

< Colson Whitehead's 'Underground Railroad' Is A Literal Train To Freedom

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Author Interviews

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TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. My guest Colson Whitehead isn't used to his books getting quite the attention he's getting for his new novel "The Underground Railroad." It's the new selection for Oprah's Book Club. Yesterday, The New York Times published a lengthy excerpt in a special stand-alone section.

"The Underground Railroad" is about a slave named Cora who grows up on a Georgia plantation and, at the age of 15, escapes through the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad, in Whitehead's reimagining, is literally a railroad with underground tracks and locomotives making stops in different states. That's one of many liberties Colson takes with the real past. Reviewing the book in The New York Times, Michiko Kakutani described it as a potent, almost hallucinatory novel that leaves the reader with a devastating understanding of the terrible human costs of slavery. Whitehead has told a story essential to our understanding of the American past and the American present.

Colson Whitehead previously joined us on FRESH AIR to talk about his novel "Zone One" about a zombie plague - he loves science fiction - and his memoir, "The Noble Hustle," about high stakes poker. His new novel, "The Underground Railroad," begins with a prologue of sorts, telling the story of Cora's grandmother Ajarry, who was kidnapped from her African village, shipped to America and enslaved.

Colson Whitehead, welcome back to FRESH AIR. Let's start with a reading from "The Underground Railroad."

COLSON WHITEHEAD: Sounds good. This is the first page.

(Reading) The first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no. This was her grandmother talking. Cora's grandmother had never seen the ocean before that bright afternoon in the port of Ouidah. And the water dazzled after her time in the fort's dungeon. The dungeon stored them until the ships arrived. Dahomeyan raiders kidnapped the men first then returned to her village the next moon for the women and children, marching them in chains to the sea two by two. As she stared into the black doorway, Ajarry thought she'd be

reunited with her father down there in the dark. The survivors from her village told her that when her father couldn't keep the pace of a long march, the slaver's stove in his head and left his body by the trail. Her mother had died years before.

Cora's grandmother was sold a few times on the trek to the fort, passed between slavers for cowry shells and glass beads. It was hard to say how much they paid for her in Ouidah, as she was part of a bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for 60 crates of rum and gunpowder, the price arrived upon after the standard haggling in Coast English. Able-bodied men and childbearing women fetched more than juveniles, making an individual accounting difficult.

The ship called The Nanny was out of Liverpool and had made two previous stops along the Gold Coast. The captain staggered his purchases, rather than find himself with a cargo of singular culture and disposition. Who knew what brand of mutiny his captives might cook up if they shared a common tongue? This was the ship's final port of call before they crossed the Atlantic. Two yellow-haired sailors rode Ajarry out to the ship - humming, white skin like bone.

GROSS: That's from the opening of Colson Whitehead's new novel "The Underground Railroad."

Why did you want to write a novel about slavery and escaped slaves? Had something happened in your life that made you want to immerse yourself in that history?

WHITEHEAD: Actually, I was pretty reluctant to immerse myself into that history. It took 16 years for me to finish the book. I first had the idea in the year 2000, and I was finishing up a long book called "John Henry Days," which had a lot of research. And I was just sort of, you know, getting up from a nap or something (laughter) and thought, you know, what if the Underground Railroad was an actual railroad? You know, I think when you're a kid and you first hear about it in school or whatever, you imagine a literal subway beneath the earth. And then you find out that it's not a literal subway, and you get a bit upset.

And so the book took off from that childhood notion. And that's the premise, not that much of a story. So I kept thinking about it. And I thought, well, what if every state our hero went through as he or she ran north was a different state of American possibility? So Georgia has one sort of take on America and North Carolina - sort of like "Gulliver's Travels." The book is rebooting every time the person goes to a different state. And it seemed like a cool idea. It also seemed very daunting. I didn't want to delve into slavery.

I - you know, it seemed like a very huge topic for me at the time. I wasn't sure if I was up for writing it in terms of my talent, I guess (laughter). I figured if I waited, I might become a better writer. And if I waited and became a more mature person, I might be able to actually take it on. So there was no one thing that made me want to do it and many factors that made me not want to take it on for all those years.

