

BOOKS

‘You’ll see the true America’

Duncan White admires a novel about a train that takes runaway plantation slaves on a Swiftian tour of the States

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by Colson Whitehead

320PP, FLEET, £14.99, EBOOK £7.99



★★★★★

The history of the activists who helped slaves escape plantations to the safety of the free states and Canada is only sporadically documented. It isn't clear when this ad hoc network came into being or gained its name – “the Underground Railroad”. It is also unclear how many slaves were rescued: the historian David Foner estimates between 1,000 and 5,000 a year from 1830-60.

The obscurity may frustrate historians, but it suits storytellers perfectly, and with race again at the sharp end of American political discourse, tales of the Underground Railroad are enjoying a resurgence. *Underground*, a television series about a group of escaped slaves, has been commissioned for a second season. Viola Davis is about to star in a TV film about the incredible life of Harriet Tubman, ex-slave and abolitionist, who is also about to appear on the new \$20 note.

The appeal of these stories is clear, indulging our fantasy that we would surely have been on the right side of history. Just as we like to think we would have joined the French resistance, so we would have been station agents on the Underground Railroad. Such stories have even become a distinct genre, something like an abolitionist action movie.

Initially, at least, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* appears to conform to the nascent genre's expectations. There is the pathologically cruel plantation owner whose violence prompts Cora and Caesar to stage a daring moonlit escape through the swamp; there is the narrow escape made all the more terrifying by the baroque cruelties that would await them on recapture; there is Ridgeway, the remorseless slave hunter with a twisted code.

Whitehead is a superb storyteller and in those tense first 60 pages he barely allows you to draw breath. But I couldn't help wondering, when there are so many accounts of real escapes, why he had created a fictional

one. As soon as the question had occurred, the novel answered it – in a strange and unexpected way.

When Cora and Caesar finally meet their contact at the Underground Railroad, the metaphor comes to life. Through a trapdoor beneath a barn, they are led by their conductor, Lumbly, to a platform where a rumbling presages the arrival of a black locomotive in “its hulking strangeness”. The Railroad is, in Whitehead's vision, an actual railroad, in a network of hidden tunnels.

“If you want to see what this nation is all about,” Lumbly tells Cora, “you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America.” Whitehead is also addressing the reader: he is going to be our conductor on this Swiftian journey through America.

In the chapters that follow, the Railroad takes Cora to South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee and Indiana, each state having a markedly different approach to its black population. Whitehead brilliantly intertwines his allegory with history, punctuating his bleak Bildungsroman with real advertisements that offer rewards for the capture of runaway slaves.

