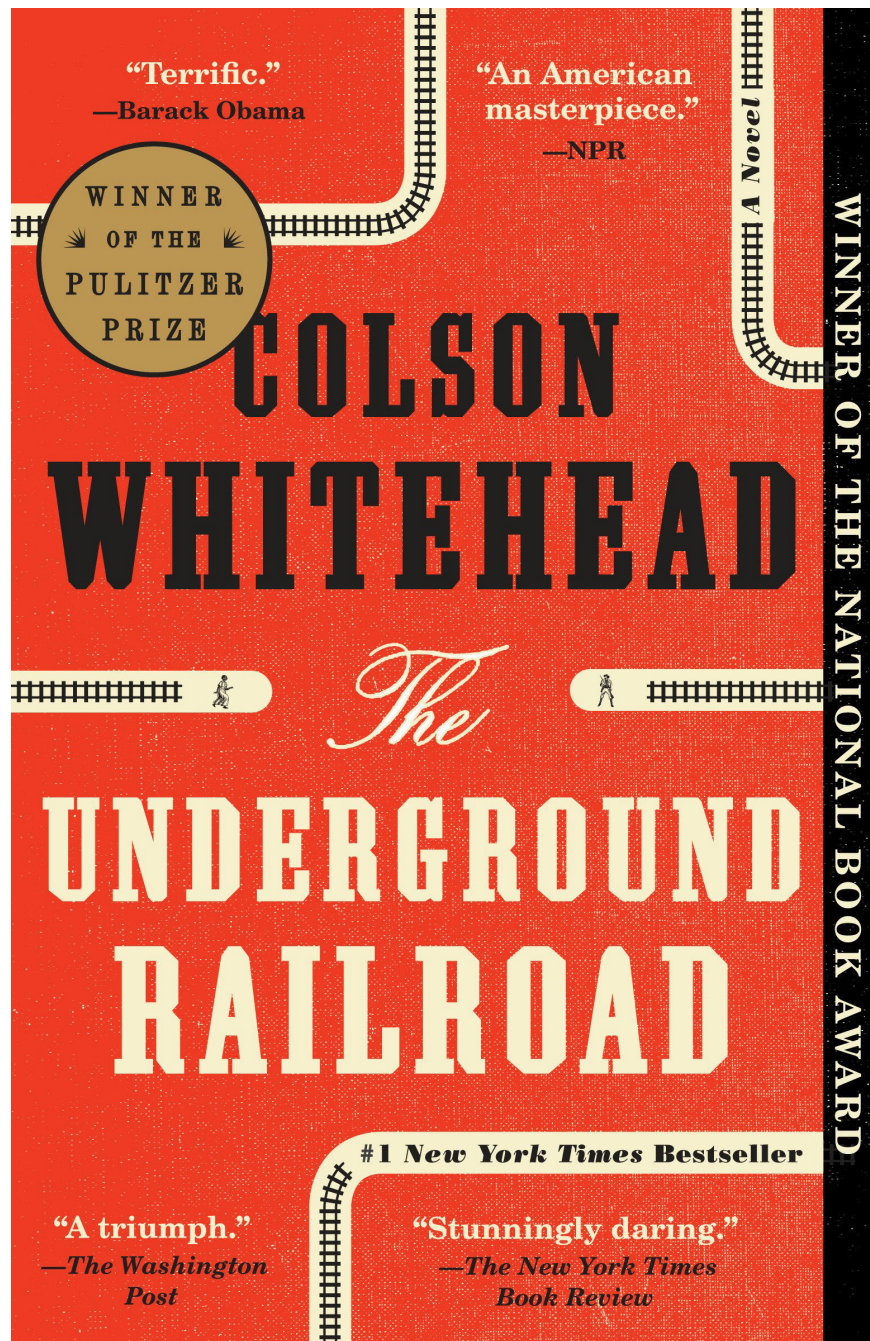
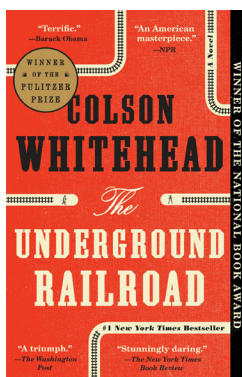


