



*Multicultural
Literature
in the United States
Today*





U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE / FEBRUARY 2009

VOLUME 14 / NUMBER 2

<http://www.america.gov/publications/ejournalusa.html>

International Information Programs:

Coordinator	Jeremy F. Curtin
Executive Editor	Jonathan Margolis

Creative Director	George Clack
Editor-in-Chief	Richard W. Huckaby
Managing Editor	Lea Terhune
Production Manager	Chris Larson
Assistant Production Manager	Sylvia Scott
Web Producer	Janine Perry

Copy Editor	Rosalie Targonski
Photo Editor	Ann Monroe Jacobs
Cover Design	Timothy Brown
Cover Illustration	Phillip Hua
Reference Specialist	Martin Manning



Front Cover: A few of the contributors to our journal: 1) Susan Power; 2) Jennifer 8. Lee; 3) Gerald Early; 4) the late Agha Shahid Ali; 5) Diana Abu-Jaber; 6) Tayari Jones; and 7) Ha Jin.

Cover artist Phillip Hua is an American-born Vietnamese visual artist who lives and works in San Francisco.

Photo credits: Agha Shahid Ali, courtesy David H. Bain, Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont; Diana Abu-Jaber © AP Images/Greg Wahl-Stephens; Tayari Jones, courtesy Lillian Bertram; Ha Jin © AP Images/Vincent Yu; Courtesy Susan Power; Jennifer 8. Lee, photo by Nina Subin, courtesy Twelve Publishing; Gerald Early, courtesy Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

The Bureau of International Information Programs of the U.S. Department of State publishes a monthly electronic journal under the *eJournal USA* logo. These journals examine major issues facing the United States and the international community, as well as U.S. society, values, thought, and institutions.

One new journal is published monthly in English and is followed by versions in French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Selected editions also appear in Arabic, Chinese, and Persian. Each journal is catalogued by volume and number.

The opinions expressed in the journals do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government. The U.S. Department of State assumes no responsibility for the content and continued accessibility of Internet sites to which the journals link; such responsibility resides solely with the publishers of those sites. Journal articles, photographs, and illustrations may be reproduced and translated outside the United States unless they carry explicit copyright restrictions, in which case permission must be sought from the copyright holders noted in the journal.

The Bureau of International Information Programs maintains current and back issues in several electronic formats at <http://www.america.gov/publications/ejournalusa.html>. Comments are welcome at your local U.S. Embassy or at the editorial offices:

Editor, *eJournal USA*
IIP/PUBJ
U.S. Department of State
301 4th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20547
United States of America
E-mail: eJournalUSA@state.gov

About This Issue

For 500 years, immigrants from diverse cultures have sought freedom and opportunity in what is now the United States of America. The writers among them recorded their experiences in letters, journals, poems, and books, from early colonial days to the present. “We are a nation of many voices,” writes Marie Arana in her essay, and that is what this *eJournal USA* on multicultural writing is about: to show how voices from various ethnic backgrounds have enriched American society through art and cultural sharing that invites understanding.

Newcomers may write of loneliness, like the anonymous Chinese immigrant to the “land of the Flowery Flag” who scratched a wistful poem on a barracks wall at the Angel Island Immigration Station near San Francisco, in the early 20th century:

*The west wind ruffles
my thin gauze clothing.*

*On the hill sits a tall
building with a room of
wooden planks.*

*I wish I could travel
on a cloud far away,
reunite with my wife and
son.*

Challenges are inevitable as immigrants adjust to life in a new country, with a new language, and as their new neighbors become acquainted with them. The articles in this journal examine that process of mutual assimilation and the interactions that broaden perspectives, regardless of ethnic heritage.

Ha Jin, Immaculée Ilibagiza, and Lara Vapnyar are relatively new immigrants who choose English — their second language — in which to write about their mother countries and the country that is their new home.

Ofelia Zepeda and Susan Power, descendants of indigenous American nations — the original inhabitants of the Americas — draw on ancient traditions of their tribes.

Gerald Early — writing on “What Is African-American Literature?” — taps hundreds of years of creativity that evolved through slavery and the civil rights movement to the current, popular Hip-Hop Fiction. Early argues that “urban literature has democratized and broadened the reach and content of African-American literature.” African-American writers Tayari Jones and Randall Kenan call on their firm roots in the American South for the special regional flavor in their work.

Akhil Sharma writes of how his bicultural life and

Ernest Hemingway helped shape his writing. “Because this wave of Asian immigrants has created curiosity within American society as to what exactly it is like to be in Asian families, I have been lucky to have had my books read,” he writes. Persis Karim and Diana Abu-Jaber, half Iranian and half Arab, respectively, recall coming to terms with two cultures in their own families, while Jennifer 8. Lee describes American

assimilation of cultures as a story wrapped in a fortune cookie. These and other contributors write about the ways they belong to America while they retain the uniqueness of their original heritages.

More than ever, Americans want to participate in the multicultural experience, whether it is through appreciation of music or art or sampling ethnic food — and along the way forming friendships with the Arab, Korean, or Guatemalan restaurateur. Often they simply immerse themselves in vibrant cultures depicted between the covers of a book. ■

— *The Editors*



Photo © AP Images

Photo illustration by Tim Brown



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE / FEBRUARY 2009 / VOLUME 14 / NUMBER 2
<http://www.america.gov/publications/ejournals.html>

Multicultural Literature in the United States Today

OVERVIEW

4 **We Are a Nation of Many Voices**

MARIE ARANA

Diversity in the United States has created a fresh, dynamic literature with new kinds of American stories.

AFRICAN AMERICANS

7 **Literature at the Crossroads**

TAYARI JONES

The crossroads is a sacred space where the specific and the universal meet and where African-American writing happily exists beside the transcendent, universal nature of art.

10 **Ghost Dog: Or, How I Wrote my First Novel**

RANDALL KENAN

North Carolina ambience and wisps of old legends infuse the work of this native son.

14 **Rwanda to America: Writing as Transformation**

IMMACULÉE ILIBAGIZA

Writing helped this survivor of the 1994 Rwandan genocide come to terms with her horrific experience and loss while allowing her to fulfill a mission of forgiveness.

17 **What Is African-American Literature?**

GERALD EARLY

Urban or Hip-Hop Fiction may signal a new maturity and broadening of African-American writing.

INDIGENOUS AMERICANS

21 **Writing to Bridge the Mixed-Blood Divide: An American Indian Perspective**

SUSAN POWER

A young girl comes to terms with her Dakota Sioux and Anglo heritage with the help of stories spun by her American Indian mother.

24 **Simple Memories as Poems**

OFELIA ZEPEDA

Poet Zepeda finds inspiration for her work in childhood memories, events, and her native Tohono O'odham language.

25 **Pulling Down the Clouds**

OFELIA ZEPEDA

26 **The Toughest Indian in the World**

SHERMAN ALEXIE

Life on the Indian reservation and the relationship between father and son are the themes of these vignettes.

28 **Teaching the Art of Being Human: Ancient Indigenous Storytelling Thrives**

INTERVIEWS BY LEA TERHUNE

The ancient art of storytelling still thrives in American Indian communities today. Two practitioners tell how stories teach basic lessons of morality and humaneness.

31 **Sidebar: Blackfeet Troubadour Sings Traditions**

A Storyteller Jack Gladstone talks about his heritage.

EAST ASIAN AMERICANS

32 American Fortune Cookie

JENNIFER 8. LEE

The fortune cookie, believed by most Americans to have come from China, in fact, did nothing of the sort.

34 Finding Allies in Books

BICH MINH NGUYEN

Icons of literature helped this young Vietnamese immigrant learn about American culture and ultimately led her to becoming a writer.

35 The Language of Betrayal

HA JIN

Writing in a second, very different, language is both a challenge and a statement — and a way to pursue one's vision.

LATINO AMERICANS

37 New Immigrant Tales: Junot Díaz and Afro-Latino Fiction

GLENDA CARPIO

The writer of *Junot Díaz* breaks new ground by easily moving between Afro-Latino ethnicities and his American identity formed in urban New Jersey.

39 An Interview with Junot Díaz

The writer speaks about growing up Dominican American.

41 Lost City Radio

DANIEL ALARCÓN

The scene is set for turbulence in a sleepy, fictional Latin American town.

MIDDLE EASTERN AND SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS

42 Netting the Clouds

DIANA ABU-JABER

Being half Arab meant a rich life of good food, lots of vivacious relatives, and a sense of being different while being fully American.

46 Writing from a Complex Ethnic Perspective

PERSIS KARIM

This Californian daughter of an Iranian father and French mother became fascinated by her Persian heritage, and exploring the nuances of her complex ethnic background became her mission.

49 One Indian Writer's Experience

AKHIL SHARMA

Immigration, South Asian culture, luck, and Ernest Hemingway are all milestones on the path of this Indian-American writer.

51 Influences on My Work

TAMIM ANSARY

Afghan poetry traditions, legends, and old illustrated books primed the imagination of Afghan-American writer Tamim Ansary.

53 The Dacca Gauzes

AGHA SHAHID ALI

The late, influential Indian-American poet Agha Shahid Ali drew from his Kashmiri heritage, Urdu poetry, and his life in America for inspiration for his works.

RUSSIAN AMERICANS

54 Sixty-Nine Cents

GARY SHTEYNGART

A trip to Disneyland for a family of Russian immigrants becomes a generational tug-of-war between Old and New World food cultures, at least in the mind of the young protagonist of this short story.

56 My Literary Crushes

LARA VAPNYAR

Although many authors vied for her affections as a girl, Chekhov won Lara Vapnyar's heart for a lifetime.

57 Additional Resources

We Are a Nation of Many Voices

Marie Arana

One in four Americans has strong ties to a foreign past, and from these diverse cultures, a new, vibrant American literature has sprung.

Marie Arana is the author of the memoir *American Chica*, as well as two novels, *Cellophane* and *Lima Nights*. She is also the editor of a collection of essays, *The Writing Life*.

“We glory in an America of diversity,” U.S. Vice President Hubert Humphrey (1965-1969) once said, “an America all the richer for the many different and distinctive strands from which it is woven.”

At no other time has this been more true. Today, one in four among us has a strong tie to a foreign past. More than one in five was born elsewhere or has an immigrant parent. We are a nation of many voices, myriad histories — a hotbed of artistic possibility. It’s little wonder that from this vibrant and variegated culture, a new American literature has sprung.

The birth of American multicultural literature was not easy; much might have stunted it; but it had the good fortune to grow in a land that had a fluid sense of identity. Even the bedrock novels of Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald capture three entirely distinct Americas. Still, by the 1950s, a different writer had begun to emerge — one whose works attempted to reflect not the nation at large, but a single ethnic sensibility. First came Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, with their deeply felt Jewish-American novels; then Ralph Ellison, with his harrowing tale of racism, *Invisible Man*.

The literature of black America had begun almost one hundred years before with the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass. After slavery was outlawed, it passed from the fiery rhetoric of W.E.B. Du Bois to the striking imagery of Langston Hughes. It would go on to many great works by James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Gwendolyn Brooks. But it wasn’t until the 1970s that black voices began to flow freely through America’s literary bloodstream. With Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed, Maya Angelou, and Jamaica Kincaid, this singularly American literature became part of the mainstream.



Novelist, editor, and literary critic Marie Arana.

© Paul Kline

BRIDGING THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

But multicultural literature took a few more years to arrive, and it involved more than black-white America. That new wave was heralded by Maxine Hong Kingston’s 1976 bestseller, *The Woman Warrior*, a highly imaginative memoir that dared speak in an entirely new way. Filled with ghosts of Chinese ancestors, it broke all the rules, mixed dreams with reality, juggled identities freely, and put a firm foot across the cultural divide.

“I read that book as a young woman and thought ‘Wow! You can do that?’” the novelist Sandra Cisneros once told me. “You can think in another language with

another mythology, but write it in English?” And so, a new era of American literature was born.

For Hispanics, it didn't happen in a vacuum. Precisely at the same time, a Latin American boom was in progress. The works of Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa were being translated furiously into English. They quickly penetrated the North American consciousness. Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was soon followed by Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz* and Vargas Llosa's *The Time of the Hero* — each book a watermark in the rising tide of our awareness.

The first Hispanic American to break onto bestseller lists during this time was a writer who didn't need to be translated: Richard Rodriguez's eloquent memoir *Hunger for Memory*, published in 1981, was fierce and elegiac, a striking work that challenged the tired stereotypes of Chicano identity. Three years later, it was joined by Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, a spare and affecting novel about a seven-year-old Mexican girl in a poor ghetto in Chicago. Readers received it as a glimpse into an America they hardly knew.

By the 1990s, the interest in Hispanic-American letters had become brisk commerce. After Oscar Hijuelos won the Pulitzer Prize for his sizzling novel of Cuba, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, publishers competed to bring out books by Latinos from a variety of backgrounds: Julia Alvarez's vividly told *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, about four Dominican sisters in the Bronx; Cristina Garcia's sprightly *Dreaming in Cuban*, about her immigrant family in Miami; Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of White Chickens*, set during Guatemala's military rule; *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Esmeralda Santiago's dreamy paean to her childhood; *Drown*, Junot Díaz's prickly stories about Dominican street punks.

Our notions of American culture were morphing quickly. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, published a scant decade after *The Woman Warrior*, gave way to a vigorous industry of Asian-American letters. Soon there were Gus Lee's *China Boy*, a novel about a boy on the mean streets of San Francisco; Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, a historical novel set in ancient China; Gish Jen's *Typical American*, focusing not on the Chinese but on what it means to be a citizen of the United States. Today, that literature has expanded to include works by the children of immigrants from other Asian backgrounds: Japanese-American Wakako Yamauchi; Vietnamese-American Fae Myenne Ng; Korean-American Chang-rae Lee.

WRITING NEW AMERICAN STORIES

But America's romance with diversity is still unfolding. Today, multicultural writers include Americans of South Asian ancestry: Jhumpa Lahiri (*Interpreter of Maladies*), Manil Suri (*The Death of Vishnu*), and Vikram Chandra (*Love and Longing in Bombay*). Or African Americans with roots in foreign places: Edwidge Danticat, who writes about Haiti, and Nalo Hopkinson, born in Jamaica. Recent years have brought, too, the work of Americans of Middle Eastern heritage: Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner*), Diana Abu-Jaber (*Crescent*), and Azar Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*).

What do these writers have in common? They share an impulse to honor their ancestors — a desire to hold fast to roots. Unlike American immigrants of an earlier era, they balance assimilation with a staunch ethnic pride.

W.E.B. Du Bois called it a “double-consciousness;” Richard Wright, a “double vision.” Whatever we choose to call it, this new literature, born from black experience, forged by an immigrant will, can no longer be considered alien. It is American now.

My own appreciation for my roots came late in life and not until I became a writer. As an editor for many years in New York's book publishing industry, I had little reason to dwell on having been born in Peru and growing up half-Peruvian. I was too busy trying to be all-American, publishing books by wonderful writers, focusing on the “typical” reader. What did Americans want?

Well into my forties, I went to work at the *Washington Post*, first as the deputy of the book review section and then as editor. The newspaper's management, deeply aware of the burgeoning culture of American Hispanics, urged me to write about it. I began with opinion pieces on Latin America, then moved on to articles about the immigrant population, the lives of migrant workers, the intricacies of the Latin American mind. Eventually, I began to recall the observant 10-year-old I was when I arrived in this country. By the time I sat down in the late 1990s to write my memoir of growing up bicultural, there was a vast population of people like me, a strong and lively fellowship of hyphenated Americans.

There is no turning back now. This is a nation, as Humphrey so aptly put it, that glories in diversity. We are the richer for it: The literature of multiculturalism is wildly original, steeped in a wider world, yet unmistakably American. Junot Díaz's *Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a bodacious novel about Dominican

identity, cannot have been written without its New Jersey streets. Edwidge Danticat's stirring memoir of Haiti, *Brother, I'm Dying*, would not exist had her family not moved to New York City. What these pioneering writers do is reach behind to fashion a new America. One foot

lingers in a distant country, but the other is firmly here. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

“You may not see it, you may not feel it, but the next thing you say, the next way you move, the next thought that enters your head, *pacu*, will go like a ripple into a great river. We are all bound together in that way. You breathe in, you talk, your words ride the air toward me. I take in that same air, breathe it out, send it on.”

— *The shaman Yorumbo to Don Victor Sobrevilla, from
Cellophane: A Novel by Marie Arana*

Literature at the Crossroads

Tayari Jones



Courtesy/Tayari Jones

Novelist Tayari Jones, an Atlanta native, likes to place her characters in a southern urban setting.

A native of Atlanta, Georgia, Tayari Jones writes about the urban South. Her first novel, Leaving Atlanta (2002) won the Hurston/Wright Award for Debut Fiction and was acknowledged as one of the best of the year by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the Washington Post. Her second novel, The Untelling (2005), won the Lillian C. Smith Award for New Voices. Recipient of prestigious fellowships, including Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, and Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, she is currently an assistant professor in the master of fine arts program at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey.

If you go into a large chain bookstore in the United States, you will find my books shelved under a sign that reads "African-American Interest." Every few

months, I receive an e-mail from an outraged (usually white) reader who is dismayed by what she sees as the denigration of my work. "Your work should be in the front of the store with all the *regular* authors!" By "regular," she means white, but she doesn't even know that yet. I also receive messages from younger black writers who worry about the status of books they haven't even written yet. "How will I get my book off the *Black Shelf*?" they worry in advance. After a few weeks of class, my own creative writing students work up the nerve to ask me how I feel about my novels being "Jim Crowed" (referring to pre-Civil Rights Act de facto discrimination). And like many other people, they can't understand why I am not particularly upset that my work is shelved almost 10 full feet away from the likes of American legends the late John



© AP Images

An Atlanta landmark, the Underground Atlanta tower draws attention to the historic old city and glorifies Georgia peaches.

Updike and Joyce Carol Oates. Some readers wonder aloud how, in this age of Barack Obama, a bookstore would have the nerve to note the race of an author and organize the shelves accordingly. One well-meaning reader even went so far as to offer to write a letter to the bookstore owner on my behalf. Although I was touched, I urged her to calm down. I am not sure that I want to shed the label of “black writer” in favor of the indistinction of being just a “writer” or even an “American writer,” minus the hyphen that makes my life interesting.

Unlike many of my peers, I approach labels with an amused fascination. As far as I am concerned, the more labels, the better. *Tayari Jones is an African-American woman, southern, middle-class, right-handed writer. She is the writer in her family. She is the writer who wears a green sweater and eats crème brûlée for breakfast.* I don't mind being identified by descriptors as long as they are true and as long as I am allowed to choose as many as I like. The trouble with labels is not with the label itself, but with the reactions some readers have to those labels. Traditionally, labels have been used to designate a lesser status. Simply avoiding the label doesn't address the caste

system that gives rise to the labels in the first place. To the contrary, eschewing the label “African-American writer” can actually reinscribe hurtful assumptions. There is a reason that people sometimes say, “Your writing is too good to be in the ‘black’ section of the store!” as though merit is what separates the blacks from the rest. The kind reader seeks to rescue me from racism, rather than attack the beast itself.

