the two Carolinas, Tennessee, and Indiana, Cora is exposed to the evil brought out in everyone by the poisonous mechanics of slavery.

In this novel, it is made clear that Whitehead's writing skills are impeccable. In his ingenious conception you will be surprised you didn't think of yourself, he portrays the Underground Railroad as a literal railroad with stops and trains chugging along. Whitehead is able to re-create the terrors faced by his ancestors of the pre-Civil War era in his seamless narrative. The secret network of underground trains beautifully shows the magnitude of what escaping slaves were able to hide and the variability of their arrivals and destinations show the desperation and variability in the slaves lives. A book that allows us to better understand the past of our society through fresh and immensely powerful eyes, *The Underground Railroad* is a must read for all.

Despite its target audience being those of a more mature nature, *The Underground Railroad* is certainly a novel that can be read and appreciated by teen readers. Being a teenager myself, I enjoyed the book immensely. The character Cora is

one who is just coming into adulthood and is at an age that is relatable to teens. Her emotional struggles and life struggles, however, cannot even be fathomed by most modern day millennials. This great divide between life situations allows teenagers to put their problems into perspective and appreciate the life that they have been given more. This book is also one with an extremely powerful message that goes far deeper than Cora and her story specifically. As many as 100,000 African American slaves are believed to have escaped to freedom along the Underground Railroad between 1800 and 1865. This number is incredible and one that should certainly be noted. This means that there is a great chance that somewhere in an African American teen's lineage, there is a grandparent or great-grandparent who made this journey and the teen or their friends might not even know - but they should. To better understand the racism and social issues that still arise today for African Americans, teenagers should gain as much insight as possible into where this racial divide stems from. *The Underground Railroad* is a tale that is about so much more than just the Underground Railroad specifically, but slavery and segregation as a whole and it tells on this issue phenomenally.