



# Underground Airlines

*Ben H. Winters*

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It is the present-day, and the world is as we know it: smartphones, social networking and Happy Meals. Save for one thing: the Civil War never occurred.

A gifted young black man calling himself Victor has struck a bargain with federal law enforcement, working as a bounty hunter for the US Marshall Service. He's got plenty of work. In this version of America, slavery continues in four states called "the Hard Four." On the trail of a runaway known as Jackdaw, Victor arrives in Indianapolis knowing that something isn't right--with the case file, with his work, and with the country itself.

A mystery to himself, Victor suppresses his memories of his childhood on a plantation, and works to infiltrate the local cell of a abolitionist movement called the Underground Airlines. Tracking Jackdaw through the back rooms of churches, empty parking garages, hotels, and medical offices, Victor believes he's hot on the trail. But his strange, increasingly uncanny pursuit is complicated by a boss who won't reveal the extraordinary stakes of Jackdaw's case, as well as by a heartbreaking young woman and her child who may be Victor's salvation. Victor himself may be the biggest obstacle of all--though his true self remains buried, it threatens to surface.

Victor believes himself to be a good man doing bad work, unwilling to give up the freedom he has worked so hard to earn. But in pursuing Jackdaw, Victor discovers secrets at the core of the country's arrangement with the Hard Four, secrets the government will preserve at any cost.

*Underground Airlines* is a ground-breaking novel, a wickedly imaginative thriller, and a story of an America that is more like our own than we'd like to believe.

## Underground Airlines Details

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Author : Ben H. Winters

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# From Reader Review Underground Airlines for online ebook

## Faith says

Jim, a 40 year old black man who has escaped from slavery, is tearfully trying to convince a priest, Father Barton, to help him free his wife. But his name isn't Jim (he goes by Victor, but that isn't his name either), he doesn't have a wife and it's the present day, not the 1800s. In this terrific alternative history thriller there was no Civil War and Lincoln did not free the slaves. Slavery is still legal in four southern states. Victor works in the north as an agent of the U.S. Marshals Service tracking down escaped slaves, and he is now in Indianapolis hunting for the slave Jackdaw. Victor knows that the priest is part of a network of abolitionists known as the Underground Airline and he suspects that they are hiding Jackdaw.

This was a very imaginative and surprising plot. Motives are never straight forward. The Marshals become increasingly desperate to recover Jackdaw, and Barton is just as desperate to keep him away from them. Victor is caught in the middle between these two sides and each is willing to both bribe and threaten Victor to get his help. The book was particularly exciting when Victor had to head to one of the slave states to recover some information. He is required to have a white escort. Victor is a very complicated character, filled with anger and with an interesting backstory that is revealed gradually over the course of the book. He is a good person but very skilled at deception. He managed to free himself from slavery but not from racism and his work for the Marshals is not entirely voluntary.

The pace of this book was very fast. I had not intended to finish it in a day but I didn't want to stop listening to it. The ending was not all together satisfying, but I liked it. The audiobook was read by William DeMeritt, who has a voice that is extremely pleasant to listen to.

I received a free copy of this book from the publisher but I wound up listening to the audiobook borrowed from the library.

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## Matthew says

It has been years since I have seen the movie Blade Runner, but as I was reading this I kept saying to myself, for some reason this reminds me of Blade Runner. Then, I started describing the book to a co-worker (and I didn't tell him about what it reminded me of) and the first thing he said is "Sounds like Blade Runner". So, I guess I was not too far off! (I did recently read the book Blade Runner is based on, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? so maybe that contributed to it).

Another thing about this book is that it was very meta for me (is at the word all the young whipper-snappers are using these days?) The book takes place mostly in Indianapolis, which is where I live. I am familiar with all the locations discussed and, at one point he specifically mentions "the corner of Southport and Emerson" right as I was driving by that very corner! (insert Twilight Zone music here!)

It looks like the reviews on this book are very mixed, but I enjoyed it. I thought the story line was creative and the alternate history the author created was dark, brutal, and very interesting. For me, when it comes to writing interesting alternate history, it is best when the alteration is to something major and serious; the results definitely hit harder when this is the case.