Even as I write this, the very questions feel a little irrelevant, even though I feel very strongly about the words that I have written. It seems impossible to answer any questions about being an African-American writer without addressing the issue of what it is to be read as an African-American writer or, even more fraught, to be *marketed* as an African-American writer. The artist in me is annoyed by the question, as it doesn't really address the thing that I do with my paper and pen.

Writing itself is a spiritual labor of the imagination. Alone with the page, I do not think of the shelving practices of large chain bookstores, I do not worry about the language that will be chosen by reviewers. When I wrote my first novel, *Leaving Atlanta*, I was driven by a desire to tell the story of the African-American children of Atlanta who lived — and died — during the child murders of 1979 to 1981. The novel documents an emotional history of a generation at a particular time and place — and much of its value comes from this function. Although the events of that terrible time are now considered historical, to me it felt more like memory than history. In 1979, I was a 10-year-old girl with over-large teeth and not enough friends. By the time I turned 12, two boys in my fifth-grade class would be dead and the corpses of dozens more strewn across the landscape of my hometown, the “city too busy to hate.” Coming of age against the backdrop of this horror was how I came to understand the cost of Blackness. When I sat down to write my very first novel — my baby, I call it — the project felt more like an urgent matter of truth-telling rather than the academic task of “filling in the gaps of history,” which is often seen as the “work” of the African-American writer.

While I do applaud those writers who have used their imagination to render in fiction the lost voices of generations past, I believe that African-American writers must also embrace contemporary narratives. Although African-American writers have beautifully reconstructed the past — Toni Morrison's brilliant *Beloved* comes to mind — we must not become so obsessed with filling the pages left blank by an incomplete historical record, that we leave no record of our own meaningful lives. I do not

like to imagine my own granddaughter forced to rely on library archives to reconstruct my life because I exhausted my resources and talent pondering the past. At some point, serious writers must commit ourselves as fervently to transforming our *own* experiences into art.

* * * *

The transformation of experience to art, observation to art, emotion to art, or even idea to art is the alchemy of the writer. This magic happens midway between the brain and the heart. Perhaps the enchanted site is the throat, where voice is born.

All of my novels are set in Atlanta, Georgia — my hometown. My favorite settings for my work are the urban centers of the American South. I love them because they are the spaces where old world meets new technology, where the goalposts of race, class, gender, and politics are often shifted in the night, so when my characters wake up in the morning, they have no idea where they are and must spend the rest of the novel looking. We are together in this — my characters and me. We are always searching for the truth. And the truth, as we all know, is *universal*.

It's possible that I seem to contradict myself in this essay. At first I am speaking of the specificity of my experience as an African American. I've even embraced the separate section in American bookstores. But then, just a few paragraphs later I am waxing in the abstract about the universality and transcendence of art.

For me, these thoughts hardly contradict. They intersect. In many traditions of the African Diaspora, the crossroads is a sacred space where the mortal and spirit worlds overlap. I think of African-American literature as art that finds its home at the place where two roads meet. Connected with physical word, African-American writers

speak of the reality of our brilliant, diverse people. The ways we interpret this tangible reality are as various as our faces. There is no authentic reality that marks African-American literature, but there is such a thing as authentic witnessing, which is determined by the writer and her conscience. But on that spirit road is the thing that binds us all as human beings, that is more significant than our constructed realities.

To end this story where I've begun, let us return to the bookstore with its separate sections. To my friends and readers who are dismayed to find my books in a section they deem "irregular," I encourage you to become a bit more circumspect. The sign above the shelf designating my novels, my human stories about love, family, and home, does not declare them "irregular." The sign just reminds the shopper that I am African-American, that my work comes from a certain rich historical tradition. It is an invitation to experience the humanity of the lives described in these diverse, yet bound-together, works of art. I do not believe that truth is ever the enemy of art, and the sign hanging there states a complicated, but unequivocal, truth. When you stand before that marked shelf you are at that magical, mythical crossroads. Do you dare feel both things at once? Whatever emotional response you may have to the frank racial description of the author represents your foot on that solid, earthy road, but do you dare experience that other thing, that extra-human thing? African-American literature, like all literature, is food for the souls of all people. Can you embrace the label and come forward, taking in its simultaneous relevance and irrelevance? It is difficult to walk along both roads, but you can do it. And I believe you will. All you have to do is admit your soul's hunger, and hunger is an expression of the most human need of all. ■

Ghost Dog: Or, How I Wrote My First Novel

Randall Kenan

Randall Kenan's critically acclaimed works include A Visitation of Spirits (1989) and Let the Dead Bury the Dead (1992). He traveled America for several years, interviewing African Americans from every walk of life to write Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century (2000). His most recent book, The Fire This Time (2007), is a timely homage to James Baldwin. Kenan teaches creative writing at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

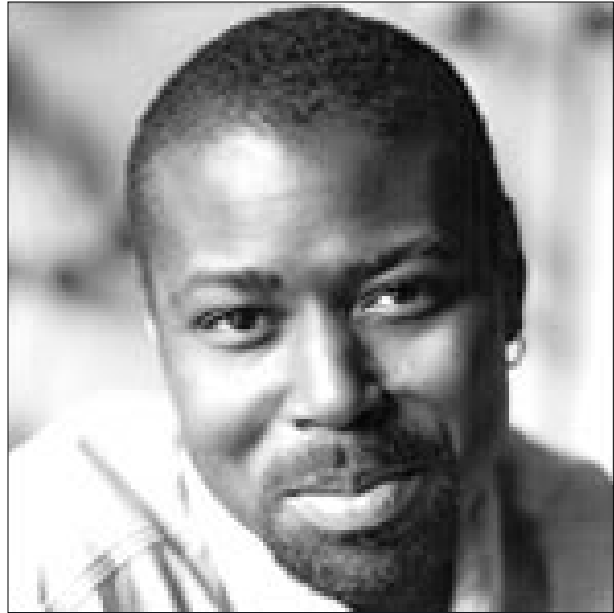
I.

I never saw the ghost dog, but I can see it, nonetheless. Some said it was actually a wolf, grey with flashing red eyes. Some said it was a very large “sooner” (a southern term for mongrel or mutt, meaning “as soon this breed as it is that breed”). But in reports about ghost dog sightings, people remarked that the dog was white, ghostly so, and more often than not a shepherd, the kind with a keen nose and pointy ears. Noble. Resolute.

In every account I heard as a child, the dog was always helpful: My great-great-aunt told of how the dog had led her out of the woods once when she was lost. There was even a long story featuring my own great-great-grandmother, a storm, a mule, a broken-down cart, and the heroic ghost dog. One woman reported being set upon by a pack of canines and how this beautiful white dog leapt to her rescue, appearing out of nowhere, and escorted her safely home. When she turned around in her doorway, the dog had vanished.

The sightings always occurred along a particular stretch of asphalt highway — once a trail for Native Americans, then a dirt road, and, by the time I was a boy, a main route to the beach. Highway 50 cut through an astounding forest of old-growth timber. Oak. Poplar. Pine. Especially the majestic, soaring, massive-limbed longleaf pine that has recently become endangered. For me, as a child, this forest was primordial, full of mysteries, dangers, witches and goblins, and all manner of wonders I had read about in Grimm's fairy tales. And that amazing white dog. The dog I had never seen. But he lived in my imagination. He still does.

It makes perfect sense to me, now, that one day I would write about that ghost dog and that world



© Jill Krementz, Courtesy Randall Kenan

Author Randall Kenan is inspired by the people and places in the rural South.

of southeastern North Carolina. Duplin County. Chinquapin. A town of only a couple of hundred souls. Farmers, poultry factory workers, marine base laborers, largely. But that seeming inevitability was not so obvious to me at the time.

II.

When I first left my small, ghost-haunted North Carolina town, I matriculated at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the nation's oldest public university, a bastion of classical thinking, progressive social thinking, high art, and most important for me at the time: scientific thought. My goal in those days: to become a physicist. My interest in science had been provoked by my having gotten lost for hours in space operas like Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* and Frank Herbert's *Dune*, in *Star Trek* and fantasies about alien cultures and faster-than-light travel, black holes, worm holes, and cool ray guns. (I'll never forget the day my physics advisor said to me when I was a junior: “I think you really want to be a science fiction writer, my boy.” When I took umbrage, trying to explain away my C in differential calculus, he

quickly said to me, “There is no shame in being a writer. More scientists,” he said, “would be writers, if they could. So be grateful you can,” he told me.)

Truth to tell, my interest in science fiction led me to study creative writing, and studying writing led me to the study of literature. But we are talking about the high falutin, canonical type of literature, Charles Dickens and F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Makepeace Thackeray. It became clear to me early on that there was an orthodoxy afoot here. Being in the American South, and at a premiere southern American university, southern literature was king and queen: Thomas Wolfe. William Faulkner. Flannery O’Connor. Richard Wright. Eudora Welty. Southern literature meant social realism. These were the iconic figures held up to us aspiring young southern writers. Any penchant for the phantasmagorical was met with discouragement. Ridiculed even. Real writers, good writers, wrote about the world as it was. “Write what you know” was the mantra of the creative writing courses nestled in the bosom of the English Department, and my major, by my senior year, was no longer physics but English. I was writing what I knew. I knew about ghost dogs.

III.

Ten things about Chinquapin:

1. Soybean fields
2. Two black Baptist churches
3. Rattlesnakes
4. Turkey houses
5. Cucumber fields
6. Deer
7. Summertime family reunions
8. Tobacco barns
9. September revival meetings
10. Cotton-mouth moccasins

IV.

When I arrived at Chapel Hill in the fall of 1981, the percentage of African Americans was in the single digits — around 4 or 5 percent. Yet those hundreds among thousands made their presence known. For whatever reason, most of my closest friends were fellow African Americans. Was it a need for familiarity? A sense of bonding? The comfort of kin? To be sure, I had many good, close, and true white friends — and Japanese and Hispanic and Indian friends, and with many of whom I am still close — but the gravity of African-American

culture drew me. I wrote for the black student newspaper. I sang in the Black Student Movement Gospel Choir.

I never felt any actual pressure to “write black.” I had great respect for the Gospel of Social Realism and its Canon, and I knew it well. But for every autobiographical story I turned in to workshop, I would also pen a story featuring a root worker (a practitioner of African-American Folk Magic) or a space station or a talking dog. Moreover, by that time, I had encountered three writers who gave me what I like to call permission.

The best training any writer can receive is reading, reading, and more reading. Even more than writing, this is also essential. And though I drank down the aforementioned canonical writers of the South with great alacrity, and added to that mix a deep investigation of the Great African-American Book of Fiction — Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks — I would stumble upon writers beyond those garden walls who had enormous impact on the way I looked at the world of prose fiction. Issac Bashevis Singer. Yukio Mishima. Anthony Burgess. Writers who were not, at first glance, the obvious heroes of a young black man from rural, southeastern North Carolina.

It was Toni Morrison, already popular, but years before *Beloved* and the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel, who taught me something of mind-opening importance. With few exceptions, African-American literature fell under the umbrella of “protest” literature, going back to the 19th century and the plethora of famous slave narratives. Even as late as 1970, the year Morrison’s first novel was published, most important African-American novels dealt largely with issues of civil rights and social justice for black people. But Morrison took as her primary subject matter black folks themselves, not racism or politics. She instead chose to focus on personal and family dynamics, matters of the heart and soul. In her world, the perspective of white folk could go unmentioned for hundreds of pages. For my 18-year-old mind this was a revelation.

The writings of the great Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez were my first introduction to what has become popularly known as magical realism. I would never be the same again. (In his Nobel lecture, García Márquez stressed that there is nothing fantastical about his work, the world he writes about is uncompromisingly real. I understood right away exactly what he meant.) Here was a writer who wrote about ghosts and a town suffering from mass amnesia and storms of butterflies and women flying up to heaven with the same matter-of-fact language of social realism — in fact, his three favorite



© AP Images/The Murray Ledger & Times, John Wright

A tobacco barn in the countryside of the American South.

writers are Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Virginia Woolf.

Zora Neale Hurston, whose long-neglected works were just beginning to be rediscovered when I was in college, hit me like a neutron bomb. Here was this trained anthropologist, this Floridian, this African American, who seamlessly integrated folklore with folklife, social realism with the fantastic. Like Morrison, who learned much from Hurston, she did not put the politics of race above the existential essence of black culture.

Song of Solomon. One Hundred Years of Solitude. Their Eyes Were Watching God. It was as if they were collectively saying: Go write ahead, boy. Do your own thing.

For my honors thesis, I turned in several chapters of a proposed novel set in a small North Carolina town very like Chinquapin called Tims Creek. It featured a young lawyer, a native son, who had become a successful Washington, D.C., lawyer. But one fateful summer when he returns to Tims Creek full of a certain emotional turmoil, he runs across a root worker who curses (blesses?) him, and the next night, in the full moon, he becomes a werewolf! I called it “Ashes Don’t Burn.”

Mercy, mercy, me.

V.

Imagine what it is like to have as your first job out of college working for the publisher of two of your literary heroes. Alfred A. Knopf. New York City. The long-time publisher of Toni Morrison. The new publisher of Gabriel García Márquez. 1985. I would soon become the assistant to the editor of the author of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. For an aspiring writer, this was like studying at the feet of Merlin.

But there was another education happening for me. I would come to spend years living in Queens and then Brooklyn. I was now rubbing shoulders daily, in the subways, on the streets, in the stores, and eventually in homes, with black folk from all over the African Diaspora. I got to know black people from Ghana and Trinidad and Haiti and Toronto and Houston, Texas. This exposure challenged all those closely held notions of what it means to be black, and made me look back at the world in which I had initially grown up with brand-new eyes. Suddenly the fish fries, the out-of-tune church choirs, the hours spent toiling under the sun in tobacco fields, Vacation Bible School, hog killings, and stories of ghost dogs

became important somehow, important to be written about.

“Ashes Don’t Burn” had one fundamental flaw, and, in hindsight, I thank my teachers back at social realism-saturated UNC [University of North Carolina] for helping me to realize that roadblock. The impediment had nothing to do with lycanthropy. Simply put: I was not a thirtysomething lawyer going through a crisis upon returning home. I was not writing what I “knew.” But I had been a boy in that same home, so, by and by, the narrative I had been laboring over changed. I kept the supernatural cast that I’m sure inhabited those dark woods. The landscape did not change at all, in fact it probably richened and deepened, partly from my nostalgia for it, and as a response to the six-billion-footed city, dreaming of the woods and the deer and the cornfields.

The story I scribbled at doggedly, in the evenings, on subways, on the weekends, would ultimately be published

in the summer of 1989 as *A Visitation of Spirits*. There are no ghost dogs in it, amazingly, but plenty of other ghosts and creatures, spirits of the world and of the mind, mingled in with a healthy dose of social realism as I had been scrupulously taught, and which I respect with great admiration.

For me, now, this approach seems inevitable. Right. The only way for me to do it. Yet the path toward that fictional vision was neither straight nor easily achieved, but worth every twist and bend and cul-de-sac.

I hope to return to lycanthropy one day soon. There is something in that mythology that fits well in Tims Creek, in Chiquapin. And of course, soon and very soon, I hope a ghost dog will make an appearance in one of my stories. Leaping to the rescue only to vanish again into the imagination. ■

Rwanda to America: Writing as Transformation

Immaculée Ilibagiza

*Immaculée Ilibagiza immigrated to the United States in 1998. Her first book, *Left to Tell* (2006), chronicles her experiences during the Rwandan genocide. Her most recent book is *Led by Faith* (2008). She gives inspirational lectures on peace, faith, and forgiveness.*

I've always loved to write. The most prized possession of my childhood was a notebook of sayings and proverbs that I had compiled over the years. Despite my love for writing, I never dreamed anyone would ever read the private thoughts I poured out in the pages of my notebook. Everyone has a story that is unique to them, but not everyone has the opportunity to tell their story to the world.

In 1994 I lived through an experience that created in me an unquenchable desire to share my story with people everywhere. That year I was home for my week-long Easter holiday. Two days before I returned to school, I found myself in the middle of one of the bloodiest, most efficient genocides in the history of the world. On the morning of April 7, President Habyarimana's plane was shot down and the genocide began.

My parents, who were both teachers, agreed with my brother when he suggested that I should go and hide. I was one girl among three boys, and when I resisted hiding, my two brothers and my parents insisted that I go. Luckily my brother Aimable was studying in Senegal at the time so we all knew he was safe.

Against my will, and strictly out of respect and obedience to my parents, I went to hide in the home of a nearby Lutheran pastor who was a member of the Hutu tribe. I was a Tutsi and it was my tribe that was being hunted. Upon my arrival at the pastor's house, he put me in a 1-by-1.5 meter bathroom with five other women. Later two more would join us.

The pastor instructed us to keep quiet and assured us that he wouldn't even tell his children, who lived in the house, that we had taken refuge right under their noses. He told us that the war would likely last a few days and certainly not more than a week. Three months later we were still in that bathroom, sitting in complete silence for fear of being discovered. During that time we had very



Photo by Michael Collopy

Immaculée Ilibagiza writes and lectures about her experiences as a survivor of the Rwandan genocide.

little food and the house was searched multiple times by our tormentors.

We emerged from the bathroom to find our tiny country littered with a million dead bodies. That night I discovered that everyone I had left behind had been brutally murdered. I kept thinking that it was all part of some terrible dream and that at some point I would wake up, but sadly I was living in a new reality. The reality resembled what I had envisioned the end of the world would look like.

During my time in the bathroom, I went through a physical and spiritual transformation. My body had withered away to a mere 65 pounds but my faith and will

were rock solid. I can remember the exact moment when I begged God to make it possible to tell my story and the lessons I'd learned during my confinement to the world.

The desire to share what was transpiring in my heart and in my country was something I couldn't ignore. Yet culturally Rwandans don't typically write books or stories. Our country is sometimes referred to as "the land of words." Traditionally my people have passed on our news and history from generation to generation at family gatherings through oral tradition. Yet there would be no one to pass stories along to now that my family and neighbors were gone.

I never thought I was capable of writing something that others would read, yet the thought wouldn't leave me. I couldn't begin to think how my dream to write my story would come true. I didn't know anything about writing and I had never met an author. But when I put my faith in God I knew that nothing was impossible. My faith allowed me to keep hope alive.

I yearned to share my parents' story and the lessons that they had taught me, right up until the last day I saw them. Their wise words had molded me into the woman I had become. I wondered how I would go on without being able to speak to them or to seek their advice. I knew that their words and their memory would stay with me forever, but I wanted to tell people how my beautiful family had ended.

During my time in the bathroom, I went from rage and hatred towards those who hunted us to a place of forgiveness. I experienced the pain of anger as I fantasized about killing those who sought to kill me and those I loved. My anger was like poison in my soul. It was simply too heavy and too painful to carry the burden of hating millions of people. It seemed as though evil and hate were smothering me until I begged God to show me how to see the good in people, how to love, how to smile.