GROSS: So one of the stops Cora, the escaped slave, goes to on the Underground Railroad is South Carolina, where they think of themselves as very progressive. Why do they think of themselves that way?

WHITEHEAD: Well, you know, they've thought about the problem of slavery and how to fix it. And so they're buying slaves from slave owners and freeing them and giving them jobs and housing and schooling and giving them a fresh start. You know, the first chapter of the book is a, hopefully, realistic portrayal of a plantation in Georgia. And it's the kind of plantation we recognize from history and pop culture. And then she takes the Underground Railroad and emerges in South Carolina, where there is this seemingly progressive government devoted to black uplift and various social programs. But of course, because it's the start of the book, things don't turn out that great. And there's a sinister purpose behind all of these progressive programs they're giving to the colored folk who have come to South Carolina.

GROSS: And you've based some of this on actual history. I mean, without giving away too much, there's a medical program that seems like it would be very helpful, but they were really conducting a syphilis study and using black people as guinea pigs.

WHITEHEAD: Yeah. I think, you know, once I made the choice to make a literal underground railroad, you know, it freed me up to play with time a bit more. And so, in general, you know, the technology, culture and speech is from the year 1850. That was my sort of mental cutoff for technology and slang. But it allowed me to bring in things that didn't happen in 1850 - skyscrapers, aspects of the eugenics movement, forced sterilization and the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. And it's all presented sort of matter-of-factly...

GROSS: Yeah, can I quote something...

WHITEHEAD: ...Hopefully.

GROSS: ...From the book about the forced sterilization program? One of the characters says, "America has imported and bred so many Africans that, in many states, the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With strategic sterilization, first the women, but both sexes in time, we could free them from bondage without fear that they'd butcher us in our sleep."

WHITEHEAD: Yeah. I mean, that's taken - you know, it's - part of that is from late 19th-century eugenics literature and also - and then taken also from early 19th-century racist literature, people who, you know, perhaps rightly, were afraid that if (laughter) - if black people were freed, they would exact retribution. You know, they were outnumbered. They'd been breeding slaves. And then you wake up one day and, like, actually, we're outnumbered by these people that we torture, brutalize and subjugate.

So not sticking to the facts allowed me to combine different forms of racial hysteria.

GROSS: In South Carolina, there's something called the Museum of Natural Wonders that Cora, the escaped slave, ends up working in. And it's described to her as having a focus on American history. And one of the people who runs it says the museum permits people to see the rest of the country and to see its people, people like you. And why don't you describe what some of the rooms in this museum are?

WHITEHEAD: Sure. Cora is a living exhibit, and so she stands in a display case all day along with two other former slaves, and they rotate through these different tableaux. One is scenes from darkest Africa, and that's a seemingly realistic depiction of life back in the motherland. And so there's a little hut and some gourds and some spears, and they pretend to interact with them. There's a scene on a slave ship where Cora is sort of happily swabbing and not below decks in chains, as she would have been. And then there's life on a plantation, where she's happily sewing and not being whipped in the fields and otherwise abused by a master.

And so the museum presents this false, sanitized version of American life for the nice white people of South Carolina who come to see them.

GROSS: You've been describing her life in South Carolina. When she gets back on the Underground Railroad and gets off on the next stop, it's North Carolina, which is a real contrast to South Carolina. Would you describe a little bit about the laws in North Carolina?

WHITEHEAD: North Carolina, as she discovers, doesn't put up a false front of it's, you know, true intent. In order to solve the problem of slavery, they've outlawed all black people. And so if you're - have dark skin and you're found in North Carolina, you can be lynched, executed. And so it's a white separatist-supremacist state, much in the way that towns in Oregon, when they were being settled, were settled on a white separatist-supremacist ideal. So, again, it's taking, you know, aspects of American history and then taking them to a certain extreme.

That section in North Carolina was inspired by one of the more better-known slave narratives, Harriet Jacobs' "Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl." And she was in North Carolina and fled her abusive master, who had sexual designs upon her, and hid seven years in an attic until she could be - get passage out of town. So Cora is trapped in an attic that overlooks the town park, and every Friday, there's a happy lynching festival where they execute the latest - the latest black person who's been caught up in their program of genocide. It's a - that's a (laughter) kind of a bit of a - I guess if I put it that way, it sounds a bit bleak.