In reading some of the criticisms of this book, the major one is that the author is white writing about an issue affecting black people from a black viewpoint. As a white man myself, I probably risk controversy on my own part by commenting on this, but hope my view comes across as straightforward and non-biased. I think that he did a respectful job with the story. If there are people who don't think this is the case, I completely understand and I am not trying to convince you otherwise! The author did cite classic black sci-fi author Octavia E. Butler (specifically her novel *Kindred*) for inspiration.

In closing, I hope I have not offended anyone with my review and thoughts on this book and approached this with an open mind. It was an interesting and thought provoking novel that I think is worth checking out if you like alternative history or have an interest in Civil Rights based stories.

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### **Amanda Mae says**

If you've seen the mockumentary *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*, you're already a little primed for this novel. This dystopian America where slavery still exists in some states is chilling in not only its accuracy to how slavery in this country was in the past, but also the repercussions and ramifications we face in both our reality and that of the book. They aren't called slaves, but People Bound to Labor, or PBs, or peebs. Technology has allowed to near total control of these enslaved people, but most of the country's cars come from Pakistan or South Africa (and still have tape decks) because the American economy as a whole isn't so great and other free countries won't deal with us. The rumored Underground Airlines moves escaped slaves up north and to Canada where they can truly be free. If they don't make it to Canada, the U.S. Marshals could track them down and send them back to the South.

This is a chilling book. It's at times a classic spy novel, but set in an alternate reality that heightens the tension even more. And our main character? Complicated to the core. You will be trying to figure him out through to the bitter end. I had trouble putting this one down. Exceptional read!

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### **Tatiana says**

I had been rather resistant to the idea of reading *Underground Airlines*. First, because of the author (did I really want to read a novel about slavery written by a white author of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Sea Monsters* from a POV of a black person?). Second, because it was hard for me to imagine a present day America where slavery could still exist (you know, some speculative premises are just too out there sometimes). But Slate writers kept talking about it, so I decided to give Ben H. Winters a chance.

And what I think about *Underground Airlines* is that it is a successful alt-history thriller. Not quite Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, but something along the lines of Paolo Bacigalupi's works. It is successful because Winters managed not to bite off more than he could chew. He penned a good thriller with a decent amount of depth without misappropriating black experiences (I think). Winters imagined alt-history became believable to me in a way I didn't expect it to be. I had thought that certainly slavery couldn't be supported for so much longer due to its basic immorality. And maybe if I had read this novel at a different time I would be pushing back harder against Winters' portrayal of how American people could logically justify going on with slavery. But this year, with a certain presidential candidate spewing racist garbage left and right, with the support of millions, Winters premise didn't sound quite that far-fetched. He managed to draw on the present-day, real events and cultural and political trends to envision an alt-world quite convincing in its

racism and inhumanity. Interestingly enough, it's the economical plausibility of hanging onto and continuing slavery didn't quite work for me.

A respectable intellectual exercise.

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## **Ij says**

### Underground Airlines

By Ben H Winters

I found "Underground Airlines" to be an interesting novel that drifts between speculative fiction and noir. Victor the protagonist is a contractor for the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS).

The story is an alternative historical where slavery was not completely abolished, but still exists in the "Hard States" (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Carolina). The story is broken into three (3) parts.

Part 1 (North), about 2/3rds of the book.

Victor is in Indianapolis to track down an escaped slave, named Jackdraw, under his contract with USMS. Victor himself is an escaped slave. Victor is using the name Jim Dirkson to infiltrate into the underground airlines. The underground airlines is a modern type of underground railroad with similar goals and jobs.

Jim meets with several members of the underground airlines in order to find Jackdraw. Jim also meets Martha, a white woman, who becomes a major player in the story. Jim reports to Deputy Marshal Bridges in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Wow, I can walk to Gaithersburg in fifteen (15) minutes.

Without adding too many spoilers Jim finds Jackdraw. This begins another part of the story and Jim's mission is expanded.

Part 2 (South)

Jim and Martha head south, to Alabama, to find a package that Jackdraw left behind. They have to trace back through Jackdraw's escape route in order to find the package. Jim takes the part of Martha's slave worker to enter the facility of GGSi a corporation that uses slaves in their operation. With some difficulty Jim tracks down the package, but Jim gets caught in the process.

Part 3 (North), all of twenty-three (23) pages.

I really can't explain how they got back to Indianapolis, but they did. Jim seems to have been working for both the USMS and the underground airlines. The rest of the story has to be accomplished in twenty-three (23) pages. I will let you decide if it makes sense.