I remember distinctly the moment when my heart was freed from anger. Forgiveness is the only word that comes to mind when I try to express what I felt in that moment. If we weren't in hiding, I would have shouted with joy to my fellow captives in the bathroom how beautiful they were, even though in reality we all looked like living skeletons and none of us had showered in months. I realized that the killers were truly blind with anger and hatred. I saw that I could not change what was in their hearts and that I would change nothing by competing with them in hatred.

Forgiveness didn't mean that I was supposed to make myself a victim by allowing another person to hurt me. It also didn't mean that I should ignore the truth or that I

should be naive. Justice can also be a form of forgiveness if done with the intent of changing a person and not with the intent to hurt or take revenge. I kept these lessons in my heart, and I intuitively knew that they were not for me alone but to share with the others, but the question still remained, how would I share this story?

At the end of 1998 perpetrators of the genocide threatened to kill me, just as they had killed many other survivors, because those who had witnessed the killing were a threat to them. I would be proud to give testimony but the truth is, I had not reported any of the killers. I hadn't witnessed any killing firsthand, and I knew that those who had hunted me had undoubtedly killed many others, and I trusted they would be duly prosecuted. Like many other survivors, I visited the prison to see those who killed our people. I met a man who had killed some of my family members and I offered him forgiveness. I knew that I wouldn't make a good witness, but, even so, my name appeared in the newspaper soon after my visit. I was identified as a witness who was accused of putting innocent people in prison.

Knowing I was at risk, and advised by American friends, I decided to leave my home in Rwanda and to immigrate to the United States. At the time I was working for the United Nations in Rwanda, which was one of the best jobs in the country, but I knew I must make the move.

I strongly believe that my move to the United States was inspired by God. However, my first months there were not easy. I found myself living in a completely foreign culture and I had difficulty integrating with my new environment. I had never experienced winter before and I arrived just as winter began. To make matters worse, I was pregnant for the first time in my life.

It was the first time I experienced short days, long nights, and vice versa. In Rwanda, the weather is always between 18 and 21 degrees C all year-round. Every day the sun goes down at 6:00 PM and it rises at 5:00 AM. Kigali and New York were like day and night. The two cities couldn't be more different.

Although I had to make many new adjustments, I felt strongly that I was born to live in the United States. It was a country where every race and every tribe felt at home. When I looked at the people around me, freedom was apparent in every face I saw. It was almost as if I could smell freedom in the air. People wore and did what they liked and no one seemed to be surprised by anything. The number of schools and opportunities was overwhelming. Every class I wanted to take or job I wanted to try was at my fingertips. New York seemed to



© AP Images/Armando Franca

Rwandan refugees near Kigali return from Tanzanian camps, where they fled to escape the 1994 genocide.

be the center of the world. There were more varieties of clothes, cars, and people than I had ever seen in my life.

People's warmth and willingness to help was very surprising. I will never forget the day I had a flat tire. I didn't realize I had a flat until a car passed me and blocked me and forced me to stop. Two boys in white T-shirts came out with smiles and tools to fix my car. They fixed the car, gave me a tire, and left with a warm smile. To this day I still wonder if those boys were angels from heaven or real people.

After some time, I felt an overwhelming desire to write my story. It took me three weeks to write my first draft. When I revisited my writing some time later, it

took another three months to go through my initial draft because by that time I had a job and I was trying to manage my editing and my job. My American friends who knew my story encouraged me to write.

Three days after I finished writing, I went to a workshop in New York. I didn't expect anything more than spending time with friends. At the end of the workshop, I met a writer who asked me how I was doing. I responded, "Fine," and after that one word, he asked where my accent came from. I told him that I was from Rwanda. At that he opened his eyes and asked me, "Do you know what happened there?" I told him what happened in a few words. We were both in a hurry. He was signing his books and I didn't want to hold up the line. He then told me that if I finished my book he would help me find a publisher. As he promised, a short time after our meeting he introduced me to his publisher and to an editor. Eight months after we met, my first book, *Left to Tell*, was published. To my great surprise, it became a *New York Times* bestseller only two weeks after its release.

I'm so grateful to the American people, who have received my story with open arms. I wondered how Americans could relate to such horror. Yet they did relate. They cried for my parents, laughed with me, and related to my struggles with faith. Telling my story has allowed my heart to heal.

In America I've found my home, and I found my shoulder to cry on. My children are Americans and I am proud that they are. I no longer feel like a stranger. I cheer for every victory and I cry for any bad news that befalls my new home. Most importantly, I look to the future of this country with hope and I pray for its well-being. As a little girl growing up in the tiny Rwandan village of Mataba, I was taught that America was the land of opportunity. Today I believe that to be truer than ever. In America I could tell my story. ■

What Is African-American Literature?

Gerald Early



Courtesy Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri

Gerald Early leads a lively class discussion at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

Emergence of a new, black pulp fiction may indicate the maturity, rather than the decline, of African-American literature.

*Gerald Early is the Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where he directs the Center for the Humanities. He specializes in American literature, African-American culture from 1940 to 1960, Afro-American autobiography, nonfiction prose, and popular culture. Author of several books, including the award-winning *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture (1994)*, Early has edited numerous anthologies and was a consultant on Ken Burns's documentary films on baseball and jazz.*

African-American writer Nick Chiles famously castigated the publishing industry, young black women readers, and the current state of African-American writing in his controversial 2006 *New York Times* opinion piece entitled "Their Eyes Were Reading Smut." (The article's title is, clearly, a parodic paraphrase of the classic 1937 Zora Neale Hurston novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a feminist staple of the African-American literature canon, considered by many literary scholars to be one of the great American novels of its era.) Although Chiles was happy about mainstream bookstores like Borders devoting considerable shelf space to "African-American Literature," he was more than a little nonplussed by what the store and the publishing

industry considered “African-American Literature” to be. “[All] that I could see was lurid book jackets displaying all forms of brown flesh, usually half-naked and in some erotic pose, often accompanied by guns and other symbols of criminal life,” wrote Chiles. These novels have such titles as *Gutter*, *Crack Head*, *Forever a Hustler’s Wife*, *A Hustler’s Son*, *Amongst Thieves*, *Cut Throat*, *Hell Razor Honeys*, *Payback with Ya Life*, and the like. The well-known authors are K’wan, Ronald Quincy, Quentin Carter, Deja King (also known as Joy King), Teri Woods, Vickie Stringer, and Carl Weber. They occupy a genre called Urban or Hip-Hop Fiction, gritty, so-called realistic works about inner-city life, full of graphic sex, drugs and crime, “playas,” thugs, dough boys (rich drug dealers), and graphic violence; lavish consumption juxtaposed to life in housing projects. In some instances, the works are nothing more than black crime novels told from the point of view of the criminal; in others, they are black romance novels with a hard-edged city setting. In all cases, they are a kind of pulp fiction; despite their claim of realism, they are actually about fantasy, as their readers are attempting to understand their reality while trying to escape it. Mostly young African Americans, primarily women, the gender that constitutes the greater portion of the fiction-reading American public, read these books, and the books are marketed exclusively for this clientele. Some of these novels sell well enough to support a few authors without the need of a “day job,” a rarity in the writing trade.

The existence of these books proffers three aspects of change for African-American literature from what it was, say, 30 or 40 years ago. First, despite problems with literacy and a dismal high school drop-out rate among African Americans, there is a young, mass, black reading audience of such size that a black author can write for it exclusively without giving a thought to being highbrow or literary or to crossing-over for whites. Second, the taste of the masses is distinct from, and troubling to, the taste of the elite in large measure because the elite no longer control the direction and purpose of African-American literature; it is now, more than ever, a market-driven literature, rather than an art form patronized and promoted by cultured whites and blacks as it had been in the past. The fact that blacks started two of the publishing houses for these books, Urban Books and Triple Crown, underscores the entrepreneurial, populist nature of this type of race literature: by black people for black people. Third, African-American literature no longer has to be obsessed with the burden or expectation of political protest or special pleading for the humanity of the race or the worth of its history and culture as it had to in the past.

(This is not to suggest that African-American literature has abandoned these concerns. They are most evident in African-American children’s and adolescent literature, which is frequently, as one might expect, highly didactic.) This is not to argue that the books that Chiles deplors have some neo-literary or extra-literary worth that compensates for them being trashy, poorly written novels. But these books do reveal some of the complicated roots of African-American literature and of the construction of the African-American audience.

Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s — such as Melvin Van Peebles’s independent classic, *Sweet Sweetback’s Badass Song*; *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Sheba, Baby*, starring Pam Grier; *Hell Up in Harlem*, *Black Caesar*, *That Man Bolt*, and *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, starring Fred Williamson; *Superfly*; the *Shaft* movies, starring Richard Roundtree — created the first young black audience for hard-boiled, urban black, seemingly realistic art centered on hustling, drugs, prostitution, and anti-white politics (in which whites — particularly gangsters and policemen — are destroying the black community). The literary roots for this came from two streams in the 1960s. The highbrow, mainstream literary and leftist types endorsed such nonfiction, black prison literature as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; Eldridge Cleaver’s essay collection *Soul on Ice*; *Poems from Prison*, compiled by inmate and poet Etheridge Knight, which includes Knight’s “Ideas of Ancestry,” one of the most famous and highly regarded African-American poems of the 1960s; and *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. All of these books have become part of black literary canon and are frequently taught in various college literature, creative writing, and sociology classes. On the pulp, populist fiction side in the late 1960s and early 1970s were the novels of former pimp Iceberg Slim and imprisoned drug addict Donald Goines — including *Trick Baby*, *Dope-fiend*, *Street Players*, and *Black Gangster*. These novels are the direct antecedents of the books that Chiles found so dismaying in 2006. They occupied a small but compelling portion of the black literature output in the 1970s. Many saw them in a far more political light at that time; now these books dominate African-American literature or seem to. Then, as now, there is a strong belief among many blacks — poor, working-class, and bourgeois intellectuals — and many whites, as well, that violent, urban life represents “authentic” black experience and a true politically dynamic “resistance” culture.

Chiles probably would have preferred if Borders and other bookstores would not label urban or hip-hop novels as “African-American Literature.” It would be



AP Photo/Jason DeCrow

Rappers Mos Def, Flavor Flav, and Chuck D (left to right) are driving forces in socially conscious hip-hop music. They are performers, musicians, and composers of rap lyrics: messages delivered in rhyming couplets to a 4/4 beat. Mos Def is also a noted actor and appeared in Suzan-Lori Parks's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Top Dog, Underdog*, replacing Don Cheadle for the Broadway production.

Hip-hop, which began in urban African-American and Latino communities in 1970s New York, has influenced not only music and film, but black pulp fiction.

better for the public if such books were called “Afro-Pop Literature” or “Black Urban Fiction” or “Mass-Market Black Fiction.” Then, the category of “African-American Literature” could be reserved for those books and authors who are part of the canon: writers ranging from late 19th and early 20th century novelist Charles Chesnutt, poet and novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar, and novelist and poet James Weldon Johnson, to 1920s and early 1930s Harlem Renaissance figures like poet and fiction writer Langston Hughes, novelist and poet Claude McKay, novelists Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, and poet and novelist Countee Cullen, to the great crossover figures of the 1940s through the 1960s, like novelist and essayist James Baldwin, novelist and short story writer Richard Wright, novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison, novelist Ann Petry, poet and novelist Gwendolyn Brooks, and novelist John A. Williams, to the Black Arts-era writers like poet and children’s writer Nikki Giovanni; poet, playwright, and fiction writer Amiri Baraka; and poet Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), to post-1960s writers like novelists Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Walter Mosley, Colson Whitehead, Ernest Gaines, and Charles Johnson; poet and novelist Ishmael Reed; and poets Yusef Komunyakaa and Rita Dove. A few additional figures, like playwrights Lorraine Hansberry, Ed Bullins, Charles

Fuller, and August Wilson, and some diasporic writers, like novelist and playwright Wole Soyinka, poet Derek Walcott, novelists Chinua Achebe, George Lamming, Jamaica Kincaid, Zadie Smith, Junot Díaz, and Edwidge Danticat, could be thrown in for good measure.

Chiles’s concern about the supposed decline of African-American literature reflects the elite’s fear that the rise of hip-hop and the “urban” ethos generally represents a decline in urban black cultural life. The “urban nitty-gritty,” as it were, seems like a virus that has undone black artistic standards and a black meritocracy. Now, there is only purely market-driven drivel aimed at the lowest, most uncultured taste. This is clearly a position of someone like novelist and culture critic Stanley Crouch. The sensitivity on this point is not by any means wholly or even mostly a matter of snobbery. It has taken a very long time for African-American literature to reach a level of general respectability, where the general public thought it was worth reading and the literary establishment thought it was worth recognizing. Now, for many blacks, blacks themselves seem to be denigrating it by flooding the market with trash novels no better than Mickey Spillane. It is by no means surprising that blacks, a persecuted and historically degraded group, would feel that their cultural

products are always suspect, precarious, and easily turned against them as caricature in the marketplace.

Another way to look at this is that urban literature has democratized and broadened the reach and content of African-American literature. In some ways, urban lit may show the maturity, not the decline, of African-American literature. After all, African-American literature is the oldest of all self-consciously identified ethnic minority literatures in the United States, going back as far as 1774 to Phyllis Wheatley's first book of poems, to the slave narratives of the antebellum period that produced such classics as *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). African Americans have thought longer and harder about the importance of literature as a political and cultural tool than other ethnic minorities in the United States have. The Harlem Renaissance was a movement by blacks, helped by white patrons, to gain cultural access and respectability by producing a first-rate literature. The rise of urban lit does not repudiate the black literary past, but it does suggest other ways and means of producing black literature and other ends for it as well. Moreover, some urban lit authors are far from being hacks: Sister Souljah, a well-traveled political activist and novelist, is a more-than-capable writer and thinker, however provocative she may be. The same can be said of the lone novel of music writer Nelson George, *Urban Romance* (1993), clearly not a trash novel. Some of the books of Eric Jerome Dickey and K'wan are worth reading as well. A major figure who straddles black romance and urban lit is E. Lynn Harris, a popular writer whose books deal with

relationships and other matters of importance for blacks, particularly black women, today.

When I approached Bantam Books two years ago to become general editor of two annual series — *Best African American Essays* and *Best African American Fiction* — I wanted to make sure that the books had crossover appeal to various segments of the black reading public, and so I chose Harris to be the guest editor of *Best African American Fiction of 2009*, the first volume in the series. I see these volumes as an opportunity not only to bring the best of African-American letters to the general reading public — from younger writers like Z. Z. Packer and Amina Gautier to established voices like Samuel Delaney and Edward P. Jones — but also to forge a sort of marriage between various types of African-American literature. I wanted to use E. Lynn Harris's reach to bring serious black literature to an audience that might not be aware of it or even desire it. It is far too early to say whether this attempt will succeed, but the mere attempt alone acknowledges a level of complexity in African-American literature and a level of profound segmentation in its audience that shows that African-American experience, however it is made into art, has a depth and outreach, a sort of universality, dare I say, that actually bodes well for the future of this and perhaps of all of American ethnic minority literature. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Writing to Bridge the Mixed-Blood Divide: An American Indian Perspective

Susan Power

Descended from American Indians and Scots-Irish/English who colonized the United States, Susan Power, a Harvard-trained lawyer, turned to writing about her Dakota Sioux heritage. Her first novel, The Grass Dancer, won the 1995 PEN/Hemingway Award for best first fiction. Her books include Strong Heart Society (1998) and Roofwalker (2002), and her work has been published in The Atlantic Monthly, Paris Review, Ploughshares, and Story. Power teaches creative writing at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota.

My mother was born in 1925 in Fort Yates, North Dakota, a dusty town on the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation. Her Dakota name is Mahpeyabogawin, which in our tribal language means Gathering-of-Stormclouds Woman, and so she came into this world like a premonition of all the black storms that were soon to follow, as overworked soil on the Great Plains became a dry, loose, killing powder. She grew up in a small log cabin just across the road from the original grave of our famous Chief Sitting Bull.

“He was our protection. If we were in trouble, or scared about something, we’d run over to his marker of piled stones and call, ‘La La, La La, help us.’” My mother has a long Sioux memory, “like an elephant,” she says. I’ve heard this story many times.

“Of course. It’s short for ‘Tunkashila.’ Grandfather.”

“That’s right.”

I wasn’t raised speaking Dakota but learned enough words, enough phrases, to appreciate what a visual language it is — each word a picture nestled in a tangle of stories that I have carried into my life and my art. I wasn’t born on a reservation but in the sprawling city of Chicago, and my mother’s memories are only half of me since my father was born in New York state, descended from Englishmen, Scots-Irishmen, who left Europe in the 1600s for the adventure of America. He was 10 years older than my mother, college-educated, raised in privilege, and when



AP Images/Doug Dreyer

Traditions of Sioux Indian culture are poetically rendered in author Susan Power’s fiction.

I was little I liked to imagine how strange and shocking it would have been for them if they’d met when my mother was 10 years old and my father 20. Would he have pitied her then? Seeing her dust-covered, barefoot, hair cut simply in a boy’s bob, and wearing a worn pair of bib overalls? Would she think he’d landed from another world, to see his dapper clothes and elegant pipe, clean-shaven face that always smelled of Old Spice? Somehow, in their separate journeys, my parents did come together, fellow book lovers who had jobs in the publishing business. And this is where

we always converge, no matter how different we were, and are, from one another — in this love of words.

My mother was one of the original founding members of the American Indian Center in Chicago, and I grew up embraced by the intertribal community, learning to dance washboard style like the older Winnebago ladies, hearing true ghost stories and cautionary tales of misused magic. I learned how different tribes worshipped, many interweaving their traditional beliefs with Christianity. This was my life on weekends, evenings, summers, but it wasn't my only life. My parents also exposed me to mainstream American culture, took me to ballets and theater, libraries and museums. I "discovered" Shakespeare when I was 12 years old, browsing through the extensive record collection at the main public library downtown, heavy sets I lugged home and listened to for hours. I memorized long dramatic passages, favoring the death scenes, and would gasp around the house, "I'm dying, Egypt, dying," in a speech that never seemed to end. I thought Shakespeare would have felt at home with Indians, master storyteller that he was, and it seemed quite natural to me to take him as a relative, a familiar, and draw inspiration from him as easily as I did Stella Johnson, who told me Winnebago stories of the Snow Shoe brothers.

In school I was always the only Indian student, from kindergarten through the 12th grade, and I saw society change from year to year, so that my difference evolved from a stumbling block that challenged teachers to something they cherished and nourished. In my early years, a teacher might give me a perfect grade for a well-written and carefully researched paper but wasn't entirely sure she wanted me to read the text aloud (as everyone else was invited to do) because my vision of history was not the commonly accepted model. But by high school, my teachers would purposely call on me in class when they

wanted another viewpoint expressed, a challenge to prevailing opinion. Friends who had earlier been wary of a classmate who didn't seem to fit in, eventually claimed I had a secret life they envied, weekends in New York attending a traditional Mohawk wedding in a longhouse, the Thanksgiving break where I came back with a beaded crown and the title of Miss Indian Chicago. I am heartened to see that increasingly readers, like teachers, are interested in all the stories of America, all the voices, and so as a writer I have opened the doors to my secret life and invite anyone to enter.