GROSS: A bit?

(LAUGHTER)

GROSS: Perhaps.

(LAUGHTER)

GROSS: Well, we have to take a short break here. But we'll be right back. My guest is Colson Whitehead. His new novel is called "The Underground Railroad." This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. And if you're just joining us, my guest is writer Colson Whitehead. His new novel is called "The Underground Railroad." It's the Oprah Winfrey book club pick. And it's a novel about an escaped slave. And the book imagines that she reaches freedom through the Underground Railroad, but the railroad is literally like a locomotive, like, literally, a railroad. And when she goes from state to state, each state represents another aspect of American possibility and how they might have dealt with slavery and racism.

The story is also about a slave catcher who is trying to catch Cora. He tried to catch her mother and failed, so he's really determined this time around to catch who he's looking for.

There's slave narratives that we have access to now. I'm not sure there's slave catcher narratives. Did you have any first-person accounts to go to?

WHITEHEAD: You know, I actually didn't research the slave catcher's point of view. I think the slave catcher's point of view is probably the default setting on American history (laughter). I think it's the dominators and the slave catchers and the slave masters who write the chronicle of 17th and 18th-century America. So I felt I had it down. You know, in terms of research, there aren't as many histories of the Underground Railroad as you'd think. "Bound For Canaan," which came out, maybe, eight - or seven or eight years ago was a great resource that got me grounded.

But my main research was reading slave narratives, the famous ones - Frederick Douglas, Harriet Jacobs - but also the ones collected by the U.S. government in the 1930s by the WPA. It was very nice of FDR to put writers to work, and they sent out writers to interview 80-year-old, 90-year-old former slaves, people who were young when the Civil War came around. And there are thousands of these accounts - some are paragraphs. Some are three pages. And they're very of sort of matter-of-fact of what went on. Sometimes, they're just describing plantation life, sometimes the tortures, how they lived. And it was a great resource just to get slang and, I guess, as a writer, the variety of a plantation experience.

Slavery was one thing in Maryland in the 1780s. It was another thing in Georgia once the, you know, the cotton boom starts up in the early 1800s. There are plantations that are - that have two slaves, plantations that have 80 slaves. And, you know, just seeing the variety of the slave experience allowed me to have less anxiety about making my own plantation because there's so many different combinations that existed. So...

GROSS: What's some of the slang or other language that you got from reading slave narratives or reading the WPA oral histories?

WHITEHEAD: Well, I mean, you know, one person's just, like, yeah, once a year, we'd get a new pair of wooden shoes from master. I was, like, you wore wooden shoes? I mean, it was grueling and mind-boggling to just go back 200 years and think about people lived and the conditions, the food - you know, just a biscuit in the morning and then you have to work for 10 hours in the hot sun under the fear of being, you know, beaten.

And I think in the years where I mulled writing the book - should I write it now, or should I not do it? You know, part of it was the fear of, you know, confronting the reality of slavery. And once I started doing the research, I realized how much I was going to have to put my protagonist and all her friends through. And that became a different level of being daunted by how my great-great-grandparents lived and struggled.

GROSS: You know, toward the end of the book, one of the character - you know, they're talking about what to do and how to help black people and who can be helped and who maybe can't be helped, so let's not spend the energy trying to save them. And so one character says, we're not all going to make it. Some of us are too far gone. Slavery has twisted their minds, an imp filling their minds with foul ideas. They've given themselves over to whiskey and its false comforts, to hopelessness and its constant devils. Those who will not, cannot respect themselves - it's too late for them.

So it's this debate. It's, like, is it too late for someone? And a character says, we can't save everyone. But that doesn't mean we can't try. Here's one delusion - that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade. And to me, like, that's what the book is really about, how the scars of slavery will never fade.

WHITEHEAD: Well, I mean, yeah, that's a debate that was going on in the 1800s. How do we create a program of black uplift, some of those have been so damaged by slavery that they'll never be teachers, doctors? Who can we save? And there are echoes in that argument, obviously, now. I mean, people, say - people are addicted to crack, they're on welfare, you know, they're too far gone to be saved.