The story ebbed and flowed, but, I made it through. I enjoyed this book and rounded up my 3.5 rating to four (4). Based on the ending, we can expect to read about more escapades of Jim and Martha in another book.

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## Jennifer Masterson says

Alright so I'm DNF'ing this and giving it 2.5 rounded up to 3 Stars. I listened to 60% and had a hard time staying with the story. I'm not sure why but it's just not doing it for me. There are too many references to pop culture. I mean Michael Jackson, Norman Rockwell and James Brown? Well James Brown was suppose to have defected to Europe. It's too far fetched for me. This is about slavery still in existence because the Civil War never happened. I wanted it to be something it wasn't.

It started out very interesting and thought provoking and then just lost me. I'm sorry. I wish I could write a better review but I just can't pinpoint why I don't want to stay with this one.

Don't take my word for it. Most people on Goodreads have liked this book. I was listening to the audio and the narration was good. Also Dystopian Fiction is not my genre at all. I was one of the few that didn't like "Station Eleven".

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## Britany says

### 3.5 Stars

**What would the world look like if the civil war never took place and slavery was still a thing?**

I tend to really enjoy alternate reality books especially given the historical references and timeline. Our narrator (who touts multiple names) is living in the North, doing a job he loathes, but it pays the bills. We slowly figure out what it is "Victor" is hunting and it left me with a sick feeling in my gut. Along the way, we meet a myriad of characters including a white Martha and her mixed son- Lionel (who I adored). Victor finds himself crossed between two lines and figuring out which side he's playing on. He is tasked with an impossible mission to go into the deep South to find a needle in a haystack- a single envelope that has information that could change the country as they know it if released.

The writing was a bit clunky and I found the narrative jumbled around to try to find its footing. I appreciated the author's take on this alternate world, but for me it faltered quite a bit. There were moments that dragged with the political speak, but I didn't feel that the author did a great job presenting this world. I still have so many questions!! On the other hand, there were so many moments that I couldn't turn the pages fast enough to find out what would become of our narrator on this path to complete an impossible task. I think this was too big a bite to pull off for this author, but I enjoyed the taste.

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## Jessica says

I know that there's been some *is it his story to tell?* conversation about whether or not a white author should be writing about the plight of a black character—and that conversation has its merit. But I'm giving this 4.5 stars because the construction of this story was just so good that I could not stop reading it. I took it with me on a flight to Denver for work. After five hours of travel, and a couple hours in the hotel bar waiting for my

coworkers to be ready for dinner, I was very nearly done.

This noir-ish story is a thoughtfully imagined alternate history in which the Civil War never took place and slavery still exists—albeit in a modern form—throughout a handful of Southern states. Victor, our pseudonymous narrator, is a black bounty hunter chasing down runaways for the US Marshall Service in exchange for his freedom. He's sent to Indiana to track down a slave named Jackdaw, but something feels off about the case. Haunted by memories of his own time in slavery, Victor digs deeper into the situation and eventually begins to question the long-held belief that he is a good person doing a bad job.

One of the main reasons I don't do a lot of sci-fi is because I'm not interested in world-building. But one of the reasons why I liked this is because the world-building is kept to a minimum. It's not as important a factor in speculative fiction, but Winters sprinkles his narrative with references to imagined historical events (a war with Texas) and describes how black pop culture icons such as James Brown were shaped by this alternate reality. It's believable, and I never found myself thinking about how any of it didn't make sense.

The scary thing is just how much of Winters's insights can be applied to modern America, even without the slavery.

Anyway, this is written in the vein of a Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett book. It feels an awful lot like a really excellent private eye story, but Winters didn't do the thing that sometimes bothers me with true noir stories in which the audience doesn't get to follow the protagonist's train of thought—they just figure things out and we have to trust that it made sense for them to figure it out. Winters takes us into Victor's head to reveal a wonderfully complex character. Victor is a troubled dude, but capable of self-reflection and that's a refreshing thing to see in a novel. I found myself rooting for Victor, but I wasn't entirely sure what I was rooting for him to accomplish.

This is suspenseful, dark, and gritty. It seems like a lot of my friends had lukewarm reactions to it, which surprises me a little bit. It was *so different* from what I've been reading lately, and I found it thoroughly engaging. Maybe I'll have to go back and check out the rest of Winters's backlist.