After my father died and I moved with my mother into an apartment building, she wanted me to feel connected to his side of the family as well as hers. She set up our long entrance hall as a kind

of ancestral gallery, a place where East and West, Indian and white, could come together as a visual reminder of different stories and hopes, all merging in me. On the eastern wall she hung land grants and tintypes of my father's people, in the center of their number an older man with a lush white beard and mischievous eyes: my great-great-grandfather Joseph Henry Gilmore, Baptist minister, university professor, poet who penned the lyrics to the hymn "He Leadeth Me" and

whose father had been governor of New Hampshire during the Civil War (1861-1865). On the western wall she affixed two beaded drumsticks, oil paintings of Sioux chiefs, aromatic braids of sweet grass, and, dead center in this collection, a photograph of my great-great-grandfather Mahto Nuhpa (Two Bear), hereditary chief of the Yanktonnai Dakota, respected orator, defender of his band during the Battle of White Stone Hill in 1863. The two men stared across the chasm of our dark tile floor, their cultural divide, contemporaries who never met in life meeting now in this unlikely place. My mother's imagination must have found the tableau irresistible, and



Courtesy Susan Power

Susan Power at 18, around the time she won the Miss Indian Chicago title.



Courtesy Susan Power

Susan Power's mother Susan Kelly Power, age 16. Mother and daughter wear traditional Dakota dress.



Monument to famous Lakota Sioux Chief Sitting Bull (c. 1831-1890), who led his warriors to victory against the U.S. cavalry in the Battle of Little Big Horn. Originally buried at Fort Yates, North Dakota, some claim his remains were removed and reburied here, in Mobridge, South Dakota. He is called "Tunkashila," or grandfather, by the Sioux.

AP Photo/Doug Dreyer

would scare me with their violence, their mistakes.

Years after I moved from this apartment and hallway, my mother reminded me of her tales regarding ancestral division by telling me how it all came out in the end.

"That's right!" I scolded her. "You had me completely afraid to go through that hall at night, thinking all kinds of mayhem were breaking out."

"I know, I know. That was terrible," she chuckled. "But there is a happy ending."

"Really?"

"Yes. Ever since your book came out, *The Grass Dancer*, I've noticed that at night there's peace and quiet in the hallway. No more arguments or misunderstandings, no more

she began telling me stories of how they argued sometimes at night.

"They're all good people but they just don't understand each other, so they fight. Even Two Bear, who was such a revered council chief, can't keep the peace. War has broken out between them so you should be careful at night not to walk through the hall. Both sides love you, of course, but they're angry, firing bullets and arrows, and they don't always see what they're doing. You might get caught in the crossfire!"

When I was little I believed everything my mother told me. I avoided the hall late at night, after we went to bed, but in the morning I would check to see if I could find evidence of the battle — bullet holes in the plaster walls, splashes of blood on the floor. It didn't matter that the hall was always tidy; I just figured my ancestors cleaned up after their wars because they worried they

anger. Both sides are so proud of you, of what you've written, and both sides feel as if they're playing an important part in your success. Nobody's left out. That gives them a lot to talk about, a lot they can agree on. They're probably realizing they have more in common than they thought."

When I began writing fiction, I never would have imagined that my stories and words, my love of literature reproduced on paper and magical narratives passed on by a chain of voices, would unite my blood — the fascinated ghosts of those who came before me. This is the best result, in my opinion: My work is a bridge between divides, where everyone feels honored and included, consulted, everyone has a voice at the table, everyone has a stake in what comes next. ■

Simple Memories as Poems

Ofelia Zepeda

A poet derives inspiration from memories of family and from her native tongue.

Ofelia Zepeda is a poet and educator born into the Tohono O'odham Indian nation of the American Southwest. She has long championed American Indian languages and wrote A Papago Grammar. She is the author of three books of poetry, including Ocean Power: Poems from the Desert and the bilingual Earth Movements/Jewed I-Hoi. She was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1999 for her work. Zepeda teaches at the American Indian Studies Programs at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and is codirector of the American Indian Language Development Institute, which she cofounded.

The question is a basic one: What or who influences my writing? The answer, though, is not easy to arrive at in my case. In the poem, "The Place Where Clouds Are Formed," the lines "with the back of his gloved hand he wipes the window, / 'is it coming yet?'" recalls an image and a voice I remember so clearly, as if it happened recently, yet it is a long-ago memory from my childhood. Many of my poems stem from simple memories. Memories caught in time, memories of certain phrases, acts, and movements. These memories surprise me when they come to the surface. It is interesting to me that when I started writing poetry as an adult I easily pulled on bits and pieces of remembered things from my childhood. In my first collection of poetry, *Ocean Power: Poems from the Desert*, I include an introductory essay that reflects on this phenomenon and my desire to give credit to those things that helped to shape my memories. They are not mine alone but consist of a menagerie of people in my life, in particular, my family. Oftentimes they are a collective memory, but I was the only one who chose to move them into poetry.

I can recount the sounds and shapes that act as the mnemonics for many of the things that help me remember. I attribute much credit to my language: The Tohono O'odham language, spoken in southern Arizona and northern Sonora Mexico, is still an oral language; reading and writing of this language is not a commonplace occurrence. The orality of my language forces me to practice remembering things. As this language moves into the 21st century, it becomes even more imperative that the act of



Poet, educator, and MacArthur fellow Ofelia Zepeda.

© Tony Celentano 2007

remembering continues, whether it is remembering the sacred rituals and songs of the O'odham or the everyday occurrences and sounds of a people in a special place. All of these remembered things are part of the overall orality of a language, and all contribute on many levels to the creative process, as in my situation. Today I take care in trying to be observant of the simple movements around me. I pay attention to everyday sounds, notice the daily movement of people. I make special notes in my memory of some of these things, never knowing when an event, a word will surface and guide me in creating a poem. ■

Pulling Down the Clouds

Ofelia Zepeda



NPS Photo by Mike Quinn

Clouds over the Grand Canyon, Arizona.

Ñ-ku'ipadkaj 'ant 'an o 'ols g cewagĩ.

With my harvesting stick I will hook the clouds.

Nt o 'i-wannio k o 'i-hudiñ g cewagĩ.

With my harvesting stick I will pull down the clouds.

Ñ-ku'ipadkaj 'ant o 'i-siho g cewagĩ.

With my harvesting stick I will stir the clouds.

With dreams of a distant noise disturbing his sleep, ñłž
the smell of dirt, wet, for the first time in what seemed
like months.

The change in the molecules is sudden, they enter
the nasal cavity.

He contemplates the smell, what is that smell?

It is rain.

Rain somewhere out in the desert.

Comforted in this knowledge he turns over and continues his sleep,
dreams of women with harvesting sticks
raised toward the sky.

"Pulling Down the Clouds" from Ocean Power by Ofelia Zepeda. © 1995 Ofelia Zepeda. Reprinted by permission of the University of Arizona Press.

The Toughest Indian in the World

Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian who grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. His first short story collection, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993), received the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Fiction. A story from the collection was adapted by Alexie for the award-winning film Smoke Signals. After his first novel, Reservation Blues (1995), was published, he was nominated a best young American novelist by Granta magazine. His prolific writing continues to win awards. He is also a standup comedian.

The following excerpts, from his short story collection The Toughest Indian in the World, give a flavor of his work. The first vignette is from the book's title story.

In 1975 or '76 or '77, driving along one highway or another, my father would point out a hitchhiker standing beside the road a mile or two in the distance.

"Indian," he said if it was an Indian, and he was never wrong, though I could never tell if the distant figure was male or female, let alone Indian or not.

If a distant figure happened to be white, my father would drive by without comment.

That was how I learned to be silent in the presence of white people.

The silence is not about hate or pain or fear. Indians just like to believe that white people will vanish, perhaps explode into smoke, if they are ignored enough times. Perhaps a thousand white families are still waiting for their sons and daughters to return home, and can't recognize them when they float back as morning fog.

"We better stop," my mother said from the passenger seat. She was one of those Spokane women who always wore a purple bandanna tied tightly around her head.

These days, her bandanna is usually red. There are reasons, motives, traditions behind the choice of color, but my mother keeps them secret.

"Make room," my father said to my siblings and me as we sat on the floor in the cavernous passenger area of our blue van. We sat on carpet samples because my father had torn out the seats in a sober rage not long after he bought the van from a crazy white man.



© Erin Patrice O'Brien/Corbis

Writer Sherman Alexie.

I have three brothers and three sisters now. Back then, I had four of each. I missed one of the funerals and cried myself sick during the other one.

"Make room," my father said again — he said everything twice — and only then did we scramble to make space for the Indian hitchhiker.

Of course, it was easy enough to make room for one hitchhiker, but Indians usually travel in packs. Once or twice, we picked up entire all-Indian basketball teams, along with their coaches, girlfriends, and cousins. Fifteen, twenty Indian strangers squeezed into the back of a blue van with nine wide-eyed Indian kids.

Back in those days, I loved the smell of Indians, and of Indian hitchhikers in particular. They were usually in some stage of drunkenness, often in need of soap and a towel, and always ready to sing.

Oh, the songs! Indian blues bellowed at the highest volumes. We called them “49s,” those cross-cultural songs that combined Indian lyrics to every Hank Williams song ever recorded. Hank was our Jesus, Patsy Cline was our Virgin Mary, and Freddy Fender, George Jones, Conway Twitty, Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, Charley Pride, Ronnie Milsap, Tanya Tucker, Marty Robbins, Johnny Horton, Donna Fargo, and Charlie Rich were our disciples.

We all know that nostalgia is dangerous, but I remember those days with a clear conscience. Of course, we live in different days now, and there aren't as many Indian hitchhikers as there used to be.

In “One Good Man” the narrator reviews his life as he cares for his diabetic amputee father, who has returned from the hospital to die. Through the story, he repeatedly asks himself, and the reader, “What is an Indian?” — posing different answers each time. “What is an Indian? Is it a child who can stroll unannounced through the doors of seventeen different houses?” or “What is an Indian? Is it a son who can stand in a doorway and watch his father sleep?” After his father tells him about a dream, he decides to take him on a trip to Mexico. This is the final vignette of the story.

South of Tecate, California, the van broke down. Then, five minutes later, north of Tecate, Mexico, my father's wheelchair broke down.

We stood (I was the only one standing!) on the hot pavement in the bright sun.

“We almost made it,” said my father.

“Somebody will pick us up,” I said.

“Would you pick us up?”

“Two brown guys, one in a wheelchair? I think the immigration cops might be picking us up.”

“Well, then, maybe they'll think we're illegal aliens and deport us.”

“That would be a hell of an ironic way to get into Mexico.”

I wanted to ask my father about his regrets. I wanted to ask him what was the worst thing he'd ever done. His greatest sin. I wanted to ask him if there was any reason why the Catholic Church would consider him for sainthood. I wanted to open up this dictionary and find the definitions for faith, hope, goodness, sadness, tomato, son, mother, husband, virginity, Jesus, wood, sacrifice, pain, foot, wife, thumb, hand, bread, and sex.

“Do you believe in God?” I asked my father.

“God has lots of potential,” he said.

“When you pray,” I asked him. “What do you pray about?”

“That's none of your business,” he said.

We laughed. We waited for hours for somebody to help us. What is an Indian? I lifted my father and carried him across the border. ■

Copyright © 2000 by Sherman Alexie. Used by permission of GrovelAtlantic, Inc.

Teaching the Art of Being Human: Ancient Indigenous Storytelling Thrives

Lea Terhune

Indigenous peoples that first inhabited the Americas held their literature in memory to be transmitted orally, and members of surviving indigenous nations still do.

Lea Terhune is managing editor for this eJournal USA.

Before there was writing, there were stories. Over millennia, stories descended through generations, in families and communities — stories that captured the values and legends of diverse societies. Gifted storytellers committed hundreds of tales and verses to memory, and they were highly honored as entertainers and teachers who inspired, instilled values, and guided behavior.

Writing was invented, and many stories transmitted orally were written down, but storytellers continued to enthrall traditional communities around the world. Even the 20th-century technological revolution, which brought radio, television, the Internet, and digital media, did not silence storytellers.

Indigenous Americans have a rich oral tradition among their many distinct tribes, or nations, who inhabited North and South America well before the first European explorer appeared. Today these stories, preserved within their communities, reach broader audiences thanks to storytellers like Sunny Dooley and Dovie Thomason. Dooley, a Navajo, or *Diné*, and Thomason, of Lakota and Kiowa Apache ancestry, sat down together to discuss storytelling in the 21st century after performances at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Dooley is a strict interpreter of Navajo tradition, who, following her chanter grandfather's advice, tells stories only where she is invited and does not advertise. Steeped in tribal culture while growing up on the Arizona



Dovie Thomason is a storyteller for several American Indian traditions besides her Lakota and Kiowa Apache birth tribes.

Photo by Katherine Fogden, National Museum of the American Indian

Navajo reservation, her first language is *Diné*. Navajos, now the largest Indian nation in the United States, were seminomadic and pastoral. Thomason was born into Great Plains Indian nations, the Lakota, whose livelihoods revolved around the buffalo hunt before the herds were decimated, and Kiowa Apache, who were legendary, fierce warriors.

Oral traditions differ among tribes, but the goals are similar. “There are hundreds of native nations, and each nation and tribe has their specific purpose for stories,” Sunny Dooley says, and for Navajos, “Stories are utilized as part of informing, teaching a person how to be human.” The story’s spiritual dimension makes it integral to all Navajo ceremonies, where it’s used “to heal, it’s used to teach, it’s used to entertain, and it really gives you a point of origin,” Dooley adds.

Dovie Thomason represents several indigenous traditions. Besides her birth heritage, she has been adopted into Pueblo and “borrowed by the Iroquois because they needed a storyteller.” She agrees with Dooley. Among



Courtesy Sunny Dooley

Sunny Dooley is a holder of the Navajo storytelling tradition.

Thomason's traditions, "pretty much everything that Sunny said about the purpose and point of storytelling is similar. We need to be taught and reminded how to be humans; we need a blueprint, some sort of map and direction for how to make choices and decisions," she adds.

STORIES AS TEACHERS

Stories aid parenting and "keeping certain ways of being human alive within a community," Thomason says. Describing Lakota and Kiowa Apache esteem for independence and individuality, she recalls her grandmother, from whom she learned many stories in her repertoire. "She said she told me stories so I could be free. And I think that may partly be mirroring her late-19th-, early-20th-century experience that stories were the way of teaching self-restraint, self-control," without trying to dictate behavior. "The idea of having to control another person's behavior is not taboo but it's just uncomfortable, it's inappropriate," Thomason adds.

Stories are used to teach the value of responsibility and self-restraint. Sacred clown characters, like Coyote,

Iktomi, or Raccoon, provide cautionary tales about the consequences of bad behavior and the benefits of doing the right thing. Coyote and Iktomi "teach that just because you can do something doesn't mean that you should", Thomason says. The stories make a person think, "I can do that. Should I? Well, maybe not." It is "respectful rather than confrontational" or controlling. Stories illuminate shortcomings while allowing an offender to make choices. Thomason explains, "The person can look at the story and say was I the bird? Who was I? Why was that story being told to me?"

Both Thomason and Dooley recall having to listen to stories, sometimes for hours, after some childhood infraction. Dooley says storytelling teaches "the goodness of all life. It tells you which firewood you can collect to burn in your home for heat. It tells you what particular animals are appropriate to harvest, to eat. And I think, too, it makes you very aware of the environment."

Sunny Dooley and Dovie Thomason began storytelling within their tribal communities. When they broadened their audience, they were faced with a dilemma: how to handle sacred and professional storytelling. "You almost have to separate yourself from the cultural, ceremonial telling of stories and then go to this other side where there is the profession of storytelling," Dooley says. Navajo ritual stories do not change, nor are new ones created. Some have "gone extinct" — "there are not as many of them as there used to be, but there are still plenty to be told." Navajo stories are long, usually taking days to tell, a challenge to interpret for short performances. New stories are created in what Dooley calls the "professional" sphere. "In that particular genre, new stories are being told and they are told in all media, not just the verbal." She says her own contributions "are personal stories of growing up in a bicultural world," adding, "I think that people from all nations who are indigenous to their countries can relate to that," because of their experience of the "European conquest story." Indigenous cultures survived colonization. Dooley says that colonial legacies "are political systems that have kind of eroded our cultural integrity. And I think stories are reclaiming that integrity."

Thomason, likewise, has had a "split experience," balancing traditional and professional storytelling. Certain stories she never tells outside the community. She worries that the assumption that tribal stories are folklore, and therefore public domain to be freely appropriated for storytelling, can distort sacred traditions. "Crossing into the professional, that became very important because I saw a lot of the destruction and damage, well-intentioned or even mindlessly being done to storytelling, that was

taking place in that profession”, Thomason says. She thinks creating new stories may be necessary. “I’m really involved with a number of tellers globally, indigenous tellers looking at the need for new stories. The 21st century is managing to throw some new behaviors at us that we have no stories to address,” she says, giving two examples: “children killing each other” in gang violence and what she calls “the hurry-up sickness ... we are multi-tasking, we are doing so much. ... People never moved so fast. We need stories to make us wise about this.”

RESTORING HARMONY

Traditional storytelling is seasonal. Thomason recalls something an elder said to her: “The world is upside down. We follow the seasons, yet this world we live in ... doesn’t. There was a time when it would become cold, we stopped. Now we put the chains on, we put [the car] in four-wheel drive. We just leave three hours early to go to work. We don’t have that quiet time in the teepee. We don’t have that down time in the *wikiup*, where all winter is a sleeping, still time of reflection.” (The teepee and *wikiup* are types of indigenous American shelters.)

Thomason continues, “So in the world that’s upside down, do we have to look at our traditions, do we have to look at our worlds? Where do we adapt? Where is it dangerous to? Where do we change? Where do we not?” Traditional stories should remain unchanged,” she says. “The bones cannot be altered. The weight of the story, the size of the story can be altered, they expand and contract, things are adaptive ... but there has to be consensus about what’s a reasonable adaptation,” Thomason concludes.

Storytelling reclaims lost harmony. Navajo stories and ceremonies “restore the harmony so once again you are at that blessed state of being in harmony with all of creation,” Dooley says. “So our stories sort of run the gamut of order to disorder back to order. And within those parameters, we exist.”

Both women bristle at the term “multicultural” being applied to American Indians. “We are not a minority, plain and simple. We are sovereign nations with unique legal status; we are indigenous, which puts us in a global, international framework of law and relationships that get lost when we become the ‘Native Americans,’” Thomason says, adding, “I’d like us to just join the world and start using the term indigenous or be specific.” Being a de-

scendant of the First Nations, whose presence goes back thousands of years, is different from other, recent émigré experiences, she says.