And conceiving the book, it didn't take a lot of energy to find parallels for the language of the slave problem and the inner city problem. All those debates still are going on in different - you know, with different sort of coded language. But, yes, the legacy of slavery reverberates in Jim Crow laws, separate but equal, institutionalized racism, the incarceration state, all the things that the people in "The Underground Railroad" are struggling with, have parallels, echoes today.

When I learned about slave patrollers - slave patrollers in the early 1800s were the de facto police force in the South. And it was their job to catch runaway slaves and make sure that any black person walking down the street had their papers. And they could stop, detain any black person, demand to see their papers. And, of course, if you were - didn't have license to move around freely, you were beaten, taken back to your master, jailed.

And it was just an early version of stop and frisk. Any white person with the slightest authority could demand to see the bonafides of any black person walking around. And, of course, growing up in a city, I'm acquainted with stop and frisk, with being pulled over by cops, with being handcuffed and questioned as I'm going about my business - obviously not every day, but it's a common occurrence for most black people in America. So we have a new name for it, stop and frisk. And 200 years ago, it was law and order on them.

GROSS: When were you handcuffed?

WHITEHEAD: I was in high school. And I was in a grocery store, and a policeman came up to me and said, put your hands behind your back. And I was taken out to the police car and a white woman had been mugged a few blocks away. And I guess I was the only black teenager - or probably the first black teenager the police had found. And she was like that's not him, and they let me go. But...

GROSS: What did you say to the police?

WHITEHEAD: Well, I'd been prepared from my father, who had told me that, you know, whenever I leave the house I'm a target. And if I'm in the wrong neighborhood, I can be lynched. You don't call it lynching, but, you know, in - '80s, there were various cases of young black men wandering just the wrong neighborhood in Brooklyn and getting beaten or killed.

So, you know, I'd been prepared by my father. You know, that's the narrative of black life. But that was the first time I'd had such a first, you know - (laughter) the real, the true introduction to it, which is, you know, being handcuffed and interrogated by cops.

GROSS: Did your parents register a formal complaint?

WHITEHEAD: (Laughter) When I told my father, like, a week later, he was like, you didn't get their badge number? And I was like it didn't occur to me. And he was - you know, it was the confirmation of his fear that he had each time I left the house anyway. And then also to know that there is no opportunity of redress upset him. And I was sort of - you know, I can do that. I actually have the agency to ask for a badge number. I'm not sure if they tell you if you ask. So, you know, it made my 16-year-old head spin.

GROSS: So you waited a week to tell your parents (laughter).

WHITEHEAD: Yeah. Well, I was going to buy - on the way to party and buying beer. So I think that...

GROSS: Right.

WHITEHEAD: ...Registered more from me than - anyway.

GROSS: My guest is Colson Whitehead. His new novel is called "The Underground Railroad." We'll talk more after a break. And Maureen Corrigan will review a psychological suspense novel about a 15-year-old girl who aspires to compete as a gymnast in the Olympics. I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross back with Colson Whitehead. We're talking about his new novel "The Underground Railroad," which tells the story of a runaway slave and re-imagines the pre-Civil War South. It's the current selection for Oprah's Book Club. Yesterday, The New York Times ran an excerpt in a special standalone section.

GROSS: For some reason, we seem to be in a time when a lot of writers are examining slavery in a fictional setting, and I'm thinking of, among other things, the Yaa Gyasi novel "Homegoing," Paul Beatty's novel "The Sellout," James Hannaham's "Delicious Foods." They're not all literally historical. Some of these are fables or they have fantastic elements in it. There's the reworking of "Roots" on TV, "12 Years A Slave" the movie, the TV series "Underground," now, of course, your novel "The Underground Railroad." Have you been thinking about why that's happening now?

WHITEHEAD: Well, yeah, I mean, as part of a phenomenon, you know, it's hard for me to step out and judge it. But I think if you want to tell the American story, a lot of it is slavery. That's how this country, you know, came into being, became a economic force in the world. And if you want to tell the story of black people in America, it starts on a slave ship in, you know, most cases. And so I think if you want to think about how America ticks, it starts with slavery.

