

## The Collective

**Lindsey Whitlock**

Pushkin Children's Books (Jun 30, 2020)

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*The Collective* is Lindsey Whitlock's alternative American history novel. It's set in the early 1800s in rural Badfish Creek, a community deep in the Illinois territory where trappers, escaped slaves, and anarchists build their homes around the trunks of trees and live by their own communal laws. This is where best friends Elwyn and Whim grow up.

As the story begins, Badfish Creek exists in a tense *détente* with nearby Liberty; both cities are distrustful of the other. Elwyn feels called to Liberty as a place to seek his fortune and further his education, whereas Whim feels content to live off the land with the steady rhythms of rural life and community. Elwyn, influenced by the letters he receives from his aunt in Liberty, chooses to leave, but in the city, his dark skin and country ways make him a curiosity and, as often, a figure of derision. A rapid series of powerful reversals of fortune follows, and Whim and Elwyn find that the worlds that they knew are much more complex and dangerous than they imagined.

Though the setting is imagined, its roots in American history are firm. It draws upon eminent domain, racial tension, the urban-rural divide, and political machinations. The teenagers thrust themselves into this world—one to make something of himself, the other to help her father. The details of home are evoked with tenderness, juxtaposed with abrupt brushoffs in the city. Elwyn's fierce embrace of the unknown butts up against Whim's tightening grasp on home and hearth, even as it pushes her farther and farther away from what she treasures most.

*The Collective* is compelling alternative history that reveals a great deal about the forces that shaped the American landscape; its coming-of-age stories encourage young readers to take their place at the table.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (July / August 2020)

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