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## Richard says

Armed with a tempting and provocatively high concept plot, this new novel shot it's way to the top of my reading list for the year. This is a mystery novel that begs to be read, about an alternate present-day where the Civil War never happened, and slavery still exists in four Southern states, and about a freed black agent for the Federal Marshalls that infiltrates abolitionist cells to track down runaway slaves. I felt obligated to read it, to at least see where the concept goes from there. But it seems that this is what the author is banking on as well, because that great concept is really all there is. Beyond the cool premise is a book that moves like a stumbling drunk, awkward and tripping over itself.

The writing is clunky and the main character wooden, trying hard to be compelling but never really getting there. Winters also tries to put his cool idea to use, by dropping a few world-building alternate history nuggets throughout the story (like James Brown being a runaway slave that finds shelter in Europe and becomes a superstar there), but they ultimately feel inelegant and unearned due to the fact that the heart of the story never really engages. In fact, the whole novel feels like an early rough draft, with ideas and story points that never truly click. I give this a low score because if you take away the fancy premise, what are we



really left with in this book?

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### **Bradley says**

Just imagine for a moment an establishment spook and modern slave wrapped into one, pressed into service to hunt down and reel back in other escaped slaves, and you've got yourself a tracker right out of the bad old days of pre-civil war. A black man forced to do the devil's work.

Now imagine him in our modern world, where the American Civil War had ended in an economic truce and slavery is alive and well and made so very efficient.

Hell, just imagine how easy it'd be to track down every slave with GPS and have a world tweeting happy PR banalities to hide the horrible truth of slums in our brightest cities, labor camps like private prisons, communities openly and proudly racist and happy to thumb their noses at the rest of the world at just how they've managed to fool the IRS, twist the legal establishment, and all the while tell themselves just how humane they are to the downtrodden.

Wait... is this an alternate timeline? An excellent What-If novel? A deeply horrific and oppressive dystopia so very much like the world we've got now?

Yes. Fancy that.

But the point is, we're living it through the devil's eyes, the scared black man in this nightmare world who is forced to do unspeakable things to men and women who should be his brothers, and if you think this is a heavy-handed political tale, then think again. I got sucked right in just fine and loved the story, it's twists and turns. Do you think he finds a way to help his brothers and sisters, and get out of his horrid servitude? Does he infiltrate the Underground Railroad (ahem, sorry, Airline) or does he betray or get betrayed?

Just how complex does this tale get?

Pretty complex. And Very Satisfying. :)

It actually makes me believe that for all the crap we're living through in *\*this\** world, I'm still happy to be *\*here\**.

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### **Mogsy (MMOGC) says**

4 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <https://bibliosanctum.com/2016/07/11/...>

I became a fan of Ben H. Winters back in 2012 when I first picked up his novel *The Last Policeman*. Since then, I've been following his work, subsequently reading *Countdown City* as well as *World of Trouble* as they were released. Together, those three books make up what I think is one of the most tragically underrated series I've ever read. So of course when I heard about *Underground Airlines*, I just knew I had to read it.

And wow, what an incredible book this was. If you haven't read Winters yet, *Underground Airlines* is why

you really need to. It's very different from the past stuff I've read by him, but the writing and the storytelling both help cement in my mind that this author is entirely deserving of more attention.

His hard-hitting new book imagines what the world would look like today, if the Civil War never happened. In this alternate reality, slavery became protected in the Constitution and still exists in America in the "Hard Four" states, but even the northern parts of the country are deeply steeped in racism.

The story's protagonist is a young black man called Victor, but that is merely one of his identities. A former slave who escaped only to be captured again, Victor was forced to make a deal with the federal government and to work as a kind of bounty hunter for the US Marshals. His handlers would set him on the trail of other runaway slaves, and then order him to track them down and bring them back to their masters. It's a job that requires taking on a lot of aliases and putting on lots of different faces, but Victor is very good at playing whatever role is required of him. And whenever the work bothers him, he simply convinces himself that he's just a man doing what he needs to do to survive, and that this is the price of his freedom.

