The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead is currently on most bestseller lists and is the latest Oprah choice. Whitehead has imagined life for blacks in the pre-Civil War era and has developed the story in which the Underground Railroad is not a metaphor but actual underground tunnels through which slaves who are trying to escape were transported. This adds a new dimension of danger for those escaping and trying desperately to work their way north and for those who have created these underground passages and hide those who are escaping.

The story centers around Cora whose mother, Mabel, has run from the plantation leaving her young daughter behind. Cora initially believes Mabel will somehow return for her, but as time passes, bitterness toward her mother sets in when Cora receives no word from her or about her. Even though Mabel is gone, her legacy lives on because a slave catcher named Ridgway has been searching for her for years, and then turns his attention to finding Cora when she, too, decides to run with a man named Caesar. The slaves who are caught and returned to their masters face fates even worse than they experienced originally.

We follow Cora through Underground Railroad stops where she is housed in all sorts of conditions, waiting tensely for the nearly inevitable knock on the door that spells doom for her. She meets kind people black and white who do their best to help her, knowing that their help can condemn them to torture or death, without necessarily helping Cora. When she and Caesar reach South Carolina where life seems so much better, they decide to stay rather than take the next train. They discover through Sam who is part of the Underground Railroad that the
apparent improvement in conditions for them masks some horrors that the medical establishment is planning, using blacks for their research.

For a brief time in Indiana, Cora feels at home. John Valentine, who was born free and is light-skinned enough to pass for white, has established Valentine farm where one hundred or more slaves have found sanctuary. His success has encouraged other black farmers and businesses to establish themselves in the general area. Eventually, the success of the black community becomes intolerable to some of their white neighbors and once again catastrophe strikes. Cora is captured by Ridgway and forced to show him where the nearest Underground Railroad station is located. Will she once again escape her captors? I will leave it to you to discover.

It has been interesting to read this book after recently reading *The Underground Airlines*. Both, of course, are fiction, but both are compelling stories of our history and in the case of *The Underground Airlines*, an alternate history in which slave states still exist. In both books, what strikes most forcefully are the horrors and suffering that people are willing to inflict on other people because they are different. On the other hand, both are also a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit and what we are willing to invest to make things better.

*The Underground Railroad* is published in hardcover by Doubleday and retails for $26.95