As Colson Whitehead’s searing new novel opens, Cora, a teenage slave, “who had seen men hung from trees and left for buzzards and crows,” and her mother abscond without saying goodbye or contacting her when she was free, is beaten by the owner of the cotton plantation – and decides to escape to the north on the underground railroad.

“If you want to see what this nation is all about, you have to ride this rails,” Lumbly, a station master on the Georgia line, tells her. “Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America.”

The underground railroad, we learn, actually exists, as a system of trains, tracks, stations and conductors, operating far below the American soil, taking runaways across state lines.

‘Magical realism’

Before her final stop, Cora will ride the railroad, landing in South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana, “each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things.” She will discover that Lumbly’s words were a joke: “There was only darkness outside the windows on her journeys, and only ever would be a darkness.”

The author of five previous novels, Whitehead has made frequent use of “magical realism.”

Given its foundational premise – that the underground railroad was actually a subterranean transportation system, not a metaphor – some more literal-minded readers of this book may find it difficult to integrate the magic with the realism. They may ask how the system could be built and operated without detection by White southerners who were nothing if not vigilant about runaway slaves.

Memorable characters

Readers may be distracted as well by the lack of historical specificity in the novel and by dialogue (“Can’t have our Cora looking like the floor of a butcher’s shop”) that reflects a modern tone and texture.

That said, it is clear that “The Underground Railroad” is a suspenseful, spellbinding novel that conveys the appalling, barbaric realities of slavery. The characters take hold of you and do not let go.

The most memorable, it seems to me, is Ridgeway.
the cynical, 6-foot-6-inch slave catcher.

Colson Whitehead, above.

Ridgeway is an Ahab obsessed with returning Cora to the Randall plantation because he has failed to bring back Mabel, her mother.

Accompanying him everywhere is Homer, his Pip, who refuses to be emancipated, Ridgeway explains, "because he knew a black boy has no future" and would inevitably be snatched by someone and "put on the block lickety-split. With me, he can learn about the world. Find purpose."

The bottom line

But for his obsession about Cora, Ridgeway always sticks to the bottom line. Having captured Jasper, a runaway slave, Jasper shoots him in the face. The reward was $50, minus $15 for the man who brought the fugitive to jail, he claims, but it would take three weeks to return Jasper (who had to be supplied with some food) to his owner: "the lost bounty was a small price to pay for silence and a restful mind." Homer consults his notebook, checks his boss' figures and says "He's right."

The conversations between Ridgeway and Cora constitute the moral center of the novel, testimony to the indomitable will of African-Americans.

"For every slave I bring home," Ridgeway proclaims, "twenty others abandon their full moon schemes. I'm a notion of order… the name of punishment, dogging every fugitive step," and undermining any and all hopes of freedom.

Maybe he is right, Cora thinks, "that the sons of Ham were cursed and the slave master performed God's will. And maybe he was just a man talking to an outhouse door, waiting for someone to wipe her ass."

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.