But then Victor gets a new assignment to locate a runaway slave known as Jackdaw. It's a particularly troublesome case, and from the very beginning Victor gets the sense that everything feels off. For one thing, he suspects that his boss is hiding information from him, and he doesn't know why. As he traces the clues to find Jackdaw, he also uncovers disturbing secrets related to the Hard Four and their relationships with the government. Amidst all the pieces of this puzzle, an abolitionist movement called the Underground Airlines might be the key to solving the mystery, but Victor will need to figure out how to infiltrate them first.

The world of Underground Airlines will shake you to your core. You read about the horrific conditions in the Hard Four and the racist attitudes that are so imbedded in the culture, and sometimes it's difficult to reconcile that with the modern setting of smartphones, laptops and GPS. At the same time though, perhaps our reality has more in common with this one than we'd like to believe. The issues in the novel may be magnified, but sadly they still exist in our world today.

Like many books in its genre, this one also made me ponder a lot about history. Namely, how fragile it is, in the sense how close events can come to turning out very differently. One change, one death, one missed opportunity, and everything can fall another way. Winters set out to explore this idea from top to bottom, working around the central premise: What if the Civil War never occurred? The America in his book is very different of course, but so is the entire world. No country exists in a vacuum, and America's altered history not only influences its own politics, but it makes international governments perceive Americans differently as well. Within America, the culture is transformed, divided, and ailing badly; even though there are individuals, groups, government organizations, corporations, etc. standing in apparent solidarity against the evils of slavery, institutional racism is still alive and well.

Victor is an enlightening figure as well, a complicated protagonist to lead us through this story. It is clear that he recognizes the truth from the start: that he is free but not free, not a slave but still chained to the machine that keeps states like the Hard Four running. As hard as he tries to let go of his past, it comes back to haunt him every time he goes on a new assignment. A part of him hates what he does and what he has become, but denial is a powerful thing, burying the guilt most days. Little by little though, the cracks form in his armor, and he begins to question who he really is under all those different identities. He's had to put on an act for so long, the past that he has tried so hard to escape will ultimately be the thing which helps Victor find his way back.

At the heart of it, Underground Airlines is a mystery and suspense novel, but it is still nonetheless oh so powerful. Ben H. Winters continues to impress me, going above and beyond all my expectations.

Audiobook Comments: I was also fortunate enough to review an audio copy of this book. I simply cannot praise the narration enough. William DeMeritt is a completely new narrator to me, but his performance immediately won me over. The main character Victor in the novel, who describes himself as a con man, has to juggle many identities and has to leap in and out of different roles depending on the situation. DeMeritt performs these parts wonderfully, lending authenticity to all of Victor's various personas especially when he does the different accents and inflections in the dialogue. His narration made this story great, and I highly recommend this book in both print and audio.

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## Kemper says

Talk about a depressing idea for an alternate-history book. This one explores the concept of what would have happened if the United States had never abolished slavery, and it remains an institution in the present day. \*sigh\* Well, at least Hitler didn't win the war this time...

Victor is a former slave who managed to escape to the north, but he was eventually caught by the government and forced to work undercover to help catch more poor souls who are trying to use the fabled Underground Airline to escape America. His latest case has brought him to Indianapolis where Victor finds inconsistencies about his latest target while he tries to avoid being drawn into the troubles of a white woman he meets at his hotel.

Just as he did in his *Last Policeman* trilogy Ben Winters has conceived of a society that is fascinating to read about, but you wouldn't want to visit there. There's a terrifying plausibility to the idea that a compromise struck to avoid the Civil War could have resulted in the continued existence of slavery into modern times, and that it would have been industrialized and modernized in the spirit of American capitalism. It's the details that Winters conjures up that really sell it like the idea that while the north is free that racial equality is still at about a 1960s level rather than the 21st century, or that anti-slavery people try to buy goods certified as not being made by slave labor.

The book fails a bit in regards to its main character, and I'm not sure why. Victor is a pretty fascinating figure as a man forced to betray his own rather than go back into bondage, and while he's conflicted about that he's also damnably good at his job. However, by telling us the story only through the first person narrator it feels like it limits the scope of a story that should be wide and epic.

There was a similar problem with *The Last Policeman* where my uncertainty about the motivations of the main character there threatened to trip up a top notch end-of-the-world scenario. However, I warmed up to Hank Palace in the second book, and it felt like Winters kept making the story more intimate and personal as it progressed. Here, it's the reverse with Victor being drawn into larger events, but while I found the setting compelling I kept wishing we'd get a broader and bigger perspective than he could provide.