People call slavery the original sin. I think the original sin is actually taking away land from Native Americans, so it's a second original sin. And so why - I think of why this nation is so screwed up. A lot of it does go to the sort of foundational errors in the country's origin. And also I think in how we see each other. In terms of, you know, the remake of "Roots" and some of the novels that are about slavery that are coming out now.

I mean, definitely when I was done with the book, I was all slaveried (ph) out. And I'm not going to see the "Roots" reboot. And so I've had some time away from the material. I had to immerse myself in the material in order to create a realist depiction of Cora and everyone else on the plantation. I also had to have some distance to shape the material in an artistic way. And so you're close to it and also at a remove in order to, you know, play the proper role as an artist. And I wrote a hundred pages, and I thought I had a good thing going. And I decided to see "12 Years A Slave," which I hadn't seen yet.

And while I was able to put all the stuff on the page, seeing the movie made me really upset, and I could only get through half of it. So it was one thing to put my characters through the reality of slavery and something different to see actual humans, you know - they're actors, but

go through some of the things I was writing about. And it was too much. You know, it was - it became too close seeing children ripped from their parents and sold off and seeing the auction scenes and the things that I had put on the page enacted by actors. I had to stop the movie, and I still haven't finished it because seeing a real human face was too much.

GROSS: What did you learn about slavery in school?

WHITEHEAD: It always seems I've kind of skipped over that (laughter).

GROSS: Really?

WHITEHEAD: I think, you know, my teachers were - teachers were more comfortable talking about Martin Luther King than plantation life, so I don't remember, you know, learning much about it until I got to college, frankly. I think "Roots," for many people is their first real introduction to slavery. You know, I was 7 when it was broadcast. And my parents - I have three siblings - brought us all out to watch it together over those, you know, historic nights. So, I mean, I remember more about LeVar Burton than...

GROSS: (Laughter).

WHITEHEAD: ...My teacher standing up in the front of the class.

GROSS: You've described your parents of being - as being of the Civil Rights generation. Did your parents talk with you about family history in terms of race? Did they know anything about your family ancestors and their slave lives?

WHITEHEAD: Well, yeah, I mean, you know, race isn't separate from family history. It's, you know, it's all one thing. So, you know, my grandmother came from Barbados in the 1920s. And that was a big sugar plantation island. And I think when cotton became the focus of slavery in the States, they took lessons from the Caribbean system which was brutal - much more brutal than what we/they had at the time. And so that's one kind of slavery.

And then there's - my mother, on one side, had free people of color who had a tavern in Virginia, and on the other side, on, you know, her father's side, came from, you know, slave stock in Virginia. So once you start going back a hundred years, there are different kinds of slave experience that, you know, people were forced to endure.

I can't say that we - my parents talked about slavery every day. It was more about, I think, being aware of how racist the country is and how do you deal with it and how can you live a happy life in a country that's so sort of twisted and screwed up, if that makes sense.

GROSS: Did writing the book affect your approach to parenting and what you wanted to tell your children, like how much you want them to know about African-American history, how much you want them to know about slavery, about how that helps explain a lot of the

conflicts that we're having now, a lot of the racism that exists - that still exists in the country now?

WHITEHEAD: Well, yeah. I mean, they're very young. And I'm not sure when they're going to be ready to read my books. I mean, I think, you know, my daughter who's 11 sort of picked up on the excitement of how people were reacting to the book. And I gave her a copy. And she started it and I think made a couple pages in, honestly (laughter) you know, before she stopped. And she's not used to reading more adult fiction. And I think, you know, hopefully she'll come back to it when she's a little older and she'll be able to process it.

But I remember, you know, when Obama was elected. You know, I didn't wear a tie very often. I put on a tie for some event, and she was like, you look like the president, Daddy. And that's her idea of a person in a tie, is the president. And so she's taking certain things for granted. I, you know, took my parents' struggles, their triumphs for granted. And, you know, as you get older and you're making your own sacrifices and making your way in the world, you know, I think most people appreciate what their parents went through.

But the way - my advantages are obviously much greater than what my parents had and, you know, their dreams for themselves. And my grandparents' dreams for their kids were of a certain size, considering the realities of the day. And so I want to introduce my kids to the reality of the world. I think I'll approach it differently than, you know, say, my dad who had, you know, had a very - what's the right word for it? - a very - he was perpetually on a war footing with, you know, with the world. And I think that was the reality of growing up in the 40s while...