We the People Book Club

# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

## Reading Guide





In so many ways **THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD** (Doubleday) explores themes similar to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Its conflict arises out of a theft, in this case a historically earlier and even more unjustifiable theft: thousands of human beings stolen from Africa. Manifest in the system of chattel slavery, this theft multiplied, depriving each new generation of freedom, home, identity and, too often, family. Manifest in racism, the theft became a living thing, a way of thinking that justified perpetual theft and produced the monster of “whiteness.” In *The Underground Railroad* we trace a system that is intentionally dehumanizing and inexhaustible in its ability to reinvent cruelty. These shadows of democracy follow the characters of *The Underground Railroad* as they travel north, west, and throughout history.

This is an alienation even more confounding than the Joads’, and it gives rise to a resilience equally striking: the spirit in Whitehead’s protagonist, Cora, tested from birth, never extinguishes.

Readers, critics, and educators immediately recognized that *The Underground Railroad* was an important and timely innovation to the literary tradition of the slave narrative. Its publication date was moved up because Oprah, having read an advance copy, had already picked it for her book club! It became a #1 New York Times Bestseller. Educators recognized the usefulness of a novel that “updated” the content and style of the genre, presenting a more nuanced understanding of slavery’s long-term effects and using language more accessible for adolescents than that of canonical works like *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* or Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

*The Underground Railroad* received the National Book Award for fiction in 2016; it then won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction in 2017. It was also longlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

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## About This Book Club Reading Guide

This guide was researched and written by Julia Davis, a 2018 - 2019 Practicing Democracy Fellow. It includes background on Colson Whitehead and *The Underground Railroad*, an overview of the story, and observations on the literary structure of the novel. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel’s democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

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## Background

Colson Whitehead was born in 1969 and grew up in Manhattan. After graduating from Harvard University in 1991, he became a journalist. He published his first novel in 1999 and has since produced a handful more in addition to two works of non-fiction.

Whitehead first had the idea for *The Underground Railroad* in 2000, but the timing did not feel right for the psychologically and intellectually demanding task. The timing did seem right in 2014, and he started composing the novel.

Whitehead's timing may not have been planned, but events conspired to create an audience hungry for a novel about the nation's original sin and its many reincarnations. Nonfiction works such as *The New Jim Crow* (2010), *Just Mercy* (2014), and *Between the World and Me* (2015) and films like *13th* persuasively argued that slavery had not so much ended as changed. Each of these works reached a diverse audience; the books all became bestsellers.

The year Whitehead decided to tackle the challenge of *The Underground Railroad* was also the year that Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri. The nation's attention turned outward to the protests and inward to a reckoning. The publicity conferred on this shooting created an audience for subsequent stories of police violence. (Police brutality has been consistent for African Americans, but media attention has waxed and waned.) National coverage of excessive use of force against black citizens became widespread across media platforms, including social media. For years after, there seemed to be another Michael Brown on the news or the newsfeed each evening: the tragic deaths of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and tens of other black victims.

The public seemed to need this book, and it did not disappoint. *The Underground Railroad* provided readers a fictional way of challenging the idea that slavery is in the past. It asks us to see and to consider the subtle propositions made by a "slave narrative" that does not comfortably present itself as a "historical novel."

## Overview

Set around 1850, *The Underground Railroad*, tells the story of Cora, a Georgia slave whose mother Mabel ran away from the plantation, rendering young Cora a "stray" who has to fend for herself in the fields and in the slave quarter. One day a young man named Caesar approaches her with a plan: escape to the underground railroad, which has opened a station in Georgia.