I'm being a tad unfair in that my main dissatisfaction comes from wishing the book was something that it wasn't. Winters has written a very interesting alt-history with a pretty compelling lead character, but I'm left wondering about all the ideas that the book couldn't get into just because it limited itself to his story.

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## Lata says

An interesting, vomit-inducing thought experiment of what the US could be if there had never been a civil war and slavery had been enshrined in the Constitution for some states. Sickening idea, though sad thing is, having extremely cheap labour is not a crazy idea: look at all the cheap items we can buy, made by people making a poor wage, versus items made for a fair wage. And mistreating workers -- workers' rights is still a very recent thing in human history. And, finally, designating a group of people as not human and treating them accordingly, well, that's never gone out of style.

The book itself--I had to read this slowly. There are no good guys here (except for one cute kid: "Controversy!") Everyone has shades and layers of motives, and how exhausting it must be to always be in fear. But then, that and greed are the bases for the society in which the protagonist and those he interacts with function. The protagonist's view of the impossibility of things improving or changing for the better, expressed about midway through the book, is profoundly bleak, which much of this book is. The protagonist is not a good man, and functions from an ethically compromised and difficult position. And yet, I kept reading, fully knowing why the main character did what he did. And there is no happy ending, just people doing things for their own ethically compromised reasons, but I did feel a little change in the protagonist's outlook by the end of this book.

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## Kayla says

I received a copy of this ARC from the bookstore I am employed at.

Jesus H.

Meet Victor. At least, that's what he tells us his name is. It could be Jim Dirkson. It could be something else; he's got a lot of aliases. Victor is a cunning black man working for a powerful government agency that hunts down runaway slaves and returns them to their masters. The year is 2012 (I think...I'm still a little gray on that detail), and the Hard Four—four states in which slavery still exists—continue to build a regime on the backs of beaten, hopeless humans.

How can that be possible? The Civil War never happened.

In this profound alternate history, Victor is stalking a runaway slave called Jackdaw. Throughout the novel, Victor is continuously haunted by flashbacks of his previous life as a slave. The memories are so real, so violent, that they leave Victor tense and shaking, clenching muscles as he desperately tries to keep his mind in the present. The past is done—this is now. He's free.

Or is he?

Winters is brilliant as he choreographs Victor's tale from Indiana down to the Hard Four and back, chasing a man that may or may not be his ticket to freedom. Our author throws in elements of pop culture and conventional history—James Brown, Michael Jackson, Jesse Robinson, Lincoln, others—to convey how different life would be were slavery a legal, modern practice. Without using confusing jargon, he is able to seamlessly bring attention to ideologies like white privilege—**“One thing I was used to seeing from young white people, it was confidence, this easy sense that the world belonged to them.”**—microaggressions, and systematic racism—**“Lord knows; people stuck there by poverty, by prejudice, by laws that keep them from moving or working.”** It's rather brilliant.

And Victor, oh Victor. A very complex man. He realizes early on in the novel that he is still enslaved—he may not be a traditional slave, but he is still an instrument of white supremacy, living a life that supports the idea of racial superiority. His visions of the past plague him, and his need to immerse himself in new identities, identities that aren't his own, begins to crack his persona. Who is he? What is he reaching for? He speaks of his different aliases like they are separate, physical identities, real people he knows and might converse with. His guilt hammers at him throughout the whole novel, and while the flashbacks are sometimes tedious to read (because of their abundance) they are a constant reminder: Winters won't let you forget the internal battle Victor is running from; a battle that is killing him spiritually.

This is not a novel for those who avoid the truth of modern racism. This is not a novel for those who turn their eyes away from the knowledge that they—we—are often followers of human ignorance. This novel is a stark reminder of what goes on within the "free and equal" borders of our country. It is eerie in its resemblance to the way people of color—not just black people—are treated *today*. Right now. It is a reminder of the hegemony that exists above our heads.

But I also choose to see the hope in Victor's story. He is conflicted. The characters around him are conflicted. And many of them hope to right the wrongs that exist in a world that mirrors our own in many ways. I loved this novel, damn it. I want to bathe in the truth of its pages, toss them into the shocked, simple minds of those who dare deny it. Five brilliantly shining stars.