GROSS: What do you mean when you say he was on a war footing with the world?

WHITEHEAD: He was on guard in a way that - in a much more extreme way than I am, than I think my kids will be. You know, in writing the book, I'm talking about the perpetuation of different racial systems over time but also gradual improvements. I mean, I think in order for Cora to leave the plantation, she has to have the hope that there's a better life for her out there or else you just stay and die on the plantation. So while a lot of the book is despairing, and she suffers a lot, she has to have an idea that there is a better place up north in Canada or someplace else where things are a little better.

And while I can see that the country is still deeply racist, I have to believe for my kid's sake that things are improving quite slowly. And I think things do. And I think that's the pace of racial progress. It's quite slow. We have our little victories, and they accumulate over time, but we have a long way to go. And I don't think you have to - just look at the election and some of the rhetoric in the last 13 months around the other that we have a lot of work to do in terms of getting to that better place.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Colson Whitehead. His new novel is called "The Underground Railroad." Let's take a break here, then we'll talk more. This is FRESH AIR.

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. And if you're just joining us, my guest is writer Colson Whitehead. His new novel is called "The Underground Railroad," and it's about an escaped slave. Your book is the selection for the Oprah Book Club, which is a pretty big deal. I think you found out about this in April, but you weren't allowed to say anything because it wasn't public yet until, like, very recently. Was that a hard secret to keep?

WHITEHEAD: Yeah (laughter) it was crippling. I think - you know, people just say when's your book coming out? And I'm September, knowing that it's August. I told my wife. And - you know, and that was about it. And so on the one hand, I like to - you know, sort of a pessimistic view of things.

And this sort of made me not able to be - keep my usual level of depression going because I was - and I still am in a pretty good mood about Oprah, you know, picking it. You know, I mean, obviously, she just reaches a huge audience and people who have no interest in reading a book about elevator inspectors or zombies or poker or black kids growing up in the '80s will come to the book now because...

GROSS: The subjects of your previous book, in case anybody...

WHITEHEAD: Yes, yeah...

GROSS: ...Missed that, yeah.

WHITEHEAD: And I'm not sure why people wouldn't want to pick up a book about elevator inspectors. But having Oprah testify for the book was really great.

GROSS: So is it going to be like a little documentary about you and a big interview?

WHITEHEAD: Yeah. We...

GROSS: Have you done that already?

WHITEHEAD: In May - yeah, in May, I flew out to Southern California, where she lives, and, you know, we filmed an interview. And even that - you know, that was very cloak and dagger. I have to say, it was like meeting sales reps and, you know...

(LAUGHTER)

WHITEHEAD: ...Sales people. And my wife came along, and she's in publishing. And she had to, like, make up an excuse for her co-workers. So it was all - you know, it was all very surreal. I got sick of lying, and it was a real relief when it was finally announced a couple days ago. And - but, yes, you know, it's been hard to maintain the same level of nihilism that I've been accustomed to.

GROSS: You sound crushed that you couldn't maintain your level of depression that you're accustomed to.

WHITEHEAD: Well, I'm used to it (laughter). It's a very comfy couch, so I'm sure - which I'll return to, I'm sure, soon enough.

GROSS: (Laughter) OK, how reassuring. So I'm going to take a little detour here. Your grandfather...

WHITEHEAD: Sure.

GROSS: ...Owned a chain of funeral homes in New Jersey. Did you grow up with a lot of conversations about death and dead bodies?

WHITEHEAD: You know, my parents - he passed away when I was very young. And my - but my mother was raised, you know - if you've just seen "Six Feet Under," the family lives in the house where they do the services and do the embalming. And that's - that was her setup. So she grew up having to run the house. And in the basement, that's where all the dead bodies were and where all the prep work went on.

And so - so, you know, the business is still in the family. Her sisters run it in New Jersey. There was a lot of talk about death in our house because we all love horror movies. And so family ritual on Thanksgiving, we'd have a nice big dinner of turkey and then watch two splatter movies.