Sunny Dooley concurs: “This whole idea of multiculturalism kind of hit and I just thought, ‘Whose culture?’” She says of her encounters with other non-Anglo/European cultures, “You go into the jungle of Africa; our rich cultures are so similar. There’s not very much ‘multi’ about it. It’s like, I know my story, they know their story. They’re similar, or alike.”

Stories require time for reflection, deficient in the modern world. Dooley questions “if people will begin to really listen again. Because I really do believe that you need times of quiet.” Thomason adds, “To speak and speak articulately and well, without notes, and to carry things in your mind, requires periods of silence and stillness to be able to develop that, and it requires an audience of listeners that can sustain silence and stillness and attention and listen.” She adds, “We’ve neglected the old knowing, speaking and listening.”

More positively, now scholars “aren’t talking about us like we’re extinct, or primitive or backward, and [they] see the rich gift of our oral traditions alongside all of the world’s literature,” says Thomason. Dooley, who uses a fine-patterned Navajo basket as a performance prop, says the attitude that something “is only valid if it is written” irks her. She uses her basket “because there is nothing written on this basket. There’s a design incorporated into it and this design doesn’t change. But it’s just as valid as anybody’s written history.”

Dooley has published poetry, and Thomason writes songs and children’s books that draw on traditional tribal tales. But their primary vocation is making the personal contact they both feel is a crucial part of the storytelling process, necessary for it to have the greatest impact. The American Indian museum showcased the abilities of Dooley and Thomason to memorably engage audiences by personalizing time-honored teaching tales. Their performances were enthusiastically reciprocated by applause from adults and delighted squeals from the many children present, who were enthralled by adventures of Coyote and Iktomi, or the story of how corn, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, beans, and chocolate came from indigenous American cultures to become comfort foods for the world. ■

Blackfeet Troubadour Sings Traditions

You felt the buffalo go
You heard the stagecoach roll ...
You rode your pony upon
Moccasin Flat at century's dawn
The trails became roads
And the roads became old ...
We listened to the stories that you told.

From "Speak to Me Grandma" by Jack Gladstone

Jack Gladstone, Montana-based songwriter and storyteller of the Blackfeet nation of the northern Great Plains, carries on his tribe's tradition in poetry. Gladstone learned stories at the feet of his grandmother, whom he celebrates in his song "Speak to Me Grandma." He references Blackfeet stories in the songs he writes, in performances, and in lectures.

"The purpose of the storytelling tradition is to reaffirm identity," Gladstone says, and he sees parallel devices in other cultures, such as Australian aboriginal Dreamtime stories: "Blackfeet refer to it as the 'long-ago time' — or once upon a time."

"But when we enter into the tapestry of this tradition, it's important that we put aside the idea of these stories being logical or rational or factual as such. The truths they convey may not be historical truths but something of the perennial wisdom." Stories show "shadow and light, trickster and hero," Gladstone says. "The trickster thinks that he is the center of the universe and the center of attention, ... and the hero recognizes that he is simply a part of something far larger and he is servicing the higher power." They are "personifications of energy," says Gladstone; "we call them gods ... the expressions of that great mysterious feeling." The "great mysterious" is how Blackfeet characterize things beyond common understanding — "two adjectives. After we get to that, we run out of words," he says.

"One of the tragedies that I see unfold around, and to a degree inside me and my own family, is stories that once were passed on are no longer passed on to the degree that they were," Gladstone says, attributing it to the many distractions of modern technology. He senses an increased divide between the material and the



Photo by Katherine Fogden, National Museum of the American Indian

Montana-based Jack Gladstone incorporates American Indian stories into his poetry and songs.

spiritual. "In my grandmother's mind there was a fluid movement between the two," he says. He tries to pass on old wisdom through legends, instructional stories, and "parables of my own life." His songs evoke the power of nature, the spirit, and ordinary life experiences. "Instead of trying to keep my audience back in time, ... I'm trying to place an emotional spell on my listeners to try to bring that time to the present, right now ... to place that timeless lesson in the present."

America is a nation "learning from each other as we go," says Gladstone:

A nation born of many people's dreams.
We're the stewards of the stories of those who
came before;

The keepers of the mountains and the streams.
From "America...Pass It On"

Oral traditions can survive when ephemeral media are destroyed, he says: "The only thing that we can really rely on in the long run is oral tradition. Not only are knowledge and values and identity reidentified and reaffirmed in the telling, but there is also that concept of becoming. We continue to become human beings. Without our stories, we can no longer become human beings." ■

American Fortune Cookie

Jennifer 8. Lee

Jennifer 8. Lee is author of The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food (2008) and maintains a “live-action blog” to go with her book, which traces the history of the fortune cookie. She is a New York Times reporter.

Americans love fortune cookies. We have Christmas fortune cookies, wedding fortune cookies, Valentine’s Day fortune cookies, Hanukkah fortune cookies. Even dogs have their own canine fortune cookies.

The cookies — curved butter vanilla wafers with slips of paper tucked inside — have a strong sentimental draw for Americans. Bakeries sell fortune cookie cupcakes. There is fortune cookie jewelry. A diamond-encrusted, 14-karat-gold fortune cookie is available for \$1,100 from Nieman Marcus, an upscale department store. There are fortune cookie-shaped computer peripherals: You can buy fortune cookie hard drives. And there are fortune cookie albums, which are like photo albums, except they are used to preserve the little slips of paper found inside the cookies.

Americans fervently believe in what is printed on those little slips of paper, to the point that they have inexplicable faith in the lucky numbers that are often printed on them. In March 2005, 110 people across the country won a combined \$19 million in the lottery because they had played the tiny numbers listed on the bottom of their fortune cookie. Two months later, another 84 winners won on the same day for largely the same reason.

The funny thing: Most Americans assume fortune cookies are from China because they get them from Chinese restaurants. I was once one of those people. After all, I was born in New York City and we got fortune cookies in the Chinese restaurants that we went to growing up. What did I know? I didn’t step foot in China until I was in my 20s.

It was only in middle school, while reading a popular novel, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, that I learned that fortune cookies weren’t Chinese at all because the women



Author and *New York Times* reporter Jennifer 8. Lee.

Photo by Nina Subin, Courtesy Twelve Publishing

in the book, Chinese immigrants, were making fun of them at a fortune cookie factory in San Francisco.

My world stood still. Fortune cookies weren’t Chinese?

It was like learning I was adopted at the same time as being told there was no Santa Claus. It shook my notion of the world.

That shock planted a seed of curiosity in me about fortune cookies. It was a journey that, more than a decade later, took me across the United States and to the far corners of the world — Peru, Brazil, India, China, and Japan. I wanted to understand the path of this mysterious cookie.

What I learned: Fortune cookies are universally recognized in the United States, but they confuse people in China. If you give fortune cookies to the Chinese, they are utterly perplexed. First they ask you, “What is it?” When

you tell them it's from America, they will nod. Then they will bite into it and become startled when they find a little piece of paper either in their mouth or in this cookie. They ask you what that paper is. You tell them, "It's a fortune." They will mutter, "Americans are so strange. Why are they putting pieces of paper in their cookies?"

Following the story of the fortune cookie was like pulling a long piece of yarn. I traced fortune cookies to Japanese immigrant bakeries in California from the early 20th century, some of which are still in operation today.

But more surprising than that, I was able to trace fortune cookies to Japan, where they are still being made in small family-run bakeries in Kyoto. There is even a Japanese drawing from the late 1800s, decades before fortune cookies were ever mentioned in the United States, that shows a man in a kimono making what looks to be fortune cookies.

Called *tsujiura senbei* and *suzu senbei*, the Japanese cookies are bigger and browner than their yellow cousins in the United States. They are flavored with sesame and miso, which gives them much more of a nutty flavor.

So how did they go from being something Japanese to something served in Chinese restaurants?

As I poked around, I put two and two together. During World War II, the United States government locked up many of the Japanese for fear they would commit treason, including those that made fortune cookies. Two-thirds of those that were put in the internment camps were American citizens, and decades later the American government finally apologized.

It took me three years to grasp the roots of my interest: My quest to understand the fortune cookie was really a quest to understand myself.

China is the largest immigrant-producing country in the history of the world. The United States is the largest immigrant-accepting country in the history of the world. I, like the Chinese food I grew up with, sit at their crosscurrents.

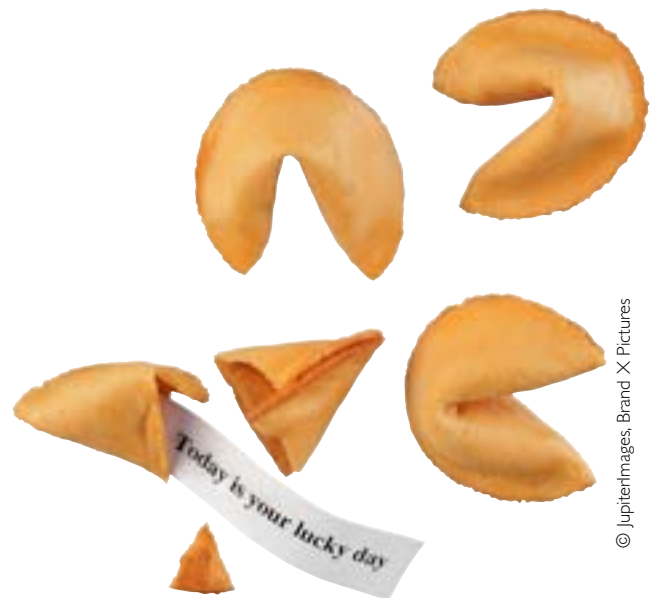
The fortune cookie is a symbol of the adaptation of Chinese immigrants in their adopted country. Americans were all too eager to believe these exotic fortune cookies were from the faraway Middle Kingdom, although the little

messages inside are not written by Chinese sages, and the Chinese were happy to oblige, producing fortune cookies by the millions — and soon billions. No matter that for decades people in China will look at fortune cookies in confusion even though the crispy crescent shape is universally recognized by Americans.

People in the United States look at a fortune cookie and think "China." But, in fact, fortune cookies were introduced by the Japanese, popularized by the Chinese, but ultimately they are consumed by Americans.

In America, we always say, "It's as American as apple pie." But we should ask ourselves, if our benchmark for Americanness is apple pie, how often do Americans eat apple pie? Now how often do they encounter fortune cookies? There are 3 billion fortune cookies made each year — 10 for every man, woman, and child in the country.

Similarly, sometimes people look at me, and they think they see someone who is Chinese. "Where are you from?" they ask. (The answer is New York City. I was born and raised there, and I live there now.) But if they were to close their eyes they would hear someone who is unmistakably American. ■



© Jupiterimages, Brand X Pictures

Finding Allies in Books

Bich Minh Nguyen

Bich Minh Nguyen was an infant when her family fled Vietnam just before the fall of Saigon in 1975. Her first book, Stealing Buddha's Dinner, about growing up in a Vietnamese household in the American Midwest, won the PEN/Jerard Award in 2005. Her book Short Girls will be published in 2009. Nguyen teaches creative nonfiction, fiction, and Asian-American Literature at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

Growing up as a Vietnamese American in a small, predominantly white town in Michigan, I found my closest friends and allies in books. They provided an escape from the daily effort of trying to negotiate a culture at home with a culture outside the home. They also provided lessons and signposts: I learned early on that to get by and to get ahead in this country, I needed to attain all the language I could. So I read everything I could find: magazines, the backs of cereal boxes, instruction manuals, and, most of all, books from the library. Being a fairly literal-minded kid, I decided that reading English literature would teach me the most about the English language. Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and the Brontës were among the first “grown-up” writers I read and fell in love with. Their ways of using character, plot, dialogue, imagery, and sentence structure stay with me today and influence my own shaping of these elements in fiction and nonfiction. They also led me to and made me fall in love with the “classics” — everything from Greek tragedies to Edith Wharton to William Faulkner.

It wasn't until I started college and started taking a broad range of literature courses that I realized how many points of view existed out there — and that maybe it was even possible to write about my own experiences as a Vietnamese American. A world-changing book for me was Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, subtitled “Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts.” One reason



Author Bich Minh Nguyen.

writers read constantly is to gain possibilities from other texts, to learn from them what language and ideas can do. *The Woman Warrior* opened many possibilities for me; it gave me incredible insight into issues of identity and race, and it showed me that I could write from my own voice. From Kingston, I began reading what seemed to me a new and expanding world of literature by Asian-American and immigrant writers, including Gish Jen, Chang-rae Lee, Jessica Hagedorn, Hisaye Yamamoto, Bharati Mukherjee, Sandra Cisneros, Edwidge Danticat, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Junot Díaz. These writers' works, along with the classics, continue to provide fresh inspiration for me, and they remind me that literature can illuminate the connections between past and present and bridge cultures toward a more complicated understanding of the human and literary experiences. ■

EXCERPT

The Language of Betrayal

Ha Jin



© AP Images/Vincent Yu

Award-winning author Ha Jin giving an interview. He teaches at Boston University.

*Ha Jin is a Chinese-American writer who was born in China, migrated to the United States in 1984, and began to write novels in English. He has written five novels, including *A Free Life* (2007); *Waiting* (1999), which won the National Book Award; and *War Trash* (2005), which received the PEN/Faulkner Award.*

*This excerpt is from “The Language of Betrayal” in *The Writer as Migrant* (2008), a collection of the Campbell Lectures given by Ha Jin at Rice University in Houston, Texas.*

The antonym of “betrayal” is “loyalty” or “allegiance.” Uneasy about those words, the migrant writer feels guilty because of his physical absence from his native country, which is conventionally viewed by some of his countrymen as “desertion.” Yet the ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language. No matter how the writer attempts to rationalize and justify adopting a foreign language, it is an act of betrayal that alienates him from his mother tongue and directs

his creative energy to another language. This linguistic betrayal is the ultimate step the migrant writer dares to take; after this, any other act of estrangement amounts to a trifle.

Historically, it has always been the individual who is accused of betraying his country. Why shouldn't we turn the tables by accusing a country of betraying the individual? Most countries have been such habitual traitors to their citizens anyway. The worst crime the country commits against the writer is to make him unable to write with honesty and artistic integrity.

As long as he can, a writer will stay within his mother tongue, his safe domain. The German writer W.G. Sebald lived and taught in England for over three decades and knew both English and French well, but he always wrote in his native language. When asked why he had not switched to English, he answered there was no necessity. That he could give such an answer must be because German was a major European language from which his

works could be rendered into other European languages without much difficulty. In contrast, the Franco-Czech writer Milan Kundera started writing in French when he was already over sixty. Such a heroic effort might signify some crisis that prompted the novelist to make the drastic switch. If we compared Kundera's recent fiction written in French with his earlier books written in Czech, we can see that the recent prose, after *Immortality*, is much thinner. Nevertheless, his adopting French is a brave literary adventure pursued with a relentless spirit. Just as the narrator of his novel *Ignorance* regards Odysseus's return to Ithaca as accepting "the finitude of life," Kundera cannot turn back and continues his odyssey. That also explains

why he has referred to France as his "second homeland."

I have been asked why I write in English. I often reply, "For survival." People tend to equate "survival" with "livelihood" and praise my modest, also shabby, motivation. In fact, physical survival is just one side of the picture, and there is the other side, namely, to exist — to live a meaningful life. To exist also means to make the best use of one's life, to pursue one's vision. ■

Copyright © 2008 the University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved.

New Immigrant Tales: Junot Díaz and Afro-Latino Fiction

Glenda Carpio

Glenda R. Carpio is the author of Laughing Fit To Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery (2008) and is currently working on a book about black and Latino fiction in the Americas. She is associate professor of African and African-American Studies and English at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Junot Díaz, who in 2008 won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), was recently interviewed by satirical talk show host Stephen Colbert. Colbert teasingly asked the author, who came to the United States from the Dominican Republic when he was seven, if by winning the prize he had not robbed an American of the possibility of earning a Pulitzer. Quick on the draw, Díaz responded that since Pulitzer himself had been an immigrant, he would have been happy to know that the prize had gone to him. The exchange jokingly echoes some of the alarm with which Latinos have been identified as America's fastest-growing minority, the group whose numbers have exceeded that of African Americans. Underlying this alarm, of course, are both the fear of a non-white majority and the fear that Latinos will be a non-black majority who will compete unfairly with African Americans for jobs and so forth.

But who and what are Latinos? The term *Latino* elides huge differences in class, gender, race, regional origins, and colonial histories. Even the other competitive term, *Hispanic*, is deceptive, given the many Latinos who do not speak Spanish. *Latino* and *Hispanic* are provisional terms at best since they loosely suggest a complex set of experiences — at once multinational and uniquely American — shared by a large and diverse number of immigrants and descendants of immigrants in the contemporary U.S.



Glenda Carpio, an expert on multicultural literature, teaches at Harvard University.

Courtesy Michele Asselin

landscape. The question of how this group defines itself and is defined from the outside is thus complex. Yet in American popular media, the term Latino (I also prefer to use this term) has been almost entirely stripped of its complexity. In particular, what popular representations have tended to erase is the racial diversity of *Latinos*. Many Latinos are black, especially according to the codes operative in the United States. They are also very often Native American (from the diverse number of indigenous cultures in the Americas), but this fact also gets obscured by the categories “Latino” and “Hispanic.”

Since his literary debut in 1996, the Dominican writer Junot Díaz has been giving sharp-witted eloquence to the complexities of being Afro-Latino and an immigrant in the United States. In his collection of short stories, *Drown* (2006), and in his novel, Díaz guards against the commoditization of the immigrant tale and the reduction



© AP Images/Jim McKnight

Award-winning writer Junot Díaz, who immigrated from the Dominican Republic as a child, teaches at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

of the immigrant to type by using a healthy dose of humor. Díaz's sensibility is a lot like that of the late actor-comedian Groucho Marx, who was fond of playing with the old saying that American streets are paved with gold. When immigrants get here, Marx said, they learn, first, that the streets are not paved with gold; second, that the streets are not paved at all; and, third, that they are expected to pave them. This is one of Díaz's most powerful gifts: that he uses a wry sense of humor to write an immigrant literature that does not obsess over identity and immigration, as well as an Afro-Latino literature that does not obsess about race. Instead the focus is on craft and the art of showing, *in language*, what it means to be black, Latino, and immigrant in America.

Díaz troubles the color line *and* long-cherished conventions in American immigrant literature by refusing to act as a native informant who is supposed to enlighten a primarily white mainstream audience; he refuses to agonize about life lived in the hyphen: between

two languages, between two cultures. Díaz also refuses to whiten Latino culture. Instead, he embraces the heavy African roots of his country of birth and explores its racial complexity. Finally, he challenges authors from ethnic minorities to interconnect. He embraces the exhilarating improvisational freedom of fusing languages — he experiments with Dominican Spanish, Latino Spanish, and African-American slang, as well as with the language of science fiction — within a historical framework that anchors his work. He highlights the African Diaspora as a common historical context that the different cultures of the Americas share. Through the brio of his language, Díaz gives voice to an Afro-Latino consciousness, a consciousness too often muted both in the United States and in other countries in the Americas, while presenting a defiant and vibrant new model of immigrant expression. ■

An Interview with Junot Díaz

*In November 2008 National Public Radio ran a series of interviews with noted immigrant authors to mark the American feast of Thanksgiving, which was started by early European immigrants to North America nearly 500 years ago. "Morning Edition" host Steve Inskeep interviewed Junot Díaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*:*

DÍAZ: Look, we talk so much about immigration without talking about it at all. Can you imagine what it would be like if today I just took you, stripped you from your family, your circuits, your language, your culture and dropped your ass off at Kazakhstan with very few people like you and said, "Hey, not only do you have to make your way through this society but you got to maintain a family?"