**“To just leave him....a man like this.”**

**“A man like this?” I said softly. “What’re you? What’re you?”**

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## **Elyse says**

Library ebook- overdrive:

The beginning grabbed me right away. The narrator...( didn't know his name for awhile, but it's Victor) - was sitting in a cafe diner with a younger man: a priest, 'Father Barton'. The dialogue between these two men is sly-covert-conniving - and gut wrenching sad. Victor was once a slave. The Priest: we wanted to punch him in the guts.

So... the narrator: Victor - a Chamaeleon of sorts, with different disguise wigs, names, identities...is a contractor/ bounty hunter, for the United States Marshall Service.

In four southern states SLAVERY IS THE LAW.... ( this is a science fiction 'light'-or time travel 'light' -or twist on the timing of historical events?!...it's hard to categorize the genre in one tight package....

Its a thrilling ride & UNIQUE.... and surprisingly intimate at the same time.

This story allows us - the reader - to imagine - how \*We\* WILL ABOLISHED SLAVERY.... in a modern world. Gets us thinking!!

It reminded me a 'little' of the book "11/23/63", by Stephen King. Both books have us look at 'what-if- history- went-another-way: and it could have! Also - there is a love- interest story in here - as in Stephen King's book. ( this one is with a white girl and black man... so it brings up racial issues on purpose).

Victor has a job to do: find a man name Jackdaw, a runaway slave,... but it's mysterious because Victor is a black man- who was once a slave himself but is now working for the government helping track down slaves and bring them in. Why? When he himself was brutally beaten.

Yikes .. I said I wasn't writing reviews: I've retired!! And this book is complex.

Thrilling- very suspenseful - a twisty brain teaser - thought provoking -ultra intriguing and original.

The main character- Victor- is a standout memorable guy!!!

I enjoyed it!!! 4.5 stars!!!

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### **Althea Ann says**

I really enjoyed Winters' 'Last Policeman' trilogy, so when I heard about his newest book; I picked it up right away, even knowing nothing about it. After reading - I think Winters has surpassed himself. This book is even better.

As the book's blurbs lets us know, this is an alternate history, set in a present-day United States where the Civil War never happened. In this reality, there are still "Slave" and "Free" states, and of course, there are still runaways - and fugitive slave catchers. Unsurprisingly, there are also still abolitionists, and secret networks devoted to helping escapees make it to freedom. With an update in transportation technology, these networks are now referred to as 'Underground Airlines,' rather than railroads.

This is one of those books where I think it's best to go into it not knowing too much about it, and to let the author reveal things at his own pace. Honestly, I think that even the publisher's description of the book gives away too much. It's enough to know that the story involves a fugitive slave catcher working for the FBI, and one particular case that he's assigned to, which seems to have been given very special weight and significance by his 'handler.'

As the case unfolds, not only do we discover a tense and thrilling mystery, but get to know a believably complex character, caught in an untenable situation. The society imagined here, with all its ramifications, is disturbingly logical in its parallels to our own. As the bare bones of the premise suggest, the book handles all the worst issues of inequality and racism in our country, and does it remarkably well, with real depth and sensitivity.

Highly recommended.

Many thanks to NetGalley and Mulholland Books for the opportunity to read. As always, my opinions are solely my own.

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### **Terri Jacobson says**

This is a hard book to categorize. The story takes place in a United States that never saw the Civil War. Slavery still exists in the "Hard Four" southern states. The myth is that "violent slavery" is against the law and has been abolished, and the slavery that exists is well-regulated and humane. Slaves are known as "persons bound to labor," or PBLs. Early on we meet Jim Dirkson, a free black who has joined the slave-hunting US Marshalls. His job is to hunt down escaped slaves and return them to bondage. Slowly we find out that Jim is not what he appears, and the mystery at the heart of the novel unfolds. The title *Underground Airlines* refers to the updated system to help slaves escape based on the Underground Railroad.

The writing in this book is above average. I find the premise fascinating, and Ben H. Winters kept me interested at every step. The world he creates is a mirror we can hold up to examine issues that exist today in our own society. This is a novel that will make you think. An excellent reading experience.