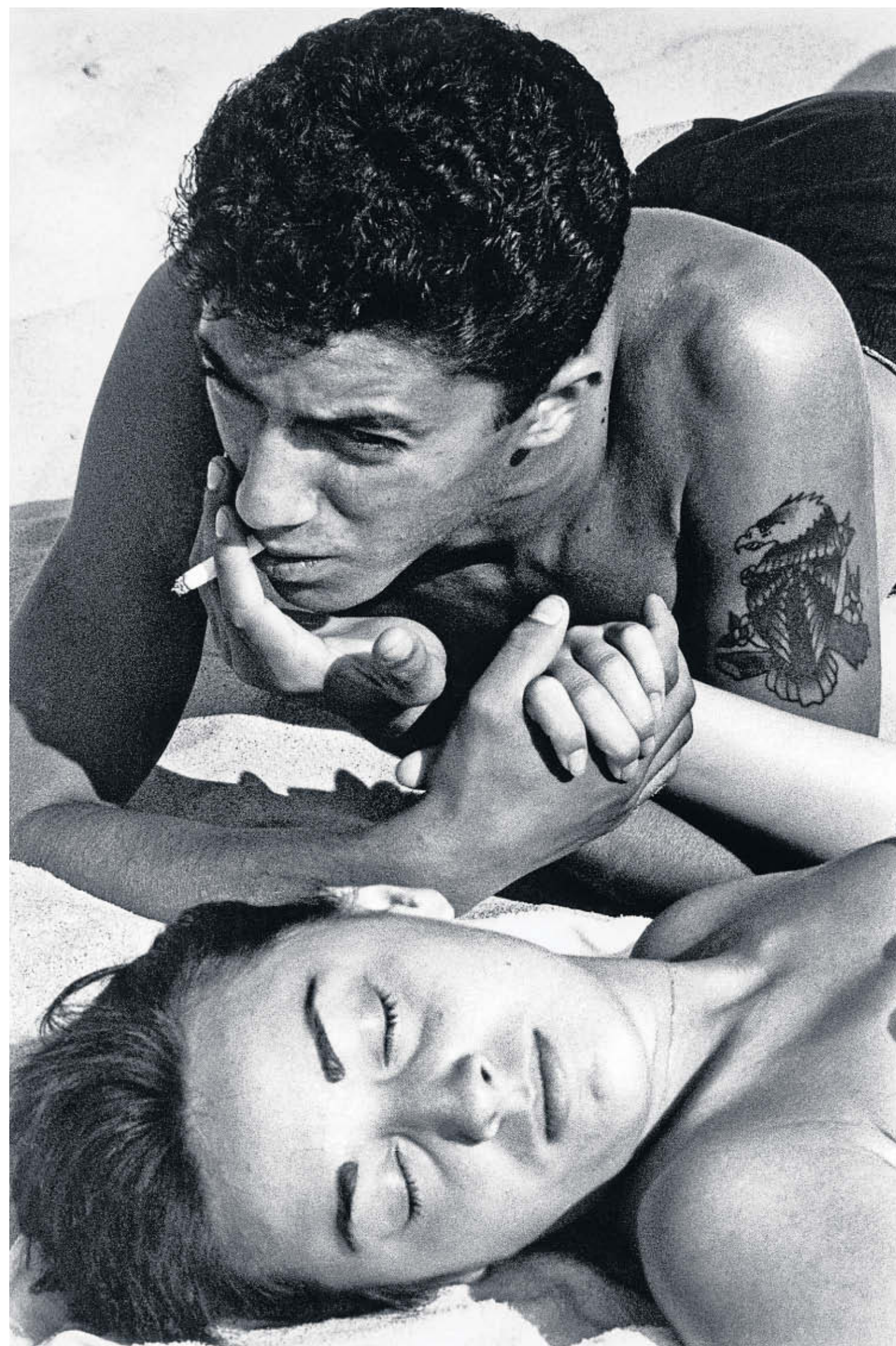
No sooner does Cora feel safe than a fresh danger presents itself. In South Carolina she adopts a new identity and gets a job but soon realises that this ostensibly benign community has sinister plans for its black population. In North Carolina, she finds a society seeking to whitewash itself in an orgy of violence: simply being black is a death sentence. All the while, Ridgeway is on her trail.

Writing at the peak of his game, Whitehead withholds, digresses and recirculates through his twists and revelations, denying the reader easy consolation. Cora is not a sentimental character; she was born and forged on the plantation and has a bloody-minded obduracy that keeps her going. She survives and, by doing so, she bears witness to violent and ugly truths, looking straight into “the true face of America”.

Whitehead's achievement is truly remarkable: by giving the Underground Railroad a new mythology, he has found a way of confronting other myths, older and persistent, about the United States. His book cannot have enough readers.



To order this book from the Telegraph for £12.99 plus £1.99 p&p call 0844 871 1515



PHOTOGRAPHY

Bruce Davidson never sneaks a shot. He delves into the intimate, but always by permission, finding it easy to win his subjects' trust. He has been doing it a long

time: he was only 10 when, in 1943, he bought his first camera – a Falcon 127 – and his mother made up a dark room for him in the basement in Illinois. At 24, on US military

service outside Paris, he became the youngest member of Magnum, the photographers' cooperative, having tracked down his hero, Henri Cartier-Bresson, to show him his work.