INSKEEP: Junot Díaz wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. It's about a kid who is a total outcast, lonely, fat, obsessed with science fiction. That kid is from a family of Dominican immigrants. So is Junot Díaz, who arrived in the United States at age six.

DÍAZ: I know that being brought to central New Jersey was both this remarkable opportunity — I would not have discovered things about myself, I think, had I not been torn away from my moorings. But also it was a real, real, real challenge. Listen, I became a fanatic of the Dominican Republic based on the fact that it was taken away from me. I don't think I ever would have thought so longingly of Santo Domingo had I stayed there my whole life.

INSKEEP: What were your first days in school like?

DÍAZ: I basically spent my first few months sitting in the classroom, in the back, being ignored by my teachers because there was no one who could speak Spanish. I remember getting into a lot of fights with the kids. Look, is there anyone crueller than children? But at the same time, we were really, really tough kids. And it was me, my older brother, my older sister, my little sister; we were all in it together. We fought our way into a good social niche, but man those first six months were real dicey, I tell you.

INSKEEP: Did you show up at school knowing hardly any English?

DÍAZ: I showed up at school not knowing a word of English and dressed like something out of a wetback comedy. We stood out so much in this community, it was remarkable.

INSKEEP: And how would a fight get started? You said there were fights with kids?

DÍAZ: I mean, how do fights get started? Somebody calls you something that you don't understand, but it's clearly negative and everybody laughs and you get scrapping. But look, you don't want to generalize, because there were also wonderful kids who were very curious about us, who right from the start, would sit with us and would talk with us and would teach us words, and those kids make all the difference. It's not so black and white.

INSKEEP: Because you write about a kid who is so utterly nerdy, I have to ask if you were nerdy yourself.

DÍAZ: Yeah, but in the same way any kid who goes to college is nerdy. I can't imagine that one gets into college by being a thug, you know? What's interesting in this book is you have degrees of nerds. You have Oscar who is the nerd extreme, you have his sister Lola who is super bookish and super intelligent, you have Junior the narrator who is also very bookish and intelligent but does everything to hide it. And I think in the spectrum I'm somewhere between Junior and Lola, with Oscar being the farthest extreme.

INSKEEP: You might be one of those kids who is nerdy but is self aware enough to know that he should separate himself a little bit from the really nerdy kids.

DÍAZ: You know, I have to tell you, it was the exact opposite. I had a certain cachet of cool by the time the first few years were done, because I had this good-looking family, my siblings were popular. And so I was actually allowed to hang out with the nerdiest of nerdy people and it never splashed back on me. I could walk around my neighborhood with a book or an atlas and nobody would say anything to me.

INSKEEP: Did your reading choices say anything about your transition to America?

DíAZ: Well, look, that was one of the things that was remarkable. The solitude of being an immigrant, the solitude of having to learn a language and a culture from scrap, the need for some sort of explanation, the need for answers, the need for something that would ... in some ways shelter me, led me to books, man ... as a kid I was very, very curious, kind of smart, and I was trying to answer the question, first of all, what is the United States and how do I get along in this culture, this strange place, better? And also, who am I and how did I get here? And the way I was doing it was through books, man. I found books. When they showed me the library when I was a kid, a light went off in me, in every cell of my body. Books became the map with which I navigated this new world.

INSKEEP: Books about what?

DíAZ: Books about everything. There wasn't a book that I thought a stranger to me. I would look at books that would have oil paintings, Audubon paintings of animals. I would look at books that would be biographies of presidents, I would look at books that would have car engines and mechanical design. I looked everywhere for the answers to those questions.

INSKEEP: What's it mean to be an American?

DíAZ: Well, that's a really good question. I think it means many, many things simultaneously. It's one of those ... it is a question that as individuals and as a

country we wrestle with every day. It's the wrestling with that question that defines us; it's not any of the answers. For me, being an American is in a large part dealing with these multiple Americas. One America which is very xenophobic, which is very close-minded, which is very racist, and an America where simultaneously and in opposition where many things are possible. Where a kid like me can come from a non-bookish culture and miraculously be transformed.

INSKEEP: How as a kid did you mesh the side of you which was, as you said, fiercely proud of the Dominican Republic with the kid who was fiercely reading every book he could find about America?

DíAZ: Well, you know, what you learn as a kid is that, you learn that [Walt] Whitman concept that you can contain multitudes. One can carry inside of them both the country of their origin and the country that has received them. I mean, the idea that has been popularized that one must choose between your home place and the new place is cruel and absurd. You can be two things simultaneously. If America teaches you anything, is that that is very true. ■

NPR, Morning Edition. Copyright © 2008. All rights reserved.

No part of this material may be duplicated or disseminated without permission. Because the copyright holder has not granted translation rights, this article appears only in the English language version of eJournal USA.

EXCERPT

Lost City Radio

Daniel Alarcon

Peruvian-born novelist Daniel Alarcón emigrated with his family from a turbulent Lima, Peru, to the United States when he was three years old, in 1980, but violence still touched his family. His uncle, opposed to the Maoist guerilla Shining Path, disappeared. The family later learned he was killed in 1989. The war haunts much of Alarcón's writing. Alarcón published his first book, War by Candlelight (2006), which was a PEN/Hemingway Award finalist. He is recipient of several prestigious fellowships; is associate editor of an award-winning magazine, Etiqueta Negra, published in his native Lima; and currently is visiting scholar at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

His first novel, Lost City Radio (2007), is set in a fictional Latin American country. It is a tale of war and the disappeared that traces the fate of Rey, the missing husband of the female protagonist. Here he describes a placid scene just before Rey, still a schoolboy, is first swept up in political violence.

The town's jail was two blocks off the plaza, sharing a quiet side street with the humble homes of maids and stonemasons. The exterior of the building was a pale blue, adorned with a rudimentary painting of the national seal, which, if examined up close (as Rey often did), was as blurry and inexact as the pixilated photographs that ran on the front pages of the town's only newspaper. An old Indian maxim — DON'T LIE, DON'T KILL, DON'T STEAL — was inscribed in severe black lettering above the door jamb, perhaps giving the sleepy jail an import it didn't deserve. Rey liked the jail: he liked to sit with his uncle, whose job, it seemed, consisted of waiting for trouble to manifest itself. According to Trini, there wasn't enough of it. He complained bitterly about the quiet town, and liked to tell stories of his year in the capital. There was no way of knowing which were true and which were false. To hear Trini tell it, the city was peopled with thieves and louts and killers in equal parts. To hear Trini tell it, he'd been a one-man crime-fighting machine, justice patrolling the crooked streets, all grit and courage. The city! It was hard to imagine: a rotten, dying place, even then, crumbling and full of shadows. But what did it look like? Rey couldn't



Courtesy Mary Reagan

The human toll of insurgency in Latin America colors the writing of Daniel Alarcón.

picture it: the boiling, black ocean, the jagged coastline, the heavy clouds, the millions draped in perpetual dusk. Here, there was bright sun and real mountain peaks capped with snow. There was an azure sky and a meandering river and a cobblestone plaza with a trickling fountain. Lovers held hands on park benches, flowers bloomed in all the municipal flower beds, and the aroma of fresh bread filled the streets in the mornings. Rey's hometown ended ten blocks from the plaza in any direction, giving way to dusty lanes and irrigated fields and small farmhouses with red-thatched roofs. Trini described a place Rey couldn't imagine: a city of glamorous decay, a place of neon and diamonds, of guns and money, a place at once glittering and dirty. ■

Copyright © 2007, reprinted with permission of HarperCollins Publishers. All rights reserved.

Netting the Clouds

Diana Abu-Jaber



© AP Images/Greg Wahl-Stephens

Much of Diana Abu-Jaber's writing is inspired by the Arab side of her family.

*Diana Abu-Jaber is the author of *Crescent* (2003), winner of the 2004 PEN Center USA Award for Literary Fiction and the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award; *Arabian Jazz* (2003); and *The Language of the Baklava* (2005). Her most recent novel is *Origin* (2007). She is associate professor of English at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon.*

Several years ago, I decided I wanted to write something “true.” I wanted to write a memoir about growing up in my Arab-American family. But somehow, almost before I’d set pen to paper, I felt silenced: The words were missing. I’d been writing fiction for a long time by that point. But as I struggled to describe the past,

to run my hands over the texture of childhood, of family dinners, conversations, and travel, it all seemed to evade me; it was like trying to catch clouds with a butterfly net.

* * * * *

I was born and raised in America, but because of my heritage, I’m often asked to comment on the Middle East — as if I were some sort of sociologist or political scientist. In reality, I’m a novelist — I prefer conjuring up the curious, unclassifiable stories of individuals to describing the wide arcs of history or culture.

But Americans love “culture” — we crave a sense of connection to something larger and older than ourselves.

Most people here came from other places; they intermarried and lost track of the ancient blood lines. In my own case, I'm the product of a father who can trace his Bedouin ancestry back hundreds of years and a mother who knows little more than that her grandparents were Irish and Bavarian, or maybe Dutch or Swiss — but isn't quite certain. Dad used to remind us constantly, as my sisters and I grew up in the United States, not to get *confused* about things — that we were actually *Arab* girls. Good, obedient, *Jordanian* girls.

What I knew about my father's culture was filtered through the Arab-American community of Syracuse, New York. Our favorite baklava came from our cheerful, plump Palestinian neighbor; our Arabic language lessons were given by a dour-faced Iraqi Chaldean in a dank Greek Orthodox church basement; and we took dance lessons from an Egyptian woman with a gleaming smile. My father would occasionally unfurl his lovely old silk prayer rug, but every Sunday we attended mass at my maternal grandmother's enormous Catholic church. This "culture" was light years away from Dad's traditional upbringing in the *wadis* of Jordan.

My fair skin didn't help clarify matters either. When I was very young, I'd notice our Jordanian relatives peeping in at my sisters, cousins, and me at play; they'd murmur to each other, "There she is — that one's *the American!*" Even back then, I sensed this was a term of distinction and exclusion — sort of prestigious yet not really part of the gang. They referred to my olive-skinned sister as "the Arab." Americans, too, felt compelled to regularly let me know that I didn't look "Arab," as if that diminished my right to think of myself as "Arab-American." I hated that, resenting the way that people thought they knew who I was or how I felt based on what I looked like.

One day, in high school, a well-intentioned teacher, who was trying to teach something she called "racial identity," tried an experiment. Willowy blonde Mrs. Harrow leaned against her desk and asked those students who considered themselves "people of color" to go to the right side of the room and those who considered themselves "white" to go to the left. To my amazement, the class appeared to divide itself easily and naturally ... until I was left sitting by myself in the center of the room. I honestly didn't know which side I belonged on. While most of the class seemed to find this hilarious, my teacher was irritated, as if I were being deliberately obtuse. Apparently Mrs. Harrow had never known the dissonance of thinking of herself in one way and being identified by others in another. I could only envy her that sort of easy

congruity — how wonderful, it seemed, to feel in accord with what others thought of you.

Luckily, the United States is so vast, there are all sorts of ways for people here to find themselves. Many immigrants find their sanctuary in gatherings, tribal convergences: Korea Towns and Italian neighborhoods and Little Haitis. When I was growing up, there weren't enough Jordanians around to form their own exclusive enclave, so we lived among an assortment of family and friends — usually other newcomers spanning different Arab countries — occasionally even including travelers from places like Italy, Turkey, and Greece. It was as if it didn't matter as much that you shared precisely the same food or religion, than that you shared the same sensibility — a slower rhythm, a passion for conversation, a strict moral code, an adoration of children.

My childhood world was loosely divided into Inside (the "Arabs" and friends) and Outside (the "Americans"). But, of course, one could not examine this division too closely or it would start to crumble. For one, my father and his brothers had married Americans. Still, every weekend, we had rambling, day-long parties at home, filled with traditional food and music and roaring conversations, mostly in Arabic, mostly about politics. To a child, the disjuncture between weekends (loud, funny, exciting, scary) and weekdays (calm, efficient, mildly dull) was like an ongoing exercise in culture shock. I learned at my parents' gatherings that revealing the "truth" — meaning the private truth of one's desires, fears, and beliefs — was one of the most frightening and risky things anyone could do in this American wilderness.

My father seemed to transform each Monday, from a boisterous, opinionated cook to a more cautious, buttoned-up office manager. I doubt that he ever openly shared his views with his colleagues, though he often came home bristling and indignant over their ignorance of the Middle East. It seems unlikely that any of his American acquaintances knew about his longing to own his own restaurant or his wish to return with us to Jordan. They knew only a carefully constructed persona. The consensus among the immigrants we knew seemed to be that America was a wonderful place for an education and career, but that Americans were also slightly dangerous, crazy, and untrustworthy. Every word that you spoke to them had to be measured with care.

It seemed that there was just no telling what an American — especially an American boy — might do. This feeling was especially heightened for my poor father after having three daughters — his "harem," as people referred to us. According to Dad, the local boys

were all potential violent sex maniacs and alcoholic drug addicts. Apparently, American girls were safer, but I was forever shocked by my friends' brashness and their insubordination to their parents. And I was amazed by how easily my friends revealed their thoughts about all sorts of private things — talking so openly about their boyfriends, their families, and their ambitions. I admired this confidence that their views would be accepted at least, if not embraced. I had learned no such faith in the world — Arab or American. This was underscored by watching the Evening News. Walter Cronkite would say one thing — about Vietnam or Richard Nixon or the Middle East — and my father would respond rather explosively with different information and opinions. I learned from the news that, once again, the world was divided into sides. The people on the inside (Americans) were always right, and the people on the outside (everyone else) didn't really count. But, of course, the problem for a child of immigrants — in a nation of immigrants — was figuring out exactly who the people on the inside were supposed to be.

* * * * *

I've found that attempting to capture a unique cultural experience is a bit like trying to look directly at something floating on the surface of the eye. Outside the raw facts of language and geography, I've struggled to figure out if there is something that makes someone's story uniquely "Arab-American." The fight for identity and self-representation, the tension between preserving heritage and embracing the new are all real issues for the Arab-American community. But they're also common to all sorts of immigrants from all over the place.

As an adult, I started to sense that the Arab-American experience was less about something innate to the Arab world and more about the way Americans perceive and respond to "Arabness." So this war between private and public identities became one of the main themes of my memoir. I wrote draft after discarded draft, fighting with myself, my fragmented memory, my confused emotional responses. I worked through layers, fragments of images, conversations, and artifacts like recipes, toward a narrative matrix.

I refused to show the manuscript to anyone, because I could barely overcome my own carefully acquired, highly respectful fear of revealing the truth. I worried that if any of my family disapproved, it might become impossible for me to write anything at all. And then, after three years of rewriting and soul-searching, after I'd finally



Courtesy Diana Abu-Jaber

Ghassan Abu-Jaber, the author's father, in a celebratory holiday mood, brings the roast turkey to the table.

presented what I'd hoped might be an acceptable draft to my agent, she sent it back to me saying, "Do it again. This time tell us what you're *not* saying."

I almost gave up entirely on the project. I began to think I'd been too sheltered by my folks, that I was too torn by my divided loyalties between my Old Country family and my American art, to really say the things I was not-saying. In despair, I confided in my mother, telling her about the way I was agonizing over the memoir, my fear of getting it wrong, of hurting people. After a thoughtful pause, my gentle, soft-spoken, grade-school teacher mother finally said, "Well honey, I understand that you want to be respectful and don't want to upset anyone. I know you love your family and want to do right by everyone. But, at the end of the day, you know what I say? I say, if anyone doesn't like it, then the hell with them!"

Well. I was shocked into silence. And then shock turned into relief. My American mother had given me that extra bit of confidence, a belief, finally, in the right to my own story, to claim it openly. I began, once again, to write. And a year later, *The Language of Baklava* was published.

People often ask why I don't write as much about my mother. The truth is that Dad is simply an easier

subject. I don't know if it's his cultural difference, or just his personality, but he's zanier, louder, and stranger than most people I meet. At the same time, I also believe absolutely that I could never have become a writer without my mother's example. Even though she didn't have an unusual pedigree, even though she listened to the same music as all the other Americans, and she wasn't obsessed with cooking or politics — it didn't matter what country she was from: She was thoughtful, respectful, and intelligent. She brought me books; she asked me about myself; she taught me how to listen and observe, how to think and read.

After *The Language of Baklava* came out, I found that I wanted to go deeper into my American past, and so I wrote *Origin*, a murder mystery, in which the main character is an orphan raised in Syracuse, with no information about her biological parents. It was unlike any book I'd written before, and for that newness alone, it was deeply satisfying to me.

That's not to say I'm abandoning or uninterested in exploring my Jordanian roots, but simply that, like all writers, I need to keep pushing myself toward new ways

of finding and telling my truth. The greatest hope and privilege of any writer might just be the push for total artistic freedom, the right to imaginative re-creation. In many ways, as constricting as my upbringing was at times, now I'm grateful that I had both cultures, not only to enlarge my sense of the world, but to hone myself against. Because sometimes, I think, it's better *not* to say everything. Sometimes, it's good to let things have a little time to develop in silence and thought.

I recently gave a reading in a little bookshop in New York. During the question-and-answer session that followed, a woman in the audience nodded approvingly and told me, "You write like an Arab."

While I'm still not entirely sure what she might have meant by that — the story was about American characters and it was certainly written in English — but I still felt oddly pleased by the sense of affirmation, and acceptance. After so many years of not-fitting, it felt like, finally, a form of recognition.

I smiled and told her, most sincerely, "Thank you." ■

Writing from a Complex Ethnic Perspective

Persis M. Karim



Photo by Adlai Karim

Poet and editor Persis Karim finds a rich resource in her Persian roots.

*Born in the United States, Persis Karim is a poet and editor of the anthology *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (2006). She is coeditor and coauthor of *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans* (1999), and she currently is associate professor of English and comparative literature at San Jose State University in San Jose, California.*

A distinctive aspect of being an American is that it literally puts you in contact with the world. As a child of post-World War II immigrants, I grew up feeling that the United States was a place of opportunity and refuge, and that for my parents, the choice to become American meant both privilege and responsibility. For my father, an Iranian who saw dramatic changes in his country as a result of the discovery of oil and the politics of the Cold War, coming to the United States

represented an opportunity to remake and reinvent his individual possibilities and goals. After living through the occupation of Iran by Soviet and British troops during the war, he thought a great deal about what would become of Iran and of his own life. As a young man, he read about the American democratic ideals embodied in the U.S. Constitution and the idea that America, conceptually, was a destination for people who felt limited by the politics of nation-states that were emerging from the yoke of imperial and colonial control. For my mother, an immigrant who experienced the ravages of war and occupation in France, the United States was a place to reencounter the glimpses of spirited American values she observed among U.S. soldiers while teaching French to them in the latter part of the war. For both of my parents, America had a dream-like allure that allowed them to begin their lives anew. They came here partly by accident,

but their intentions to stay and become Americans were very deliberate.