Caesar is not like Cora. Raised with his family in Virginia by a woman who promised to emancipate them in her will, Caesar grew up believing another life was possible for him. Though his mistress lied about the will and her executor sold the family south, separating them, the hope his family nurtured in him endures. For Cora, the brutal conditions on the Randall plantation define existence, dangerous and horizonless. She rebuffs Caesar, seeing only foolishness in his proposition. However, after a predictable but stunning display of cruelty by Terrance Randall, something stirs in Cora, and she changes her mind.

During their escape, they are ambushed by a posse; in the process of defending themselves, Cora kills a young man, which seals her fate all the more: if caught, she will face not just death but days of torture. This raises the stakes in her desperate bid for freedom.

Caesar and Cora meet up with Lumbly, the first of several "station agents" of the Underground Railroad, an *actual* underground tunnel with a track and a locomotive. Their journey takes them through stops in South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, and finally what Whitehead terms simply "The North." Each region represents "a state of possibility," a set of conditions separate from but not unlike chattel slavery, systems Cora and Caesar must confront to in order to survive.



## Genre, Language, and Structure

*The Underground Railroad* is a modern take on the literary tradition of the slave narrative, which was particularly popular in the nineteenth century. Slave narratives described the horrors of plantation life and the rigors of the journey north to freedom; helpful in the anti-slavery movement especially after the Fugitive Slave law of 1850, they were either written by the slaves themselves or told to abolitionists (if the author had only oral literacy).

In addition to these published accounts from fugitives and freed slaves, Whitehead drew on oral accounts from over 2,500 former slaves taken down by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s.

In telling the story of Cora's escape from Georgia to the North, Whitehead uses a fairly linear, chronological narrative. The chapters named according to geography begin with a notice for a runaway slave and follow Cora's progress from south to north. Each of the geographic chapters focuses on the forms of unfreedom (and, later, freedom) associated with that region's laws, practices, and possibilities. The chapters named after characters give deep backstory on the motivations of individuals key to Cora's journey.

By contrast, in telling the broader story of slavery and systemic racism, Whitehead dispenses with chronology and geography. What happens in each of the geographic chapters is determined by an idea or theme, not by fidelity to place and time; in each, Whitehead explores particular forms of racism by narrating events inspired by various periods in American history. For instance, in South Carolina Cora encounters *both* the Tuskegee, Alabama syphilis experiments *and* eugenics programs like the "Mississippi Appendectomies" (forced sterilizations).

Whitehead does not employ these more postmodern storytelling techniques until Cora has left the plantation, however. As the novel begins, his style works at a faithful, straight-forward account of life on the Randall's Georgia plantation. As in other slave narratives, the plainness of the language and the extravagance of the cruelty that is its subject contrast in order to heighten the audience's sense of horror: the extraordinary violence is a normal phenomenon expressed in ordinary language and even tone.

Historical realism — which simultaneously allows Whitehead to establish the urgency of escape and kinship with other narratives — takes a turn towards magical realism when Cora and Caesar meet their first "conductor" and we learn that the underground railroad is an *actual locomotive that runs in a tunnel*. Then, when Caesar and Cora emerge from the tunnel into the South Carolina sun, Cora "looked up at the skyscraper and reeled."

We reel, too. Skyscrapers and subways coexisting with slaves! The effect makes slavery seem much less remote, and from then on, this old genre of the slave narrative seems to speak to us of the present. The collapse of time affected by the simultaneity of slavery, its later effects, and modern technology makes the novel timeless: after Georgia, each of its incidents seems to speak of our past, our present, and everything in between. It releases slavery from the deadening position of history and makes all its ghosts living, breathing, urgent realities.

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## Themes

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### Law ≠ Justice

*The Underground Railroad* dramatizes the truth that law and justice are separate concepts, that law is human-made while justice derives from a greater, more inherent power and order. This is a most American distinction, one made by the founders at the nation's inception: The Declaration of Independence, a criminal speech-act from the point of view of the British government (*our* government), established national legitimacy according to the "laws of nature and of nature's god."