(LAUGHTER)

WHITEHEAD: So death came from our communal love of horror - horror movies, you know...

GROSS: Well, one of your books, "Zone One," is about a zombie plague in New York. And I'm wondering if being exposed to discussion of preparing dead bodies for a funeral - for funerals, you know, for burial played into your interest in zombies.

WHITEHEAD: No. My mom - you know, my mom, you know, always just talks about it with a sort of horrified delight about sneaking down - sneaking down in the basement and, you know, taking a peek at all the implements and the preparation tables. You know, in terms of "Zone One," you know, it comes out from watching horror movies, you know, with my family.

When I saw "Night Of The Living Dead," when I was - I saw it when I was very young and struck by the fact that there was a black protagonist. He's the one sane person in a story, and I hadn't seen a lot of movies with black heroes at that point.

WHITEHEAD: And so I think that stayed with me over the years. There seemed to be a way in which a black person trying to navigate the world as white mobs are trying to tear him limb from limb was a compelling story and also a way of commenting on America. And so that's in "Zone One." And I think it's definitely in a more overt way in "The Underground Railroad."

GROSS: In your novel, there are several ads for escaped slaves offering bounties for them. Are any of those taken from actual ads for escaped slaves?

WHITEHEAD: Yeah, I mean, I, you know, I like...

GROSS: Is ad the right word? Should I be saying poster? I'm not sure what language to use.

WHITEHEAD: The ones in the book are classified advertisements from newspapers, estate masters advertising...

GROSS: Are they real ones?

WHITEHEAD: Yeah, they're real. They're advertising, you know, be on the lookout for my slave Bessie. She has a scar on her neck. She ran away for some reason, I'm not sure why. And, you know, I mean, I like being a mimic when I'm writing. But then sometimes you can't compete with the actual historical document. And so the University of North Carolina digitized these runaway slave classifieds from newspapers at the early part of the 19th century. And there was five of them. And, you know, the first four are mostly verbatim from newspapers. And then the fifth one is Cora's. And that's one I created for her, hopefully being true to her story.

GROSS: Well, why don't you read one of the ones that are - that is largely real for us, and by real I mean you got it from the original text.

WHITEHEAD: Yes, and so these ran in newspapers. And here is one. (Reading) Thirty dollars reward will be given to any person who will deliver to me, or confine in any jail in the state so that I can get her again, a likely yellow Negro girl, 18 years of age, who ran away nine months past. She's an artfully lively girl and will no doubt attempt to pass as a free person, has a noticeable scar on her elbow occasioned by a burn. I've been informed she is lurking in and about Edenton. Benjamin P. Wells, Murfreesboro, Jan. 5, 1812. Was that, like...

GROSS: What goes through your mind when you read that?

WHITEHEAD: I read it aloud, I think, am I doing a good Ken Burns narrator-like...

(LAUGHTER)

WHITEHEAD: ...Rendition? And then, you know, it was just - you realize that there's so many aspects of slavery you don't think about. And one of it is just like when your slave runs away, what do you do? Well, you put an ad in a newspaper the same way that you put an ad for a lost cat in a laundromat. And you describe them - she has a burn on her elbow. And you give characteristics - she can be identified - and then offer money for a reward. And so, you know, it's property. It's your lost pet that you're trying to, you know, get back. And, you know, and there'd just be a page full of, you know, 20 ads like, find my escaped slave.

And some of them are totally clueless, obviously, like, she left for no reason at - you know, probably for a very good reason, or, you know, she has a downcast expression. I wonder why she is a downcast expression - because you've brutalized her for her whole life. You realize just how - I guess it's the banality of evil. There was a process for everything. There was a system. And everything's accounted for, even what do you do when your slave escapes? You pay, you know, five bucks to the newspaper so that you can get her back.

GROSS: Well, Colson Whitehead, thank you so much for talking with us and coming back to FRESH AIR.

WHITEHEAD: It was a lot of fun, thanks.

GROSS: Colson Whitehead's new novel is called "The Underground Railroad." After we take a short break, Maureen Corrigan will review a new psychological suspense novel about a 15-year-old girl, a gymnast, who aspires to compete in the Olympics. This is FRESH AIR.

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