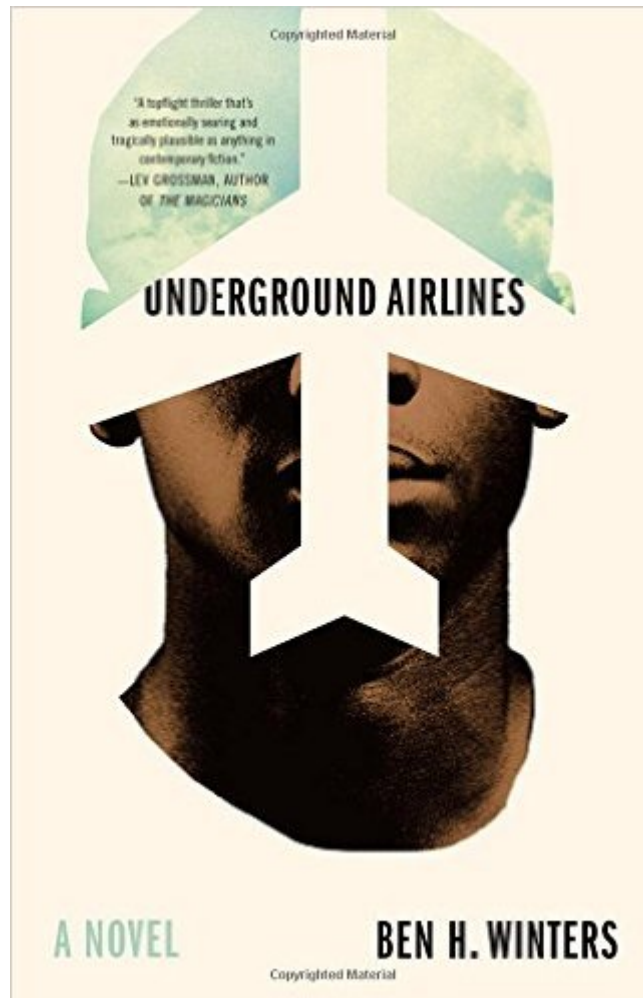


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# Underground Airlines



## Synopsis

Now a New York Times bestseller! 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A remarkable tour-de-force of an modern day America where slavery is still constitutionally permitted. It is an alternate history novel that belongs on the shelf along with such classics as Robert Harris' Fatherland with a protagonist that invokes such literary ancestors as Ellison's Invisible Man and Bigger Thomas. Winters tells a cracking good detective story with twists that always fooled me and characters that were morally complex. I particularly liked that Winters shared enough of the history of this alternate America without bogging down his narrative yet left me hungry to know more (For example, what was America's role in the two world wars as the world shuns a slave owning USA?) For those looking for a thinking person's thriller for the summer, this is your book

I was lucky to get an early read on this book, and it is fantastic. Smart, thrilling, sometimes disturbing, always completely engrossing and beautifully written. It's one of my favorite books of this year, and I feel confident saying that even though the year is just half over.

Winters' novel blends speculation about how the U.S. might look today if the North and the South had reached a sustainable compromise on slavery mixed with suspense over a secret development in what is known as the Hard Four, that is, those four states (North and South Carolina now merged) in which slavery still exists. The weakness and strength of the novel revolves around the depth and texture of the alternative world and the suspense. What's painted of the different world intrigues but it never feels enough. Of course, each reader will respond differently, some wishing for a more fleshed out alternate world, while others satisfied and more excited by the suspense, procedural action, and the novel's many twists, all of which Winters pulls off well. It's today and the long-standing North-South compromise on slavery has created a divided and tense nation. As southern states shifted from slave to free over time, complicated and elaborate trade policies developed aimed at restricting trade with the Hard Four, a way of making everybody outside the Four feel good about themselves. Part of the compromise covers capturing and returning fugitive slaves. Turns out that most people in the free states, including law enforcement, want no part of returning escapees to slavery. The federal government employs undercover African-American agents to ferret out and return fugitives in accordance with the compromise. These agents work at the job to maintain their own freedom. Victor, one of many assumed names, is such an agent and he is tracking down a very special fugitive called Jackdaw, though at the outset Victor doesn't know what makes Jackdaw so extraordinary. To find Jackdaw, Victor

travels to Indianapolis, where rumors have it he may discover his quarry. There he hooks up with the Underground Airlines (no planes involved, sorry) of the title. He hopes to infiltrate the group and use them to flush out Jackdaw. But, as thrillers will have it, nothing goes as it should. He finds himself involved with a young woman and her child in search of a black man she loved, as he tries to carry out his assignment. Plus, the Underground Airlines seem to have their own agenda and appear to be using Victor to accomplish it. Then there is the nagging question of what makes Jackdaw so special. Even this is not simple and leads to its own twists and intrigue. The real meat of the novel doesn't come until the end of Part 1 and into Part 2. It's here that the intrigue ramps up and that we see just what life is like in the slavery South. Many readers will wish there had been more of this, more of life in the Hard Four, more of the slavery rationalizations, the fog used to disguise a cruel system, and more about the structure of the U.S. itself. But probably, upon consideration, that would be a different kind of novel, and perhaps even a series. Leave it at, good at what it does.

This book is a thriller that keeps you guessing and on your toes. It's treatment of an alternate history where the Civil War never happened and slavery still exists is haunting, and in many ways seems all too real. It is for these comparisons the reader makes of alternate to real that the book is thoroughly haunting. An excellent read.

**\*\*Thank you to Netgalley, the author and publisher for a complimentary copy of this book in exchange for an honest review\*\***This was a far more complex book than I've read of late. The synopsis is pretty comprehensive so you have a good idea already what goes down in this book. Victor, the main character, is a very complex and not particularly endearing personality. It's very difficult to tell whether this is part of the author's plan or if it's a lack of character development....As a secret agent for the US marshals and a man with a horrific past, it's more than likely that he's deliberately created to be an enigma but I did find it quite hard to latch on to him as a protagonist, however, the supporting characters weren't quite developed enough to compensate for this. As someone who really enjoys character driven books, this was a bit of a challenge (though totally worth it). It was the world building and concept of this book which makes it stand out, exploring how different the world would actually be if the Civil War hadn't happened and slavery was still considered acceptable. The horror of this book was that the writing style was dispassionate. Victor is obviously opposed to slavery, as are a lot of the people he meets, but they all 'know' that it's not something that they can change. Slavery just is. For me, the appeal of this story was the

concept rather than the style of writing. It's thought provoking, disturbing and unlike anything I've ever read. I also can't stress enough that there wasn't anything wrong with the writing style, I just like my characters more passionate and engaging.

I came into this book without knowing anything about it -- I heard it recommended on Slate's Political Gabfest -- and I wanted to love it. I almost did; it certainly started well, but it didn't quite meet that initial promise. The writing is crisp, the dialog fluid, the exposition unforced. However, the plot didn't develop an arc that propelled me through the last third. It started to feel like work, and by the end, I had more of a sense of relief than resolution. This wasn't because the story didn't remain consistent; it may have been more because it did. Characters who develop too quickly are initially satisfying but ultimately empty, and certainly Winters didn't fall prey to that problem. But he may have undershot. The audacity and clarity of his vision, combined with fine writing, brought me to four stars, but my lack of increasing engagement prevents a fifth.

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