2017 FICTION WINNER

The Underground Railroad
by Colson Whitehead
published by Doubleday, Penguin Random House

In Whitehead’s commanding, vividly imagined novel, smart and resourceful Cora flees a Georgia cotton plantation only to discover, on each stop along an actual Underground Railroad running in tunnels beneath Southern soil, yet another horrific variation on racial tyranny.

BOOK GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Cora is a fierce character, determined to obtain her freedom at any cost. She is partly fueled by memories of her mother Mabel’s escape. Do you think knowing her mother’s fate might have had an impact on Cora’s actions?

2. How do stories of freedom influence Cora’s decisions?

3. How do Cora’s dreams of freedom measure up against her experience?

4. How is slavery depicted and what aspects of slavery are emphasized in the novel?

5. How does making the metaphorical Underground Railroad a physical railroad change or add to the story?

6. How does Colson Whitehead’s use of the archetypal hero’s journey illuminate the many repercussions of slavery, as Cora emerges at each stop along the Underground Railroad and finds herself in one dangerous and strange situation after another?

7. Although it was illegal to teach enslaved people to read, Cesar, who guides Cora to the Underground Railroad, is literate. Is there a connection between literacy and freedom?

8. Consider the character of Ethel and how she cared for Cora. How did your view of Ethel alter after reading her backstory?

9. How does the story of the slave catcher, Ridgeway, deepen the perspective of the novel?

10. Is anyone safe from either physical harm or moral damage in this world of brutal tyranny?
INTERESTED IN STARTING A BOOK GROUP?

The American Library Association offers resources on how to get started, how to structure a meeting, how to select books and how to facilitate a meaningful literary discussion.

For more information visit http://libguides.ala.org/bookdiscussiongroups.

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