The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

Publishers Weekly ★ 04/11/2016 "Each thing had a value... In America the quirk was that people were things." So observes Ajarry, taken from Africa as a girl in the mid-18th century to be sold and resold and sold again. She finally arrives at the vicious Georgia plantation where she dies at the book's outset. After a lifetime in brutal, humiliating transit, Ajarry was determined to stay put in Georgia, and so is her granddaughter, Cora. That changes when Cora is raped and beaten by the plantation's owner, and she resolves to escape. In powerful, precise prose, at once spellbinding and ferocious, the book follows Cora's incredible journey north, step by step. In Whitehead's rendering, the Underground Railroad of the early 19th century is a literal subterranean tunnel with tracks, trains, and conductors, ferrying runaways into darkness and, occasionally, into light. Interspersed throughout the central narrative of Cora's flight are short chapters expanding on some of the lives of those she encounters. These include brief portraits of the slave catcher who hunts her, a doctor who examines her in South Carolina, and her mother, whose escape from the plantation when Cora was a girl has both haunted and galvanized her. Throughout the book, Cora faces unthinkable horrors, and her survival depends entirely on her resilience. The story is literature at its finest and history at its most barbaric. Would that this novel were required reading for every American citizen. Agent: Nicole Aragi, Aragi Inc. (Sept.)

Library Journal ★ 07/01/2016 Pulitzer Prize finalist Whitehead (John Henry Days) here telescopes several centuries' worth of slavery and oppression as he puts escaped slaves Cora and Caesar on what is literally an underground railroad, using such brief magical realist touches to enhance our understanding of the African American experience. Cora, an outsider among her fellow slaves since her mother's escape from a brutal Georgia plantation, is asked by new slave Caesar to join his own escape effort. He knows a white abolitionist shopkeeper named Fletcher with connections to the Underground Railroad, and as they flee to Fletcher's house, Cora saves them from capture with an act of violence that puts them in graver danger. "Who built it?" asks Caesar wonderingly of the endless tunnel meant to carry them to freedom. "Who builds anything in this country?" replies the stationmaster, clarifying how much of America rests on work by black hands. The train delivers Cora and Caesar to a seemingly benevolent South Carolina, where they linger until learning of programs that recall the controlled sterilization and Tuskegee experiments of later years. Then it's onward, as Whitehead continues ratcheting up both imagery and tension. VERDICT A highly recommended work that raises the bar for fiction addressing slavery. [See Prepub Alert, 3/7/16.]—Barbara Hoffert, Library Journal

Kirkus Review ★ 2016-04-13 What if the metaphorical Underground Railroad had been an actual... underground railroad, complete with steam locomotive pulling a "dilapidated box car" along a subterranean nexus of steel tracks? For roughly its first 60 pages, this novel behaves like a prelude to a slave narrative which is, at once, more jolting and sepulchral than the classic firsthand accounts of William Wells Brown and Solomon Northup. Its protagonist, Cora, is among several African-American men and women enslaved on a Georgia plantation and facing a spectrum of savage indignities to their bodies and souls. A way out materializes in the form of an educated slave named Caesar, who tells her about an underground railroad that can deliver her and others northward to freedom. "Each thing had a value... In America the quirk was that people were things." So compared with Georgia, though, the place seems so much easier that Cora and Caesar are tempted to remain, until more sinister plans for the ex-slaves' destiny reveal themselves. So it's back on the train and on to several more stops: in North Carolina, where they've not only abolished slavery, but are intent on abolishing black people, too; through a barren, more forbidding Tennessee; on to a (seemingly) more hospitable Indiana, and restless onward. With each stop, a slave catcher named Ridgeway, dispensing long-winded rationales for his wicked calling, doggedly pursues Cora and her diminishing company of refugees. And with every change of venue, Cora discovers anew that "freedom was a thing that shifted as you looked at it, the way a forest is dense with trees up close but from outside, the empty meadow, you see its true limits." Imagine a runaway slave novel written with Joseph Heller's deadpan voice leasing both Frederick Douglass' grim realities and H.P. Lovecraft's rococo fantasies... and that's when you begin to understand how startlingly original this book is. Whitehead continues the African-American artists' inquiry into race mythology and history with rousing audacity and razor-sharp ingenuity; he is now assuredly a writer of the first rank.