Slavery was, in 1776 and almost a century after, an unwritten asterisk to the Declaration's promises. It required the establishment of two sets of laws, one that protected white interests and one that kept blacks in chains and in check. Those in the novel who pledge allegiance to whiteness and all its privileges are on the side of the law. Those who resist this system of law are on the side of justice, the "laws of nature and of nature's God."

The separateness of law and justice produces the novel's utterly distorted world. The patrollers, a precursor to the modern police force, are charged with keeping law and order; law and order means working on behalf of the slave system, ensuring that no slave exercises any of the rights the Declaration guaranteed. Violent, disreputable men, "In another country they would have been criminals, but this was America." The diabolical slave catcher Ridgeway, who hunts human beings, the utterly rational Dr. Stevens, who steals families' futures through sterilization, the heroic Mayor Jamison who secures his town through the terror of lynching — these are among the most secure characters in the novel, protected by the law.

The ease of the lawful is purchased with the fears of the just. Those who fight for their own justice and those who fight on behalf of others lead furtive double-lives, fearful for their safety. Mabel, Cora, Caesar, Sam, Lumbly, the conductors of the railroad, and the refugees at the farm all sacrifice so that some measure of justice can survive under a system of racist laws.

Though the novel pretty clearly distinguishes law from justice, it still grapples with justice itself in two fundamental ways. Having experienced "mean and constant" plantation justice and the random justice meted out in Tennessee's fires and yellow fever, Cora has to wonder if justice has a design. Royal later convinces her that it does, that "every one of her enemies, all the masters and overseers of her suffering, would be punished, if not in this world then the next, for justice may be slow and invisible, but it always renders its true verdict in the end."

While Royal's conclusions refer to a higher power, the novel also grapples with how justice ought to be carried out from one human being to another. Red is released from the Underground Railroad for shooting Boleman. He "had new ideas about how to break the stranglehold of slavery and refused to give up his guns." Royal's sense that "there was no bringing their methods into convergence" suggests the Civil Rights debates about the ethics of using violence against a violent system.

As she travels north, Cora's own reflections on the self-defense that obviated her capture become less "black and white;" as she gains *distance* from plantation justice, the sinister uplift of South Carolina, and the brutal segregation in North Carolina, the calluses of oppression thin, and Cora becomes heroically *intimate* with her own tenderness and compassion.



Ridgeway: "This is not your property."

Royal: "That's what the law says. White law. There are other ones."

— Ridgeway and Royal talking about Cora, a woman who has escaped from slavery in *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

### THINK

1. When the band from Valentine Farm rescues Cora in Tennessee, Ridgeway informs Royal that Cora is not his property. Royal responds, "That's what the law says. White law. There are other ones." Royal does not expand on what these laws state. Based on your reading of the novel, write these laws; try to think of at least three. Have some fun and write them as dialogue in Royal's tone of voice. Are these laws what you consider justice?

### REFLECT

2. Identify a wrong that was done to you that is still very much alive because it diminished (or threatened to diminish) your humanity. Think about why this wrong, though in the past, impacts your present life. What would healing or justice look like in this case? Do you think of justice and healing in terms of punishment or transformation? What amends can be made?

### PRACTICE

3. Whitehead sustains narrative tension that is fueled by the separation of law and justice in a novel that is as much about the 20th and 21st centuries as about the 19th century. This gives us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of this distinction for our times. Find someone in your community who spends a good deal of time working to uphold or revise our justice system — a lawyer, a community organizer, a preacher, a member of law enforcement, a politician. Share your experience with the novel and ask this individual to identify an area of law that seems unjust. What are they doing to rectify this discrepancy? How might your community collaborate with them?



