

Combined Book Series

Overview

The combined book series includes books selected from previous Reading Wyoming programs.

Bone

by Fae Myenne Ng

from **Family Photographs : Relationships Among the Generations**

The readers gathered at Sheridan County Fulmer Public Library to discuss a series I put together from other book discussion series. I titled the series: *The minority experience in the United States*. Our first book for discussion was Bone. The group consisted of 15 readers.

Many have participated in the book discussion for several years, but we did have 4 new group participants. The majority of the group had discussed the book previously, in the context of the series Family Photographs. I tried hard to refocus the conversation into a discussion of the minority experience in the US; rather than the “family” experience. First I presented how the Chinese experience was unique in terms of immigration laws and the “bachelor society”; to whom Ng dedicates the book. How successful was I? Well not very. They were reluctant to see the Chinese story as significantly “different” from other immigration stories and minority experiences and were influenced by having discussed the book under the Family Photographs series. However, the discussion was a great success. The group appreciated the information I presented about the Chinese immigration laws and why “Chinatowns” emerged and some began to move the conversation around to the minority experience rather than the “family” experience. The fact that I did not exactly get the discussion heading specifically into the unique experience of the Chinese community, the discussion itself was lively and thought provoking. The participants who had previously read the book were delighted to re-read it.

This group is terrific and they participate with thoughtful insights, always bringing interesting perspectives to the discussion.

Katie Curtiss
Sheridan County Fulmer Library

Good Scent from a Strange Mountain

by Robert Olin Butler

from **Many Americas**

I began the discussion with some background on Butler, including his time in Vietnam and the fact that many of the stories had been published in various literary journals before he gathered them together into the book, *Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. Before beginning the discussion I presented some thematic elements running through the stories:

- the presence of the trauma of war; Vietnam is always there reminding readers of what the Vietnamese lost.
- the ways in which assimilation unites, as well as the challenges of cultural duality.
- the search for identity, definitions of self, and self discovery.

At the end of last month’s discussion I asked readers to come ready to lead the discussion by presenting their favorite stories, characters or moments within the stories. Each of the 12 participants was eager to share their favorite “reading moments”. Several mentioned their enjoyment of the humor in **Love** and one reader referenced the narrators’ observation; “the man who could once bring fire from heaven now could only bring shit from the trees.”! Other participants particularly liked **Snow** and the personal connections made between Mr. Cohen and Gian; their links within memories of snow, loss of love and parents. **Letters from my Father** was discussed in reference to the meaning of “children of dust” and the ways in which Francine’s discovery and reading of her father’s letters affect her own discovery of self.

One reader enjoyed **Fairy Tale** which led us into a discussion of language, the importance of intonation in the Vietnamese language, and the consequences of colliding perceptions when languages differ. The group agreed that the story was indeed a Fairy Tale but in a good way – the story is about possibilities and reclaiming a life in America. The deepest discussion revolved around **The American Couple** and just who was *the American Couple*, and **A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain**. Several participants had questions about Ho Chi Min and if he was indeed in London. I gave some historical background on Wilson’s 14 points, the peace after World War I, and the hope of establishing a League of Nations. I brought into the discussion the meaning of the title of this story, happiness; and the mantra of the Hoa Hao as well as the divergent paths of Ho (political) and Dao (peaceful). In discussing this story I also presented connections between **The Trip Back** (memory of senses), parasailing in **The American Couple**, as well as how family obligations, familial relationships and duties in Vietnam translate, when transported into a new life in the United States. “Sugar is as important as war”.

Thanks to Norleen Healy for the suggestion that the readers be asked to lead the discussion and present their favorite stories, characters and “reading experiences”. The only downside was, at times, the discussion bounced around a bit too much and it was sometimes difficult for me to bring it into a landing, so to speak. This might also be the result of the fact the book was a collection of short stories. I found it somewhat difficult to corral the discussion back to a discussion of themes that tie the stories together. Confessions of a control freak discussion leader??? The upside was that I found the participants tended to discuss with each other more, rather than look to me for direction, and the participants liked taking on the responsibility of directing the discussion.

Katie Curtiss

Coming of Age in Mississippi **By Anne Moody** **from Ordinary Lives: Memoirs of American Women**

Twelve readers gathered at the Sheridan Fulmer Public Library to discuss Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. The discussion was terrific because there were many voices and differing experiences during the 1960's. Few participants experienced the Civil Rights movement in the same way, hence a great discussion from multiple perspectives. We discussed the feelings that seemed to influence and motivate Ann at various stages in her life, as well as what characteristics were most responsible for the way she responded. What made her “ordinary” and “extraordinary”? I asked the participants how they saw Ann as a person and why they felt she wrote the book. Many commented that people have a general perception of life in the segregated south but this book really brought it home. Each person loved the book and the unbelievable obstacles Ann Moody and civil rights leaders constantly faced, from both the black and white community.

We discussed why this book is considered fictionalized biography, as well as the various meanings of the title of the book. I provided information on how the book was received and provided some statements by Ted Kennedy. We ended the evening by discussing what happened to Ms. Moody. The group was surprised to learn she wrote little more and moved north to work with poverty programs. I left them with a quote from Moody; “I never saw myself as a writer. I was first and foremost an activist in the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi. When I could no longer see that anything was being accomplished by our work, there I left and went north. Through my writing I came to see no matter how hard we in the movement worked, nothing seemed to change. The movement was not in control of its destiny, nor did we have any means of gaining control of it”

Katie Curtiss

House of Houses **by Pat Mora** **from Ordinary Lives: Memoirs of American Women**

Our group had our last discussion on Tues night April 27. I put together this series from the books of several of the Humanities book discussions series. I titled the series “The Minority Experience in the US”. The books we read were *Bone*, *Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and *House of Houses*. There were about 14 (I always forget to count, sorry).

Many readers had trouble with our final book, *House of Houses*. The book did not draw them into the houses Pat Mora was creating. Several readers were put off by the interspersed Spanish phrases and confusion as to who was dead, who was alive, and who was speaking. For the first time in many years some of my most dedicated readers admitted that they did not finish for the book.

I began the discussion with some background on Ms. Mora and her thoughts on bilingualism and the Mexican American immigrant and citizen experience. I organized part of the conversation around the structure of the book; characterizing generations, which characters the group liked, and how and why they were drawn to connecting with a certain character. I also asked the group to consider the role of geography, calendars, traditions, and how they provide layers within the book and layer within our inner spaces.

The group eased into the conversation and it became lively and interesting. This group always agrees that the discussion of the book is the prize for reading a book. The discussion is the best part because it brings us together to discuss a myriad of humanities issues. After the discussion we agreed it was a worthwhile read and several that did not finish will go back and read it again.

I feel partially responsible for the group's response to *House of Houses*. If this book were in one of my future discussions I would hand out a family tree of the Mora and Delgado families (the one in the book does not work) and give the group several questions to think about as they read the book. As many readers did, I myself got caught up in trying to figure out who was related to whom, and which member of which generation was speaking. One of the members of the group emailed me an awesome family tree and I printed it out and brought it to the discussion.

We wrapped up the discussion by linking the four books we read and which themes connected the books. It was agreed that *Coming of Age in Mississippi* was a bit out of sync, but was one of their favorites. What linked the other books were the challenges of generational conflicts, and the challenge of maintaining cultural traditions and linguistic expressions, which often cannot be translated, when families migrate to new countries.

Katie Curtiss

