



***The Underground Railroad, by Colson Whitehead***  
***Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, March 2017***

*The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead's acclaimed novel, is an unvarnished tale of slavery in antebellum America. The story centers on Cora, a young slave living on a Georgia plantation owned by the Randall family. Over the years, many slaves bravely had tried to escape, but only Cora's mother Mabel made it out. Cora grew up abandoned and distrusted. Caesar, a slave who had been promised freedom by his former owner, approaches Cora to run away with him. But the risks for escape are daunting, and its punishments are too graphic for this review.

One evening, however, an incident at Randall plantation emboldens Cora. Chester, a slave boy serving wine, accidentally bumps into Terrance, the brutal elder Randall brother, causing one drop to stain the master's sleeve. As Terrance beats Chester, Cora intervenes to protect him: "She had seen boys and girls younger than this beaten and had done nothing. This night a feeling settled in her heart. It grabbed hold of her and before the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her, she bent over the boy's body as a shield." After her own thrashing, Cora agrees to run away with Caesar. Before they leave, Cora's friend Lovey discovers their plan, and she joins them in their escape.

Caesar, as a woodworking apprentice, had met Mr. Fletcher, a Unitarian shopkeeper with abolitionist leanings. If the fleeing slaves could make it to Fletcher's house, he would convey them to the underground railroad. But already bulletins are out for the runaways' capture. When a trio of hog hunters encounters them in the forest, a fight ensues, and Lovey is taken. As Caesar and Cora get away, Cora mortally wounds the youngest hunter with a rock. Now there is no turning back.

Once Cora and Caesar reach Fletcher's house, the abolitionist takes them to Lumbly, a conductor on the underground railroad. (Here the author adds a surrealistic touch. In his rendering, the underground railroad is not a metaphor for a system of safe houses, but an actual railroad with a tunnel, rails, and platforms.) The first stop on the underground railroad is South Carolina.

However, Ridgeway, a slave catcher hired by Terrance Randall, is in hot pursuit. Years ago, he was unsuccessful in capturing Cora's mother Mabel, after she had fled Randall plantation. His failure gnawed at him and festered. This time, he would not fail. With Javert-like zeal, he is determined to find Cora.

Leaving South Carolina, Cora makes her way to North Carolina and then onto Tennessee and a safe house in Indiana. There, for a while, she feels safe: "Strangers but family, cousins never introduced. She was surrounded by men and woman who'd been born in Africa, or born in chains, who freed themselves or escaped. Branded, beaten, raped. Now they were here. They were free and black and stewards of their own fates."

Mr. Whitehead's prose is as intense as his story; he infuses *The Underground Railroad* with great feeling and vivid scenes. His novel is compelling and original. And his gritty characters and their quest for freedom are unforgettable.