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## Slavery, Freedom, and Unfreedom

Like the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, *The Underground Railroad* clarifies some assumptions about progressive history: escaping to the North does not secure freedom, and abolition does not lead to equal citizenship. Having established this historical pattern, Whitehead perhaps invites readers to further update it: electing a black President does not usher in a colorblind society.

Whitehead's most notable artistic choices serve to emphasize just how much various forms of unfreedom dictate the lives of African Americans. Whitehead factors out time and plays with physical location. As a result, slavery exists at the same time as other forms of racism, be they virulent or beguiling. The parallels this suggests make slavery seem much more modern, an institution whose effects are with us, not behind us. The forced sterilizations; the laws against being black; the KKK-like violence against Valentine Farm; the creation of false histories in which African Americans are objectified and made to relive their trauma — these forms of racism are the sisters and brothers of slavery, all born in the same generation of the same parents: fear and power.

Each sister and brother, whether clothed in the smile of uplift or the snarl of the lynch mob is, in Whitehead's account, an answer to a question asked explicitly in South and North Carolina: How do we maintain white power now that the number of slaves and blacks is "untenable"? The systems that arise to quell this fear are *calculated*, not natural or accidental. They are conscious decisions to maintain the status quo through racist inventions. The fear of blackness each system addresses is fear of karma: It is a fear "that the black hand will return what has been given." The fear is that a system founded on blood — the exploitation, torture, and death of slaves but also the belief in race and race purity — "would collapse in blood," and "because of that fear they erected a new scaffolding of oppression on the cruel foundation laid hundreds of years before."

While the new "scaffolding of oppression" is designed to sustain whites' power and allay their fears, Cora sees clearly that this does not work, that racism makes everyone unfree. From the attic in North Carolina (a plot device inspired by Harriett Jacobs' seven years in her grandmother's crawl space!), she watches people enjoy the park, but understands that "they were prisoners like she was, shackled to fear. Martin and Ethel were terrified of the watchful eyes behind every darkened window. The town huddled together on Friday nights in the hope their numbers warded off the things in the dark." Remarkable in this insight is the understanding that no one escapes the burden: whites experience it as their cruelty and racism dehumanize them or as the acts of resistance that preserve their humanity make life precarious.

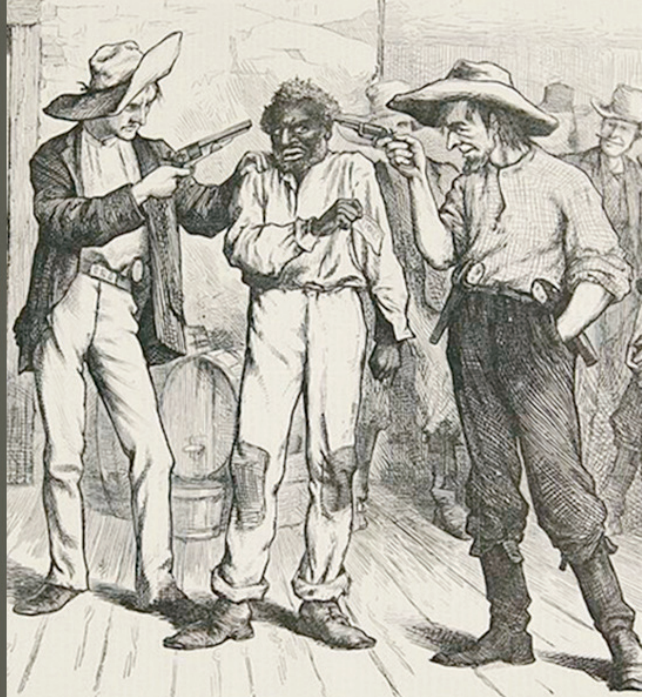
Finally, as with the theme of justice, the novel leaves us wondering if freedom is possible. Will Cora find freedom? Will African Americans? Will America itself? In an interview for *GQ*, Whitehead said, "I think if you want to understand Black history, it's slavery. If you want to understand America, it's slavery." Built on stolen land by stolen labor, America sold the idea of freedom down the river.



