

“From the Stacks”

By Alison E. Williams, Program Coordinator at the Copper Queen Library

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Reading the Underground Railroad on a Saturday

“The almanac had a strange soapy smell, and made a cracking noise like fire as she turned the pages. She’s never been the first person to open a book.” So says Cora, the young slave in Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Underground Railroad*, a book that the Copper Queen Library was first to put on the shelves in all of Cochise County. Colson Whitehead headlined the Tucson Humanities Festival at the UA College of Humanities. On a balmy Thursday night two weeks ago, I spent some time at the pre-reading party, with Mr. Whitehead and Tuscon’s Mayor, Jonathan Rothschild—“No relation,” he likes to joke—discussing speculative fiction, conspiracy theories, and the delineations of history and politics in the fictionalized stories of our Nation.

Mr. Whitehead was introduced by UA Humanities Dept. Dean, Alain-Philippe Durand, AZ Humanities Board of Directors Chair, Ryan J. Bruce, and by Mayor Rothschild, all who spoke of the impact of literature on their lives. The Mayor’s eloquent and passionate introduction of Mr. Whitehead spoke to his own voracious reading habit of literary fiction and his articulate support of the Arts and Humanities, as Mayor. When Colson came onto the stage in front of more than 600 people, he began with a carefully crafted autobiography that was both desolate and hilarious, starting with his childhood, where he described the ‘80’s tv sitcom life of Arnold Jackson (Gary Coleman) in *Diff’rent Strokes*, as his own, before breaking the shifting silence with “just kidding,” and then referred us back to his novel “Sag Harbor,” if we wanted to know more. He was often self-deprecating and morose, while continually making the audience burst into laughter at his wit and insight, always imbuing his humour and sadness with a deep introspection that made everyone there love him as a person, not just as an author.

Colson had had the idea for *The Underground Railroad* for a very long time, ever since realizing that some people actually thought it was a literal thing, in historical context. He presented the idea of this literal train moving between the States, with another idea to his agent who said, “both are good.” When he brought it up to his shrink, he said, “What are you, crazy? I mean, we both know you’re crazy, but this sounds right up your alley.” When he told his editor, he just said, “Giddyup mother****er, which is publishing for ‘I think that’s a very good idea.’” After reading from *The Underground Railroad*, (Doubleday, 2016), Colson answered a series of questions from the audience, as best he could, including a carefully crafted paragraph by a grad student that began, “would you discuss the (insert academic speak here)...”, to which he replied, “No.” He answered everything else though. He then ended with the first public reading of the first chapter of his upcoming novel, *The Nickel Boys*, due out July, 2019, based on the true story of a Jim Crow era reform school in 1960’s Florida.

From Saturday Night Live's First Season, and locally filmed *Violent Saturday*, both on DVD, to Tom Waits' *The Heat of Saturday Night*, to *The Comforts of a Muddy Saturday*, by Alexander McCall Smith, and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, the shelves of the Copper Queen Library hold many harbingers of what is to come on November 3rd, 2018. From 10 AM—2 PM, the CQL will reopen its doors on Saturdays, after many years, and welcome our Patrons back to spend a little weekend time in the stacks, or bring their children to make some art in the DIY Maker Space in the Children's Library. As well, our wonderful volunteer teacher Sharon Stetter will be shifting the age group and moving her Kids Yoga & Mindfulness class to Saturdays, 1—1:45 PM, now for kids aged 3–8 years old. "I told myself that I was going to live the rest of my life as if it were Saturday." Said Chip Gaines, in *The Magnolia Story*, and we hope Bisbee will as well.