

COLSON

WHITEHEAD

The

UNDERGROUND

RAILROAD

THE A. NORTON

A remarkable novel from a remarkable writer. Colson Whitehead's latest work is "The Underground Railroad" and it's astonishingly ambitious. Whitehead tells the story of a young woman named Cora who bravely risks all to escape the nightmarish bonds of slavery. I say "nightmarish" but everything depicted here is bitterly, unrelentingly real. The novel is, as far as I can tell, scrupulously accurate to its time...right up to the moment that Cora enters the Underground Railroad. And then to our astonishment we discover that in this novel the Underground Railroad is LITERALLY an underground railroad, reaching deep into the South via tunnels far below the surface of the earth. Suddenly the novel takes off in a fantastical style that manages to encompass the next 150 years of racism and cruelly broken dreams in ways unexpected. Cora pops up into South Carolina, which here is presented as a progressive haven. Slowly we realize this land where whites and blacks mingle in peace hides slavery of another sort, a world where eugenics and "well-intentioned" whites control those they fear in subtler ways than the whip. Cora moves on, to a state where the wiping out of the black race has taken ferocious hold on the populace. And Cora moves on to another state, this one where blacks have claimed a beachhead, a few farms where they educate and feed themselves and hope to make peace with their neighbors. Somehow, the jumbling of history in this way makes it all seem fresh and awful. We're fooled into thinking things have changed and Cora might just have found a haven, only to be disabused of the notion that things change with brutal abruptness. Whitehead here makes the omnipresent menace of hate and prejudice terribly real, with heartbreaking passages of revelation about everyone from Cora to her lover to the fates of those around her. Whitehead's empathy for everyone from nervous sympathizers to vicious fugitive hunters to Cora and her people in all their agonized humanity is wonderfully immediate. His tale is subtly outlandish...and yet not for one moment is it exaggerated or remotely untruthful. This isn't historical fiction but it's as accurate an assessment of race in America as anything to be found in textbooks. I won't say whether the ending offers even a sliver of hopefulness, but as you approach the end, a sliver of hopefulness is about all you can allow yourself to dream of. But the ending is as courageous as everything else here: like his heroine, Whitehead sees the future and forges ahead anyway. -- Michael Giltz