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## Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I don't usually read alternate history but when I saw this book from an author I had previously enjoyed, I decided to give it a try. It is present day America, minus one Civil War. Gradually the majority of the southern states have gotten rid of slavery, but four holdouts still use slaves. The central story is Victor, a bounty hunter on the trail of Jackdaw that takes him to Indianapolis. He has long worked for the US Marshall Service, but he also grew up on a plantation as a child.

I think most readers will enjoy this for the small changes in history that have had a big impact on the present day, portrayed right next to the world we know as far as technological advance, etc. (The underground freedom movement in this world is known as Underground Airlines, which I thought was a fun use of this approach.) To me, the novel was uncanny. It is all set in an alternate Indianapolis. I lived there for a year, in a neighborhood on the southeast perimeter where I was the racial minority. There were plenty of times when I was the only white person on the bus, and sometimes people would crack jokes about it. Winters sets the freed slave community in this area, and much of the action occurs between this spot and Meridian and Keystone, the two central north-south roads in the city. Small details that had changed (like the Lincoln the Martyr statue at Monument Circle, which in our reality has a giant monument to those killed in the Civil War) to small details remaining the same (Circle Centre Mall!) The only thing missing to make it my Indianapolis was a threatening tornado.

I was so unnerved that I actually sent a Tweet to the author asking if he had lived in Indy, and he responded to say he had for several years. Well it really shows.

It's a departure from Winters' previous post-apocalypse/collapse police procedural novels (beginning with *The Last Policeman*,) but there is still a central guy on a case, so there is some familiarity in the tone.

*Thanks to the publisher, who supplied me with an eARC through NetGalley.*

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## MadProfessah says

Ever since I read Ben Winters' pre-apocalyptic mystery-thriller *The Last Policeman* trilogy (*The Last Policeman*, *Countdown City* and *World of Trouble*) I have been something of a fanboy for this speculative fiction author. When I learned that his first published book after *The Last Policeman* was going to be called *Underground Airlines*, set in an alternate history of an America where slavery persists to the 21st century and a modern analogue to the Civil War era Underground Railroad exists I was VERY psyched.

*Underground Airlines* is out and has an incredibly compelling premise. The alternate history is based around a seminal event: the assassination of President-elect Abraham Lincoln in 1861 and the subsequent "grand compromise" which defused the tension between the states (that in our timeline led to the Civil War) by ratifying five constitutional amendments which have the effect of maintaining slavery. They allow every state in the Union to determine its slaveholding status, and include an amendment cementing racial apartheid in place by preventing the enactment of any future amendment that would alter the 5 Grand Compromise amendments.

Most historical events that occurred in our timeline (9/11, Michael Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt) also occurred in the timeline of *Underground Airlines* but there are some fascinating (and horrifying) ways that the absence of the Civil War from our past has warped the present alternate time-line depicted in the book.

Interestingly, it's not the entire South which has slavery (or the preferred term "Person Bound to Labor") in the modern era. There are the Hard Four: Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana and Carolina (North and South are reunited).

*Underground Airlines* not only has an amazing premise but also a VERY complicated protagonist. He is a former slave named Victor who is now working (via coercion) for the U.S. Marshal's Service as an undercover agent to locate escaped slaves and return them to involuntary servitude. Clearly Victor is a very problematic character (and in my mind, not very sympathetic). [This may be a feature of main characters in Ben Winters novels--the titular cop in *The Last Policeman* is definitely not a heroic figure.] His circumstances are very complicated, and through the machinations of the plot, Victor becomes a double agent and perhaps a triple agent as he gets sucked into a particular case that involves a "mcguffin" which could potentially have a devastating impact on the rotten institution of slavery.

Despite my misgivings and issues with the main character, the setting of *Underground Airlines* provides author Ben Winters with multiple opportunities to include mordant, thought-provoking commentary about race and class and history in our society and raises this book above the multitude of other sources of media which call to our attention.

Highly recommended.

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## **Erin says**

*Underground Airlines* was a good concept but I thought the execution was off. It tells of a world in which the civil war never happened and slavery still exists in several southern states. It should have been a slam dunk but I just never really felt engrossed in the story and I think that might be because the author is white. I'm not saying white authors can't or shouldn't write characters of color but I think it's harder for a white person to understand and accurately write about the black experience and in a book about slavery that's doubly hard. I would still recommend this book to other readers because it's an interesting topic but I think it's more of a library book and not one to buy.

Popsugar Reading Challenge: Book about a Difficult Topic

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