Bruce Davidson's *Survey* encompasses 50 years of social documentary, from his New Jersey series on *The Dwarf* to his photographs of the Selma march. *Aperture*, £45

Coney Island, Brooklyn, 1959 from Bruce Davidson's series *Brooklyn Gang*

Injected with hamster ovaries

A superb memoir looks at the indignities IVF has made normal, says *Helen Brown*

AVALANCHE

by Julia Leigh

144PP, FABER, £12.99, EBOOK £7.19



★★★★★

For a great many nights, the Australian novelist Julia Leigh injected herself with an artificial hormone produced from genetically modified Chinese hamster ovary cells. She performed this routine modern fertility treatment “knowing that no matter how hard I hoped, no matter what I tried, chances were I'd never have a child”.

Leigh was 38 when she first walked into an IVF clinic with her partner, Paul. There they learnt that, although nothing was discernibly “wrong” with either of them, and despite the amazing and rapid advances in technology, the odds of their conceiving this way were still slim, and would become slimmer when Leigh passed 40.

The emotions, science and statistics are bafflingly complex, but Leigh nails them all in a volume that lays bare her five years on the IVF roller coaster. Like Rachel Cusk, she writes about herself and her intimate circle with arresting honesty. The kind of deep, dark pain that people normally hug to themselves is exposed in high definition.

It's the sort of prose that people often call “unflinching”, although *Avalanche* actually contains a lot of flinching: at the sight of needles and at the difficulties of writing honestly about oneself. She imagines her ex-husband asking: “Why are you writing this, Rat-wife? Rat-patient. Hey. Queen of the Rats, why?” While she believes in the truth of what she is writing, she knows that “Paul would shape a different story. What's more, I know my own next sentence could turn this way or that.”

Leigh first met her partner at university. She was 19, he was 23. Their romance collapsed after a year, when Paul wanted to sleep with other people. This was no surprise. Early in what she describes as their “courtship” he'd taken her aside and told her “he'd been at a party and performed cunnilingus on a girl against the living-room wall while everyone was dancing. That was the word he used – cunnilingus – very formal.” They remained friends and reignited their romance when Leigh was 37, living in New York and working on a screenplay and a novel. Both had a “string of tender affections” behind them. His included a marriage and a 12-year-old son. But their connection, she

feels, was different: “inevitable”. Their “souls flared”. He said he would do anything to make her happy and asked what she wanted. She wanted him and she wanted a child. He agreed. But after their wedding, she says: “One of my inner eels slipped loose, an eel that took the guise of reasonable caution but was really a small, wriggling mistrust.”

Compared with the “Gordian knot” of her love for Paul, the gentle, steady love Leigh feels for her nieces and nephews is “a plain good thing”. A child of her own would give her constant contact with such love. But in quest of it, she must navigate the range of options offered by the “druids” at the IVF clinic. She has to choose which drugs to inject, whether to freeze or implant embryos and how much to spend. All this,



Unflinchingly honest: Julia Leigh

while shot full of hormones that build up – “like snow in the night” – to leave her bloated, labile and prone to tears. At times she tries to purify herself with yoga and decaffeinated drinks. At others, she drinks whiskey and wails. Paul leaves, and she has to find a sperm donor.

At first Leigh doesn't tell many people about the IVF and those she does tell say the wrong thing. Her mother says, flat out, that she is not cut out to be a mother. Friends have stories that offer too much hope or too little. The public, she believes, have a “qualified sympathy” for women who undertake IVF. She feels she is treated like a smoker with lung cancer: “What did you expect?”

According to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, around 47,442 women in Britain have a total of 62,155 cycles of IVF or Intra-cytoplasmic Sperm Injections each year. There's an emotional avalanche coming for most of those women.



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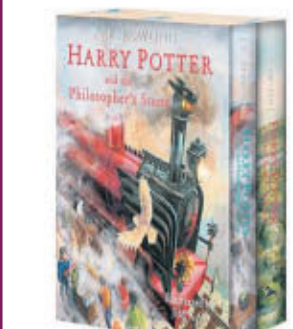
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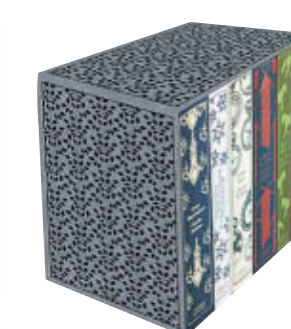
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