But perhaps it lies in wait. Perhaps it's underground with the railroad, a journey of possibility without a terminus. Or perhaps freedom lies in wait underneath the piles of history and reality we have not yet found a way to fully reckon with. Will idea *and* reality meet out there in the west for Cora, out there in the future for all of us? The novel ends with cautious optimism but no answer.

"The patroller required no reason to stop a person apart from color. Slaves caught off the plantation need passes, unless they wanted a licking and a visit to the county jail. Free blacks carried proof of manumission or risked being conveyed into the clutches of slavery; sometimes they were smuggled to the auction block anyway. Rogue blacks who did not surrender could be shot."

— from *The Underground Railroad*  
by Colson Whitehead



#### THINK

**1.** Female slaves were doubly unfree, as their bodies were objectified as both tools of labor and tools of procreation/desire. Read the passages that describe Cora's acts of self-preservation: mortally wounding the young boy in the Georgia chapter and finally escaping from Ridgeway in the North chapter. What is the relationship between Cora's rape by the smokehouse and these two saving acts of aggression?

#### REFLECT

**2.** Cora refers to the racist machinations in North Carolina as a "new scaffolding of oppression." If we follow the logic of the book, we might conclude that our present has invented its own way of maintaining the status quo against those marginalized as "other." What "new scaffolding of oppression" are you aware of? How would you characterize your place in this structure?

To what extent does a person's race or gender still determine how free that individual is?

#### PRACTICE

**3.** At Valentine Farm, Cora loosens "her leash on herself": She is able to let her guard down, to love and trust. The nightmares that haunted her on her journey turn to dreams about a future life with Royal, kids, security. This freedom comes to her, at least in part, because the farm is a community run by and for black citizens. And this freedom is short-lived, in part, because segregated safety doesn't sufficiently address



the surrounding hatred. The communities beyond the farm have not learned the value of diversity and compassion.

Think about your own communities. Who is not represented in your community? Who might feel less than free? Why might someone not feel free, accepted, or welcome in your community? How can you be an agent of radical inclusion and both prepare your community for more diversity and invite the other to be your neighbor?

This practice will be most effective if you first take some time to list the qualities that ensure freedom within a community. Then you can think about the small gestures and large actions that would cultivate these qualities.

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## Resilience, Courage, and Voice

The fact that Cora *endures* to the end is hardly surprising. She was born to conditions that necessitated toughness and formed her as a survivor. What is remarkable is that Cora does not just survive; she thrives. Cora transforms herself beyond what her conditions at birth dictated for her. In other words, she emerges as a classic American heroine.

Born a slave amongst slaves in the deep South, Cora is further ostracized: after her mother leaves her a “stray,” she is cast off from slave society, forced to join the women in Hob. Our first glimpse of what lies beneath these layers of hurt is Cora’s defense of her garden plot against Blake and his dog house. When she takes a hatchet to it and then squares off with Blake, her posture says, “You may get the better of me but it will cost you.” She secures her ancestral plot and uses the wood from the doghouse to warm her and the other Hob women.

Cora has the ability to know what is precious and to protect it with her whole existence in the balance. We see that, and Caesar sees that, which is why she is the one he asks to escape with him. But Cora does not yet know herself. In the beginning of the novel, Cora’s spark, her spirit, expresses itself almost entirely through the actions of her body. She is a heroine without a voice.

On the plantation, it is as if this spirit takes ahold of her. When she rushes to protect Chester, it possesses her out of nowhere: “A feeling settled over Cora. She had not been under its spell in years, since she brought the hatchet down on Blake’s dog house and sent the splinters into the air. She had seen men hung from trees and left for buzzards and crows. Women carved open to the bones with a cat-o’-nine-tails. Bodies alive and dead roasted on pyres. Feet cut off to prevent escape and hands cut off to stop theft. She had seen boys and girls younger than this beaten and had done nothing. This night the feeling settled on her heart again. It grabbed hold of her and before the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her she was bent over the boy’s body as a shield.”