I was raised in northern California in a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon suburb with a complicated sense of my own identity. Unconsciously, I tried to assume a Californian and American identity. But early in my life, I felt a strong sense of my difference. My family was not surrounded by an Iranian or a French community or by our relatives, but still I felt ethnically marked. Perhaps it was my name, my looks, the food we ate (lots of rice and lamb), or perhaps, it was my own decidedly strong attraction to notions of “the other” that became more enhanced as I became more aware of the news of the world. The Vietnam War first alerted me to the world outside the United States, but it was the events that followed it that thrust me into a greater awareness of my Iranian-American identity.

During the 1970s, when the United States began to play a more active and visible role in the politics of the Middle East, my curiosity about Iran became more acute. By the time I entered middle school, Iran was a major preoccupation of U.S. foreign policy. My father, already disillusioned by the U.S.-sponsored coup d'état in 1953 of the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh, had begun during my adolescence to be more vocal and critical of the U.S. role in his country of origin. Although I had no distinctive political views and only a limited understanding of Iran, I began to ask questions about what it meant to be an American. Around the time of the U.S. hostage crisis and the eruption of the Iranian revolution in 1979, I began my own exploration into my father's heritage and, increasingly, felt a need to understand and explore this part of my heritage.

For me, literature and writing provided the most important window into my Iranian heritage. As a child, my father shared with me his passion for poetry. He read aloud in Persian and English the works of the great Persian poets Hafez, Rumi, and Khayyam, as well as British and European poets like Baudelaire, Shelley, and Shakespeare. His love of literature and reading was infectious, and it became the most important way for me to satisfy my growing curiosity about Iran and Iranian culture. At the time, Iran was in turmoil, and the U.S. media consistently represented it and its people in harsh and negative ways. Even popular culture was unkind to the Middle East. My teen years were marked by the common epithet “Camel Jockey” and the hit AM radio song “Ahab the A-rab.” As a young adult, I found myself wanting to defend my father's country and his

people against accusations of being “extremist, terrorist, hostage-takers.” At school, on city streets, and on the TV, news people around me were chanting “Bomb Iran” and “Iranians Go Home!”

At home I listened to my father's astute and more complex analysis of the political events unfolding in Tehran. I began to understand that events taking place there were as much the result of problems created by my country, the United States, as they were the result of the few extremists who took Americans hostage at the U.S. embassy. These events and the overly simplistic images of Iran in the media made me even more curious about what was taking place in that nation. Rather than shrinking from the anger and hostility expressed toward the immigrant Iranian community, I became more serious and committed to learning about Iran and my Iranian identity. Throughout my learning, then and now, I always return to literature and the power of representation that it bestows on the writer. Slowly, I began to feel the emergence of a first-person ownership of my mixed-blood, immigrant heritage. I was compelled then by the idea of writing “our” narrative, telling “our” own story. It became a kind of mission for me to help narrate the story of the Iranian immigrant community in the United States that continued to grow as the events of the revolution, the hostage crisis, and the Iran/Iraq War played out, and as the increasingly negative iconography of Iran became cemented in the American mindset. I set out on a journey to claim some of my Iranianness, by exploring the ways that Iran and Iranian culture had influenced me as a writer and as a citizen of the United States.

As a writer, I began to see the value — even the advantage — of expressing the complex and nuanced features of my not-entirely American background. I wanted to harness and develop a perspective and voice as a writer that was part of the particular time in which I grew up. I also wanted to write about all the many ways that my heritage and difference helped me and thrust me into a process of self-definition that could only be possible in the United States, a place where defining oneself is not a static proclamation but rather a dynamic process continually influenced by the larger political and cultural dialogues that are part of the surrounding frame of one's American life. It has taken some time for American readers to appreciate the complexities, hardships, and beauty of the Iranian immigrant experience — and the body of literature that now describes that experience. A young but flourishing literature of the Iranian Diaspora has finally taken hold. This Iranian-American literary sensibility is attenuated by

the sense of loss and displacement by the first generation of Iranian immigrants, but also by an appreciation for what immigration has made possible for the emerging second generation. Iranian Americans have an acute appreciation of free speech and the opportunity to create a new literary culture that includes the voices of writers who have historically been excluded or minimized in the tradition of letters in Iran; those include the voices of women, of religious and cultural minorities, and of political dissidents.

On my own journey as a writer, I have attempted to find and connect the threads of my complex heritage. I have drawn on the richness of my parents' journey to the United States, one of the countless unintended, coincidental results of the Second World War. It was a war that altered the directions of governments in every geographic and political corner of the globe, but it also rippled on and on to affect the lives of millions of individuals, ultimately leading my parents from their homes to the same dance hall in Chicago at a time that presented a great sense of hope and opportunity to them both. As a writer, I draw heavily on the idea that children of immigrants must narrate something of their own story, as children born on this continent but also as people who come from another. My own opportunities to express myself have been greatly influenced by the belief I have about what it is to be an American writer. I

am cognizant that one cannot live in the United States and ignore the problematic or beneficial ways that this nation influences so much of the world with its cultural and political power. And yet I am also aware that we must continuously draw on the notion that we are an adolescent country, deeply involved with our own sense of becoming. In such a context, to write from one's heritage is only a beginning. I would like to believe that my father's and my mother's stories took hold in me and gave me the impetus to narrate something of the challenging trajectory of their lives, but that my role as a writer is to move past their stories, past whatever ethnic heritage I inherited to make something new.

I consider what I am doing — as a writer, poet, and editor — to be the ultimate expression of my hybrid American identity. I write about what I am becoming through the accidents of history and the accidents of my parents' lives, but my writing also contemplates and engages the sense of dynamism and possibility that is essential to our American character. That character is the glue that holds this country to some sense of social unity, but it also creates the fissures that allow new perspectives and voices to enter and creep from the margins to the center. While my work is not always consciously driven by the presence of these fissures, they are an absolute necessity that underpins what is best about claiming my American and my hyphenated American identity. ■

One Indian Writer's Experience

Akhil Sharma

Akhil Sharma's first novel, An Obedient Father, won the 2000 PEN/Hemingway Award and the 2001 Whiting Writers' Award. He writes for The New Yorker and The Atlantic Monthly, among other publications. He was named among the best of young American novelists (2007) by Granta magazine.

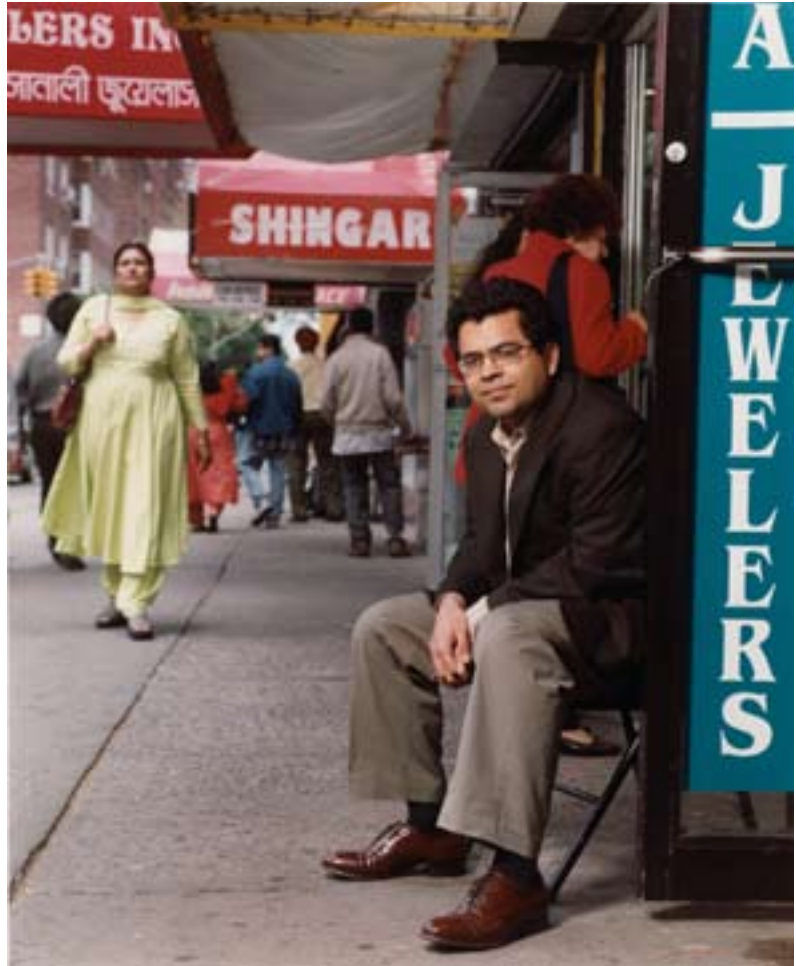
I can only speak from my own experiences, and so I should not be understood to represent all Indian-American writers.

I first started writing short stories in ninth grade. I did this because I was very unhappy and I wanted attention.

My family came to America in 1979. There was me, my brother, my mother, and my father. Two years after we arrived, my brother had an accident in a swimming pool that left him severely brain damaged. I was 10 then, and my brother, 14.

My brother is still alive and he cannot walk or talk. Anup, which is my brother's name, cannot be fed through his mouth, and so he is fed through a gastrointestinal tube that enters his stomach from just below his right ribs. Anup does not roll over automatically in his sleep, and so someone has to be with him all night long and turn him from side to side every two hours and, in this way, keep him from getting bed sores.

For two years after the accident, my brother was kept in a hospital, and then my parents decided to take care of him themselves. They brought him to our house and hired nurses. Other than the direct worries of my brother's condition, another pressing worry that I grew up with was concern about money. Because we had such little money and because we were dependent on insurance companies and nurses, we felt that we were always being betrayed, that people were not fulfilling their responsibilities. Many times we had nurses who said that they would come and start a shift on a particular day and time and they wouldn't show up. Also, because there were strangers in our house, we were always afraid that people would steal things. We had one nurse who stole



Akhil Sharma in the Jackson Heights section of Queens, New York, where there is a vibrant South Asian community.

© Andrea Artz

teddy bears that my mother had bought at a flea market.

Until ninth grade, when I was 15, the only time I wrote short stories was when they were assigned for a class. In ninth grade I had a teacher, Mrs. Green, who praised me for how well I understood our reading assignments and so, to get more attention from her, I began writing stories.

At first all the stories I wrote had white American characters. I think this was partially because all the fiction I read was about white people. Equally important though was that I felt the experience of being an Indian American was not important. Living as a minority, not sharing the experiences of the majority population, I felt that my

experiences, because they were not the majority experience, were not as important as those of white people. Also, to some extent, I felt that my experiences, because they were not shared, were not even as real as those of white Americans.

Among the problems I had in writing about whites is that I didn't know anything about whites. It was only in 10th grade that I first went into a white person's house.

In 10th grade I read a biography of Ernest Hemingway. I remember starting reading it one morning at the kitchen table and the windows of the kitchen being dark. I read the biography of Hemingway so that I could lie to people and tell them that I had read Hemingway's books. (I used to lie all the time and claim I had read books I had not.)

I read the book and was amazed. What amazed me was that Hemingway had gotten to live in France and Spain, that he had travelled to Cuba and appeared to have had a good time in his life. Till then I had thought that I would be a computer programmer or an engineer or a doctor. When I read the book, I suddenly thought that I could have a lifestyle like Ernest Hemingway's and not lead a boring life.

After I read the biography, I began to read other books about Hemingway. I read biographies and collections of critical essays. I must have read 20 books about Hemingway before I read any actual work written by him. I read all this about Hemingway because I wanted to learn how to repeat what he had done and I didn't want to leave any clue unexamined. At first, I was not actually interested in Hemingway's own writing.

I think of Hemingway as the writer who has influenced me most. Hemingway, as you probably already know, wrote about characters whose experience was exotic to American readers. He wrote about gangsters and soldiers in Italy and journalists in Paris. Among the many things I learned from Hemingway, and I could say that almost everything I am as a writer began with Hemingway or as a response against Hemingway, one was how to write about exotic things without being bogged down by the exoticism. Scholars who analyzed Hemingway pointed out that his stories began in the middle of the action, that he wrote as if the reader already knew a great deal about the environment that he was writing about, that when he gave direct explanations, this breaking of the reality of fictional experience was a way of saying to the reader that the reason I am breaking this fictional convention is because I don't want to lie.

For me, because I began my education as a writer with Hemingway and did not really read any nonwhite



© AP Images

Writer Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) at his Sun Valley, Idaho, home in 1939.

writers until I was in college, I have always thought that writing is just writing. Writing is just a string of words and a series of strategies that generate experiences within the reader. I have always felt that in the same way that the race of a surgeon does not matter because a heart and a gall bladder remain a heart and a gall bladder, no matter the race of the patient, the race of a writer also does not matter.

I came to America as part of a great wave of immigration. Because this wave of Asian immigrants has created curiosity within American society as to what exactly it is like to be in Asian families, I have been lucky to have had my books read. (I think of myself as a good writer, but I could imagine that if I had been writing 50 years earlier, my writing might have been too exotic and peripheral to be worth reading by ordinary readers.)

My first book won the PEN/ Hemingway prize. This is given to the best first novel published in any given year.

The person who gave me the prize was one of Hemingway's sons. I believe it was Patrick Hemingway who gave me the prize. This white-haired gentleman and I sat and talked in a conference room for about 10 or 15 minutes. I did not tell him how much his father had mattered to me because I felt shy. Instead we talked about how his father had found titles for his books in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Sometimes when I think of how lucky I have been, I want to cry. ■

Influences on My Work

Tamim Ansary



Author Tamim Ansary during an interview in his San Francisco home.

Tamim Ansary, author of West of Kabul, East of New York, directs the San Francisco Writers Workshop, the oldest continuous free writers workshop in America. He writes and lectures about Afghanistan, Islamic history, democracy, and the creative writing process, and other issues as they grab his imagination.

When I think back to “influences” on my writing, I find that my primal sources were oral. I was born into a family tradition of poetry, storytelling, mysticism, and philosophy going back a thousand years to Khwadja Abdullah Ansary of Herat; and although as a child I never read my forebears’ work, I heard their words and the spirit of their work resonating in the conversations of my father and his brothers and cousins and friends, who gathered every day to quote couplets, coin phrases, and discuss deep issues over endless

cups of tea; and I, tucked on the floor next to my father, listened in unnoticed.

And then there were the virtuoso family storytellers I grew up with, headed by my grandmother K’koh, who never spent a minute in school and could not write her own name yet spun whole universes for us, inhabited by giants and sorcerers, tricksters, and heroes roaming surrealistic landscapes, where trees might bloom with eyeballs and horses take flight and then burst into fireballs: She came to us as a voice in the dark, and we children, piled up like puppies, listened breathlessly.

I could not get enough of those stories — literally: Adults were too few and too busy to sate my craving, so I had to start making up stories of my own.

By then I had learned to read, with which tool I could break into another treasure, one locked into a 20-volume set of books titled *The Book of Knowledge*:

It was an illustrated children's encyclopedia. Every day, after my elders went to school or work, I pored through those volumes, finding out what stars were made of, who built the pyramids, and how to tell Indian elephants from African ones, and when the others came home I couldn't wait to tell them.

Everything I write today goes back to those earliest sources, I think: I'm still poring through books of knowledge, still bursting to tell people what I've learned,

still trying to reconstitute that voice coming out of the darkness with accounts of epic journeys and images of blazing horses; and I'm absorbed, still, in that conversation that my father and his peers were part of once, only I've graduated to the table now, and the table has expanded across the globe, and the voices are coming through many media, all of us just trying to puzzle out what this world is about and tell each other what we've unearthed about the mysteries. ■

Agha Shahid Ali



Courtesy David H. Bain, Middlebury College

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), an Indian-American poet from Kashmir, grew up surrounded by English, Persian, and Urdu poetry. He lived in the United States as a child, while his parents studied for their doctorates at Ball State University in Indiana. He returned to the United States as an adult, where he studied, taught, and wrote much of his poetry. He taught at several universities, the University of Utah, Warren Wilson College, and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst among them. He introduced the Urdu poetic form, the ghazal, into the English poetic lexicon and edited a book of English ghazals, Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English. But he is known best for his elegant, moving poetry, exemplified in his collections A Nostalgist's Map of America, The Country Without a Post Office, and Rooms Are Never Finished. He was beloved by his students, prompting the University of Utah Press to establish the Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize in his memory.

The Dacca Gauzes

. . . for a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite Dacca gauzes.
-Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Those transparent Dacca gauzes
known as woven air, running
water, evening dew:
a dead art now, dead over
a hundred years. "No one
now knows," my grandmother says,
"what it was to wear
or touch that cloth." She wore
it once, an heirloom sari from
her mother's dowry, proved
genuine when it was pulled, all
six yards, through a ring.
Years later when it tore,
many handkerchiefs embroidered
with gold-thread paisleys
were distributed among
the nieces and daughters-in-law.
Those too now lost.
In history we learned: the hands
of weavers were amputated,
the looms of Bengal silenced,
and the cotton shipped raw
by the British to England.
History of little use to her,
my grandmother just says
how the muslins of today
seem so coarse and that only
in autumn, should one wake up
at dawn to pray, can one
feel that same texture again.
One morning, she says, the air
was dew-starched: she pulled
it absently through her ring.

*Agha Shahid Ali, "The Dacca Gauzes" from The Half-Inch Himalayas © 1987 by Agha Shahid Ali and
reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press.*

MEMOIR

Sixty-Nine Cents

Gary Shteyngart

*Gary Shteyngart was born in Leningrad and immigrated to the United States when he was seven years old. His book *Absurdistan* (2006) was named among the ten best books of the year by leading publications including the New York Times and Time magazine. His first novel, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2003) won the Stephen Crane Award for First Fiction and was named among the best of young American novelists (2007) by Granta magazine. He is assistant professor at the Columbia University Creative Writing Program in New York.*

When I was fourteen years old, I lost my Russian accent. I could, in theory, walk up to a girl and the words “Oh, hi there” would not sound like Okht Hyzer, possibly the name of a Turkish politician. There were three things I wanted to do in my new incarnation: go to Florida, where I understood that our nation’s best and brightest had built themselves a sandy, vice-filled paradise; have a girl, preferably native-born, tell me that she liked me in some way; and eat all my meals at McDonald’s. I did not have the pleasure of eating at McDonald’s often. My parents believed that going to restaurants and buying clothes not sold by weight on Orchard Street were things done only by the very wealthy or the very profligate, maybe those extravagant “welfare queens” we kept hearing about on television. Even my parents, however, as uncritically in love with America as only immigrants can be, could not resist the iconic pull of Florida, the call of the beach and the Mouse [popular cartoon character Micky Mouse].

