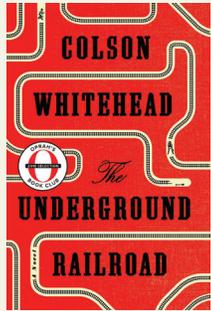


# In Reading Groups

Book Discussion Guide from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

by Jacque Stouffer



## *The Underground Railroad*

by Colson Whitehead

In Whitehead's rendering, the Underground Railroad is a literal subterranean tunnel with tracks, trains and conductors, ferrying runaways into darkness and, occasionally, into light. The central narrative of Cora's flight to freedom in the north is interspersed with short chapters about the other characters she encounters.

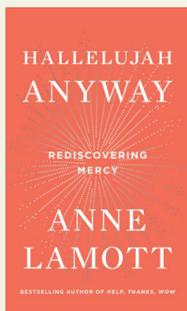
1. Why do you think the author opens the book with Ajarry's story? How does it help set the stage?
2. How badly did you want to read the chapter, titled "Mabel," right away - to find out why Mabel left Cora behind?! Were you able to resist?
3. Think for a bit about the Hob. Is it symbolic of society as a whole? What lessons did Cora learn during her time there that she used later in her story?
4. Discuss the importance of the small garden Cora, her grandmother, and her mother shared. What do you think fuels their desire to own something, however small?
5. The concept that no slave knew his or her birthday struck me in this reading. What kind of fundamental gap would that leave in your life, and how would it affect your concept of self?
6. How would the story have been different if Cora had chosen to run on her own? What value did Caesar bring to our first introduction to the Railroad?
7. Was it pivotal to the plot that Caesar was raised in a slave setting more "free" than Cora? How?
8. The author included back stories for many characters who only appeared for one or two chapters. Did this help your reading and visualization of the story, or was it confusing at times?
9. We get to see much of Ridgeway's story, and see sides of him in addition to his role as slave catcher. Did you find him to be a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
10. When the Railroad was first introduced, did you question its description? Did you think it was written as fantasy? Fanciful realism? In literal fashion? Which parts of the Railroad and its stations did you easily accept, and which did you find unbelievable?
11. Were there other pieces in Whitehead's story that you found challenging to believe or engage in, particularly in the portion set in South Carolina? How did these pieces aid in the story's progression or detract from it?
12. On page 171, the author suggests a comparison between the engine of slavery and cotton to that of a train. Did you see this comparison or suggestion elsewhere in the book? How do you think the comparison is accurate?
13. Why do you think Ethel has her own chapter? What other characters would you like to have known more about?
14. Compare the Valentine farm in Indiana with what Cora experienced in South Carolina. Were there similarities?

15. When it finally arrived, were you satisfied with Mabel’s story? Why or why not?
16. Where do you think Cora arrived at the end of her Railroad journey?
17. Even after they ran, in what ways were the slaves still in bondage? What other characters were living in bondage – to their homes, roles, jobs, or relationships?

18. Early in the story, Cora is given advice which stays with her on her journey. “Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America.” Although mostly underground, where and how does Cora’s journey show her the true face of America?

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## NEXT MONTH



### *Hallelujah Anyway*

by Anne Lamott

With her trademark humor and candor, Lamott explores the scriptural imperative to “love mercy,” reviewing both the difficulties and the life-changing rewards of obeying this mandate. Lamott’s honesty and humility, laced with wit and compassion, offer wisdom and hope for difficult times.