Reflecting on her courage in a moment of calm, Cora cannot recall the feeling; it “had retreated to that obscure corner in herself from where it came and couldn’t be coaxed.” Emotionally and intellectually, Cora has settled back into her slave mind, back into fear. That same night, thinking of Mabel, she cannot admit her mother’s courage or her own into her conscious mind. She can think no further than the

swamp that surrounds her: “Things in the swamp whistled and splashed, hunting in the living darkness. To walk in there at night, heading north to the Free States. Have to take leave of your senses to do that.

“But her mother had.”

And so does Cora. As she braves the dark unknown of the swamp and the tunnels and adapts to the ever-changing chains and prisons that the white citizens concoct for her, she learns how to access her spirit, to center it, and to make it talk. Her act of courage gives her courage, and as her fear subsides, her voice emerges.

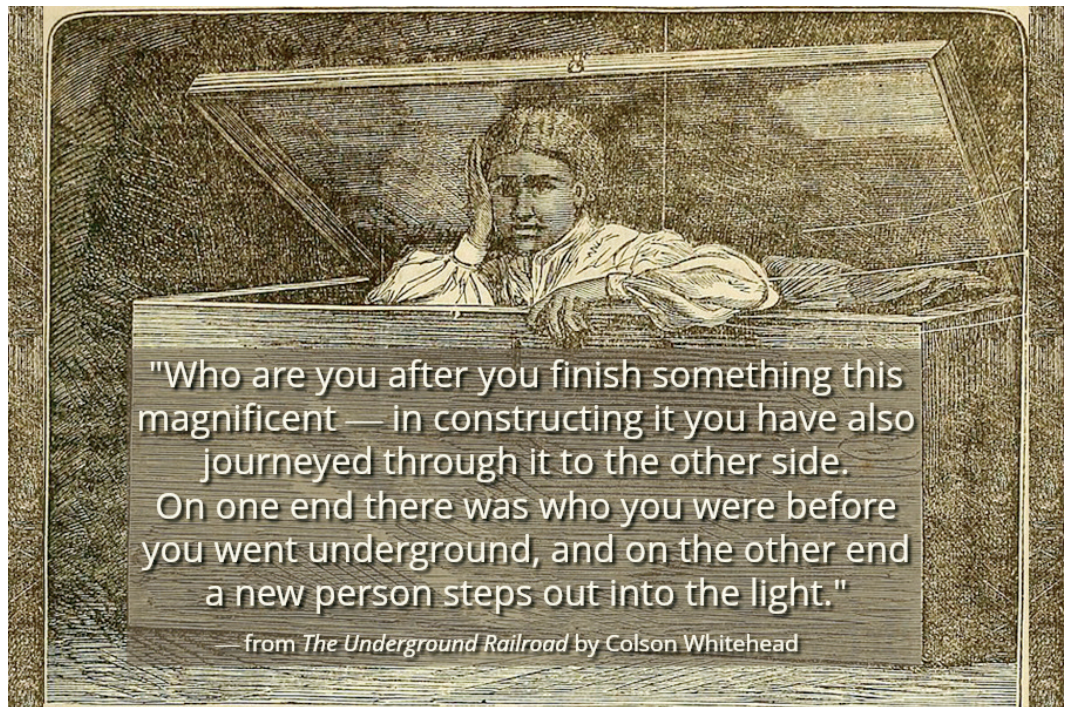
Cora finds ways to both survive and assert herself. She practices self-assertion quietly at first. When Dr. Stevens explains the reasons for mandatory sterilization, Cora pushes back in her mind, calling him on his double-standard and faulty argument: “Mrs. Anderson suffered black moods. Did that make her unfit? Was her doctor offering her the same proposal? No.” She practices wordlessly on the patrons of the museum, challenging one person per hour with an evil-eye stare that breaks them.