And so, in the midst of my Hebrew-school winter vacation, two Russian families crammed into a large used sedan and took I-95 down to the Sunshine State. The other family — three members in all — mirrored our own, except that their single offspring was a girl and they were, on the whole, more ample; by contrast, my entire family weighed three hundred pounds. There’s a picture of us beneath the monorail at EPCOT Center, each of us trying out a different smile to express the déjà-vu feeling of standing squarely in our new country’s great-



Getty Images

Gary Shteyngart, author of *Absurdistan*, teaches at Columbia University in New York city.

est attraction, my own megawatt grin that of a turn-of-the-century Jewish peddler scampering after a potential sidewalk sale. The Disney tickets were a freebie, for which we had had to sit through a sales pitch for an Orlando time-share. “You’re from Moscow?” the time-share salesman asked, appraising the polyester cut of my father’s jib. “Leningrad.”

“Let me guess: mechanical engineer?”

“Yes, mechanical engineer. . . . Eh, please Disney tickets now.”

*“Sixty-Nine Cents” by Gary Shteyngart. Copyright © 2007 by Gary Shteyngart. First appeared in *The New Yorker*. Reprinted by permission of the Denise Shannon Literary Agency, Inc.*

The ride over the MacArthur Causeway to Miami Beach was my real naturalization ceremony. I wanted all of it — the palm trees, the yachts bobbing beside the hard-currency mansions, the concrete-and-glass condominiums preening at their own reflections in the azure pool water below, the implicit availability of relations with amoral women. I could see myself on a balcony eating a Big Mac, casually throwing fries over my shoulder into the sea-salted air. But I would have to wait. The hotel reserved by my parents' friends featured army cots instead of beds and a half-foot-long cockroach evolved enough to wave what looked like a fist at us. Scared out of Miami Beach, we decamped for Fort Lauderdale, where a Yugoslav woman sheltered us in a faded motel, beach-adjacent and featuring free UHF reception. We always seemed to be at the margins of places: the driveway of the Fontainebleau Hilton, or the glassed-in elevator leading to a rooftop restaurant where we could momentarily peek over the "Please Wait to Be Seated" sign at the endless ocean below, the Old World we had left behind so far and yet deceptively near.

To my parents and their friends, the Yugoslav motel was an unquestioned paradise, a lucky coda to a set of difficult lives. My father lay magnificently beneath the sun in his red-and-black striped imitation Speedo while I stalked down the beach, past baking Midwestern girls. "Oh, hi there." The words, perfectly American, not a birthright but an acquisition, perched between my lips, but to walk up to one of those girls and say something so casual required a deep rootedness to the hot sand beneath me, a historical presence thicker than the green card embossed with my thumbprint and freckled face. Back at the motel, the "Star Trek" reruns looped endlessly on Channel 73 or 31 or some other prime number, the washed-out Technicolor planets more familiar to me than our own.

On the drive back to New York, I plugged myself firmly into my Walkman, hoping to forget our vacation. Sometime after the palm trees ran out, somewhere in southern Georgia, we stopped at a McDonald's. I could already taste it: The sixty-nine-cent hamburger. The ketchup, red and decadent, embedded with little flecks of

grated onion. The uplift of the pickle slices; the obliterating rush of fresh Coca-Cola; the soda tingle at the back of the throat signifying that the act was complete. I ran into the meat-fumigated coldness of the magical place, the larger Russians following behind me, lugging something big and red. It was a cooler, packed, before we left the motel, by the other mother, the kindly, round-faced equivalent of my own mother. She had prepared a full Russian lunch for us. Soft-boiled eggs wrapped in tinfoil; *vinigret*, the Russian beet salad, overflowing a reused container of sour cream; cold chicken served between crisp white furrows of a *bulka*. "But it's not allowed," I pleaded. "We have to buy the food here."

I felt coldness, not the air-conditioned chill of southern Georgia but the coldness of a body understanding the ramifications of its own demise, the pointlessness of it all. I sat down at a table as far away from my parents and their friends as possible. I watched the spectacle of the newly tanned resident aliens eating their ethnic meal — jowls working, jowls working — the soft-boiled eggs that quivered lightly as they were brought to the mouth; the girl, my coeval, sullen like me but with a hint of pliant equanimity; her parents, dishing out the chunks of beet with plastic spoons; my parents, getting up to use free McDonald's napkins and straws while American motorists with their noisy towheaded children bought themselves the happiest of meals.

My parents laughed at my haughtiness. Sitting there hungry and all alone — what a strange man I was becoming! So unlike them. My pockets were filled with several quarters and dimes, enough for a hamburger and a small Coke. I considered the possibility of redeeming my own dignity, of leaving behind our beet-salad heritage. My parents didn't spend money, because they lived with the idea that disaster was close at hand, that a liver-function test would come back marked with a doctor's urgent scrawl, that they would be fired from their jobs because their English did not suffice. We were all representatives of a shadow society, cowering under a cloud of bad tidings that would never come. The silver coins stayed in my pocket, the anger burrowed and expanded into some future ulcer. I was my parents' son. ■

My Literary Crushes

Lara Vapnyar



Author Lara Vapnyar.

Courtesy Random House, Inc.

Lara Vapnyar emigrated from Russia to New York in 1994 and began publishing short stories in English in 2002. She is the author of two collections of short stories, Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love

(2008) and There Are Jews in My House (2004), and a novel, Memoirs of a Muse (2006).

As a teenager, I went through a series of literary obsessions with different writers. I would pick up a book from the shelf and fall in love. There could be a summer when I read nothing but Gogol and proclaimed him the greatest Russian writer, but by September I would switch to Dostoyevsky, only to abandon him for somebody else in a couple of months, or to return back to Gogol. I would be falling in love with writers, but not necessarily with the ones whose work I especially enjoyed. There were also writers whom I greatly admired but rarely enjoyed, like Tolstoy, for example. He can't help but lecture at times. Often when I read his novels, I had an image of him hovering over as an annoying parent, and I wanted to say, "Oh, just leave me alone, let me enjoy the book."

My longest, and the most serious, relationship has been with Chekhov. I can't say whether I first fell in love with his stories or his portrait at the front of the book: Both were perfect. His stories were tender and light yet serious, so very serious. They were sad yet comical, but comical in a respectful way. There were no cheap laughs: Chekhov required the reader to find the humor. But the most important thing about Chekhov is his ability to quietly prod his reader to open his eyes and see things that had always been there, yet that had never been discovered. He makes his reader gasp with recognition.

I identified with every Chekhov character. I was Gurov, I was Anna Sergeevna, I was the circus dog

Kashtanka. It was a perfect, untroubled romance until I read "Rothschild's Fiddle." Despite its name, the story isn't about Rothschild but about Yakov, a Russian undertaker. Rothschild is a minor figure in the story, just a little Jew — not a bad man but a ridiculous, pathetic man. Now here was a Chekhov character with whom I didn't want to identify — but I couldn't help but identify with him. He was a Jew, just as I was. I discovered many other Jews in Chekhov's stories. They were never evil, but they were unfailingly small, incapable of grandeur. That was how Chekhov saw Jews.

After I immigrated to the United States and began to identify myself as a writer — two events that happened almost simultaneously — I became drawn to contemporary American writers, especially those who were like me of an immigrant descent. I admired the exquisite style and quiet depth of Jhumpa Lahiri, the fire and energy of Junot Díaz, the amazing experimenting of Alexander Hemon. I would turn to their work for inspiration when I was stuck with my writing, and I would turn for help to their characters when I was stuck in my personal life.

Yet, Chekhov remains the true literary love of my life. I keep his books on my nightstand, and I return to them again and again to remind myself that something so simple and unpretentious as Chekhov's stories can open into the true greatness. ■



© AP Images/Jim Mone

Russian playwright Anton Chekhov remains perennially popular: his photo at a Minneapolis, Minnesota, theater.

Additional Resources

Multicultural Literature in the United States Today

GENERAL

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Asian-American Writers*. New York: Chelsea House, 2009.

Bona, Mary Jo and Irma Maini, eds. *Multicultural Literature and Canon Debates*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

Botelho, Maria J. and Masha K. Rudman. *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature: Mirrors, Windows and Doors*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Cutter, Martha J. *Lost and Found in Translation: Contemporary Ethnic American Writing and the Politics of Language Diversity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005.

East, Kathy and Rebecca L. Thomas. *Across Cultures: A Guide to Multicultural Literature for Children*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007.

Gates, Pamela S. and Dianne L. Hall Mark. *Cultural Journeys: Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006.

Gilton, Donna L. *Multicultural and Ethnic Children's Literature in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007.

Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1919-1940*. Seattle : University of Washington Press, 1991.

Nelson, Emmanuel S., ed. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005.

Norton, Donna E. *Multicultural Children's Literature: Through the Eyes of Many Children*. Upper Saddle River,

NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2001.

Regier, Willis G., ed. *Masterpieces of American Indian Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.

Note: The five complete and unabridged works collected here are parts of a long and passionate testimony about American Indian culture as related by Indians themselves.

INDIVIDUAL AUTHORS

Abu-Jaber, Diana. *The Language of Baklava*. New York : Pantheon Books, 2005.

Memoir of growing up with a gregarious Jordanian father who loved to cook.

Sample text: <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0622/2004056828-s.html>

Alarcón, Daniel. *War by Candlelight: Stories*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown, 2007.

In his first book for young adults, based on the author's own experiences, coupled with poignant drawings by acclaimed artist Ellen Forney, that reflect the character's art, Alexie tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

Sherman Alexie Website: <http://www.fallsapart.com/>

Agha, Shahid Ali. *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Sample text: <http://www.nortonpoets.com/ex/alianostalgists.htm>

Agha, Shahid Ali. *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.

Agha, Shahid Ali, ed. *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000.

Agha, Shahid Ali. *Rooms Are Never Finished*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.
Sample text: <http://www.nortonpoets.com/ex/aliaroomsare.htm>

Agha, Shahid Ali. *The Country Without a Post-Office*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Agha, Shahid Ali. *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press; Hanover, NH, 1987.

Amin, Dina A. *Alfred Farag and Egyptian Theater: The Poetics of Disguise, with Four Short Plays and a Monologue*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 2008.

Ansary, Tamim. *West of Kabul, East of New York: An Afghan American Story*. New York: Picador, 2003.

Arana, Marie, ed. *The Writing Life: Writers on How They Think and Work: A Collection from the Washington Post Book World*. New York: Public Affairs, 2003.

Arana, Marie, *American Chica, Two Worlds, One Childhood*. New York: Dial Press, c2001.

Arana, Marie. *Cellophane*. New York: Dial Press, 2006.

Arana, Marie. *Lima Nights*. New York: Dial Press, 2009.

Burns, Carole, ed. *Off the Page: Writers Talk About Beginnings, Endings, and Everything in Between*; introduction by Marie Arana. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.

Carpio, Glenda R. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. New York: Oxford University, 2008.

Díaz, Junot. *Drown*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.
Note: The author's debut story collection.

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.

Early, Gerald L. *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*. Rev. and updated ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Early, Gerald L. *This is Where I Came In: Black America in the 1960s*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Gass, William H., Naomi Lebowitz, and Gerald Early. *Three Essays: Reflections on the American Century*. St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 2000.

Ilibagiza, Immaculée, with Steve Erwin. *Led by Faith: Rising From the Ashes of the Rwandan Genocide*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2008.

Ilibagiza, Immaculée, with Steve Erwin. *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2006.

Jin, Ha. *A Free Life*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007.

Jin, Ha. *Waiting*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

Jones, Tayari. *Leaving Atlanta*. New York: Warner Books, 2002.

Jones, Tayari. *The Untelling*. New York: Warner Books, 2005.

Karim, Persism M., ed. *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2006.

Karim, Persis M. and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, eds. *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian Americans*. New York: George Braziller, 1999.

Kenan, Randall. *The Fire This Time*. Hoboken, NJ: Melville House, 2007.

Kenan, Randall and Amy Sickels. *James Baldwin*. Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House, 2005.

Kenan, Randall. *Let the Dead Bury the Dead*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

Kenan, Randall. *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Knopf, 1999.

Sample text: <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/random043/98041730.html>

Lee, Jennifer 8. *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food*. New York: Twelve, 2008.

Marshall, Ann, ed. *Home: Native People in the Southwest*; with poetry by Ofelia Zepeda. Phoenix, AZ: Heard Museum, 2005.

Nguyen, Bich Minh. *Stealing Buddha's Dinner: A Memoir*. New York: Viking, 2007.

Power, Susan. *The Grass Dancer*. New York: Putnam's, 1994.

Power, Susan. *Roofwalker*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2002.

Sharma, Akhil. *An Obedient Father*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

Shteyngart, Gary. *Absurdistan*. New York: Random House, 2006.

Shteyngart, Gary. *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2002.

Sample text <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fj0720/2001047676-s.html>

Vapnyar, Lara. *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2008.

Vapnyar, Lara. *There are Jews in My House*. New York: Pantheon, 2003.

Sample text <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/samples/random045/2003042975.html>

Zakaria, Fareed. *The Post-American World*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.

Zepeda, Ofelia. *Ocean Power*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995.

Zepeda, Ofelia. *Where Clouds Are Formed*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008.

WEBSITES

Academy of American Poets

The Academy of American Poets supports American poets and fosters the appreciation of contemporary poetry through a wide variety of programs, including National Poetry Month (April); online educational resources providing free poetry lesson plans for high school teachers; the Poetry Audio Archive; and the Poets.org Web site. <http://www.poets.org>

African American Literature and Culture Society

Seeks to study African-American literature within the context of contemporary theory and traditional discourse. Expands the appreciation of African-American literature. Encourages students' participation in the study of African-American literature and culture. <http://aalcs.marygrove.edu>

American Library Association

American Library Association promotes library service and librarianship, including "Diversity, Equity of Access, Education and Continuous Learning, Intellectual Freedom, and 21st Century Literacy." <http://www.ala.org>

American Literature Association

A coalition of societies devoted to the study of American authors. <http://www.calstatela.edu/academic/english/ala2>

Before Columbus Foundation

Promotes contemporary, American multicultural literature. It derives its name from the book *They Came Before Columbus*, which maintains that American literature was already evolving in each American ethnic group before they actually came to North America. <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/IEW/BeforeColumbus>

Celebrating Cultural Diversity Through Children's Literature

Dr. Robert F. Smith, Professor Emeritus, Towson University, Towson, MD

This Web site contains links to annotated bibliographies of children's multicultural books appropriate for kindergarten through grade six. Cultural groups currently listed include African Americans, Chinese Americans, Latino/Hispanic Americans, Japanese Americans, Jewish Americans, Native Americans, and Korean Americans.

<http://www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com/>

The Kennedy Center's Annual Multicultural Children's Book Festival

The Kennedy Center invites all children, parents, and educators to its annual free Multicultural Children's Book Festival. Books come to life in this afternoon-long series of readings by authors, illustrators, and guest celebrities; book signings; and other interactive performances and events.

<http://www.kennedy-center.org/programs/specialevents/bookfestival/>

Library of Congress Center for the Book

The center is a partnership between the government and the private sector. The Library of Congress pays its staff salaries, but it depends primarily on tax-deductible contributions from foundations, individuals, and corporations to fund its projects, publications, and reading promotion events and programs.

<http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/>

National Book Festival

The first National Book Festival, a collaboration between First Lady Laura Bush and the Library of Congress, held September 8, 2001, on the grounds of the Library of Congress and the U.S. Capitol, was such a success that it became an annual event. People came from all over the country to celebrate the diversity of books and of reading.

<http://www.loc.gov/bookfest/index.html>

Native American Authors

This Web site provides information on Native North American authors with bibliographies of their published works, biographical information, and links to online resources including interviews, online texts, and tribal Web sites.

<http://www.ipl.org/div/natam/>

Organization of Women Writers of Africa (OWWA)

Nonprofit organization that establishes links between women writers from Africa and the African Diaspora.

<http://www.owwa.org>

PEN American Center

U.S. branch of the world's oldest international literary and human rights organization. International PEN was founded in 1921 in direct response to the ethnic and national divisions that contributed to the First World War. PEN American Center was founded in 1922 and is the largest of the 144 PEN centers in 101 countries that together compose International PEN and is comprised of 3,300 professional members who represent the most distinguished writers, translators, and editors in the United States.

<http://www.pen.org/>

US-Africa Literary Foundation

Promotes the interests of African writers and makes African writings known and appreciated throughout the world.

<http://www.bowwaveo.org>

FILMOGRAPHY

The First Generation

Producer: National Educational Television and Radio Center, 1957.

Length: 29 minutes

Black/White

Notes: Our Nation's Roots series

Director: Neal Finn.

Summary: Dramatizes the problems confronting the first generation of an immigrant family, the conflicts between a first-generation Polish American and his father, and the influence of native-born children of immigrant families in various fields of endeavor.

Literature and Language of Our Immigrant Kinfolk

Producer: WCBS-TV and New York University
Distributor: National Educational Television and Radio Center, 1957
Length: 29 minutes
Notes: Our Nation's Roots series
Director: Neal Finn
Summary: Explains how many cultures became one because of the immigrant impact on American life; tells how the social novel became a feature of American literature; and discusses the influence of the immigrant upon the American language.

A Time for Stories

Producer: Public Service Broadcasting Trust for and in partnership with Prasar Bharti Corporation
Distributor: Public Service Broadcasting Trust, New Delhi, 2004
Director: Rajani Mani
Summary: Documentary film captures Katha Utsav, a literary convention held in January 2004 in New Delhi and through the participants explores the necessity of art and issues of communication and personal identity. In English, Hindi, and Malayalam with some English subtitles.
Performer: Narration, Atul Kumar; editing, Ankur Mayank, Vikram Russel.

Smoke Signals

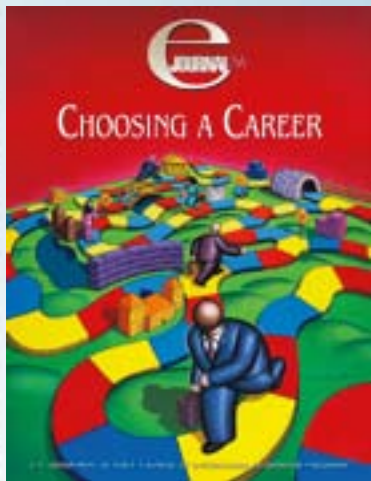
Producer: Shadowcatcher Entertainment
Director: Chris Eyre
Writer: Sherman Alexie (Screenplay/book)
Synopsis: The film portrays the relationship of a young Indian man, Victor Joseph, and his father, Arnold Joseph. Victor Joseph and a friend from the Indian reservation, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, travel to Arizona to collect Arnold Joseph's effects after learning of his death. The older man's life is recalled by the men in flashbacks, but their recollections differ. Victor learns things about his father he never knew, and comes to terms with his memories and his loss.



America.gov
Telling America's Story

Home of eJournalUSA

<http://www.america.gov>



**A
MONTHLY
JOURNAL
OFFERED IN
MULTIPLE
LANGUAGES**