Emboldened, Cora voices resistance to the sterilizations when Miss Lucy says, “You could be a true credit to your race if you put your mind to it.” “I can decide for myself,” Cora replies. “Why can’t they? On the plantation, master decided everything for us. I thought we were done with that here.” Miss Lucy’s anger is a visible sign that Cora is no longer embodying fear but speaking truth to power.

Cora’s resilience, her “insurrection of one,” becomes so strong it does not wither in the face of gratitude. Grateful in some measure to both Martin and Ethel, Cora nonetheless calls them on the hypocrisy of their values: rebuking Martin when he has the gall to speak of Ethel not choosing her fate and criticizing the hypocrisy of the religion with which Ethel intends to comfort Cora. Cora insists that the white people around her face the same reality she must face.

The resilience and courage of Cora, Caesar, the station agents, and the conductors are what make the underground railroad the underground railroad. When Cora asks who built it and Lumbly responds, “Who builds anything in this country?” Cora is perplexed and never quite understands. But, hopefully, we do. As Cora pumps her way through the last, narrow tunnel north, is “she traveling through the tunnel or digging it?” Is she, as Lumbly inscrutably asserts, seeing “the true face of America”?

Those with the courage to imagine a new life built the tunnel, and in that act they built a “new nation hidden beneath the old.” The builders preserved below what was being destroyed above. This is the deep optimism the novel leaves us with and the ultimate fruit of Whitehead’s choice to literalize the underground railroad: America can be excavated.



THINK

1. What role does Cora's mother Mabel play in the emergence of Cora's courage? How did the chapter on Mabel affect your view of her and of Cora's "inheritance," a concept previously associated only with the garden plot?

REFLECT

2. Think about acts of courage in your own life, ones done by you and ones done on your behalf. How have others been your conductors and station agents? How have you been a conductor or station agent for others?

PRACTICE

3. Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Kathryn Schulz ends her review of *The Underground Railroad* with this poignant challenge to those who are drawn to the fictional and historical stories of courage and resilience: "It is to our credit if these are the Americans to whom we want to trace our moral genealogy. But we should not confuse the fact that they took extraordinary actions with the notion that they lived in extraordinary times. One of the biases of retrospection is to believe that the moral crises of the past were clearer than our own — that, had we been alive at the time, we would have recognized them, known what to do about them, and known when the time had come to do so. That is a fantasy. Iniquity is always coercive and insidious and intimidating, and lived reality is always a muddle, and the kind of clarity that leads to action comes not from without but from within. The great virtue of a figurative railroad is that, when someone needs it — and someone always needs it — we don't have to build it. We *are* it, if we choose."

Building on question 2, therefore, define the moral crises of this time, identify who needs a figurative railroad, and start digging.

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## Further Resources

1. To further explore both the theme of justice and the theme of racism, read Ta-Nehisi Coates' seminal article "The Case for Reparations." (See <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.) Reflect on Coates' account of the legacy of slavery and his proposals for justice.
2. To further explore the idea that a "new scaffolding of oppression" is erected with each generation, pick up Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. If your time is limited, the introduction and first chapter will give you a good taste of the evidence. If you would rather view than read, Ava DuVernay's excellent documentary *13th* is in many ways a filmic version of Alexander's work. Make as many parallels as you can between these rhetorical works and Whitehead's fictionalized history.
3. *Moonlight* director Barry Jenkins bought the rights to *The Underground Railroad* and is developing it as a drama series on Amazon. There is no release date yet.

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### Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor

Poetry

*Tenth of December* by George Saunders

*Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson

*Puddnhead Wilson* by Mark Twain

*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and  
*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

*The Partly-Cloudy Patriot* by Sarah Vowell

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

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**The Practicing Democracy Project** offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.



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