

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

All the Pretty Horses **By Cormac McCarthy** **from Community and the Western Landscape**

Series: Story
Book: All The Pretty Horses, by Cormac McCarthy
Place: Torrington
Date: Feb. 6, 2012
Discussion Leader: Court Merrigan
Participants: 6

In Torrington we met on the EWC campus to discuss All The Pretty Horses. The initial reactions to the book ranged from admiration to the sweeping, Biblical nature of the prose, to a bit of befuddlement at McCarthy's eschewal of standard grammar and punctuation. I didn't have a clear answer as to why McCarthy did it in this way, other than to point out that he is following in a tradition of other writers, especially Faulkner, who also felt the standard rules of grammar and punctuation were malleable "options."

We spent a bit of time placing the story in context, both in terms of the history of Mexico and the American cultural context at the time the story takes place (1949). In particular we discussed how the situation John Grady Cole finds himself in with regard to the imminent sale of the ranch he grew up on is analogous to what is happening all over Wyoming today, with many ranches not being a "paying proposition" and being out of the reach of many in the younger generation, some of whom might like to carry on the ranching lifestyle. We talked about how the main characters on the American side, the three boys, are acting as typical teenagers might in any era, riding impetuously into danger with little thought for consequences. John Grady Cole, however, was thought by some to be very shrewd, although this doesn't account for his later mistakes during his stay in Mexico.

We also discussed the role of horses in the book, particularly the fetish that McCarthy makes of them. We spent some time, too, talking about how John Grady Cole's romance with the daughter of the ranch owner in Mexico was, really, A Very Bad Idea. We admired McCarthy's ability to keep the story humming through episode after episode; just when you think it's over, nope, something else comes up. We also discussed how the bloody history of the Mexican Revolution influenced the views of many of the characters in the story.

We felt sorry for the young boy, Jimmy Blevins, and some of the older participants spent some time reminiscing about their own youths, when AM radio stations out of Texas beamed powerful signals across the whole USA. One participant grew up in North Dakota and had clear memories of listening to an old-time radio show beamed out of south Texas growing up. We laughed a bit about the description of the preacher towards the end of the book, how bodies in coffins were being shipped to him and how he would lay hands on the radio.

We concluded the discussion with a look at a road map of Mexico, charting the (very long) journey that John Grady Cole and his friends took from San Angelo, Texas, down into Mexico, and back.

The Maltese Falcon **By Dashielle Hammett** **from Crime and the Cultural Landscape**

Series: Story
Book: The Maltese Falcon, Dashiell Hammett
Place: Torrington
Date: March 5, 2012
Discussion Leader: Court Merrigan
Participants: 8

In Torrington we met on the EWC campus to discuss The Maltese Falcon. We spent a little time comparing this book to All The Pretty Horses, which we read last session. There was general agreement that The Maltese Falcon was not as deep a book, although perhaps more entertaining. We also spent some time discussing the place of Joel Cairo, who is clearly tagged at various points in the text as a homosexual. We speculated that that sort of "tagging" was more acceptable in 1929, when The Maltese Falcon was originally published, and we wondered why Hammett found it necessary to characterize Joel Cairo in this way. The thinking tended, I think, to go along the lines that Joel Cairo was portrayed in this way so as to further emphasize the macho, tough-guy nature of Sam Spade.

We spent a little time discussing how Sam Spade was the prototypical tough-guy PI, the one who sort of started it all (with some help from Mickey Spillane and Raymond Chandler.) To that end, we pulled up some clips from the movie on YouTube. The long physical description of Sam Spade that opens the book, where Sam Spade is described as a "blonde Satan" with lots of v-curves, was a topic of interest. The book gives you an impression of a burly, big man; but then once you've seen the movie it is basically impossible to separate the image of Sam Spade from Humphrey Bogart, who of course is not blond nor burly at all. We also discussed how the movie lifts dialogue from the book nearly verbatim in spots, which points to how crisp the dialogue in The Maltese Falcon is. It was great to watch some of the movie scenes, which really put a stamp on what we read in the book, but it is definitely true that the movie image tends to overwhelm the personal image a reader has built up in their mind. To say nothing of how the actors in the film were often typecast themselves, and so it is easy to confuse the happening of The Maltese Falcon with other movies where those actors had a role.

We questioned rather Sam Spade was really a moral character, beneath the tough-guy exterior, or whether he was just as greedy and grasping as the other characters who are only trying to profit from the bird. We spent some time in discussion of the ending, and how Sam Spade was most concerned with not "being a sap." One participant

speculated that perhaps *The Maltese Falcon* is a reflection of the go-go '20s, a time when everyone was trying to get ahead and get rich, and never mind the consequences. Sam Spade, in that sense, then, is a sort of throwback to an earlier era when honor was more important than profit. Not everyone agreed with this take, necessarily, but we did find it interesting.

Finally, we wondered about the falcon itself. Was there even such a bird in the first place? Maybe the Russian general had deceived everyone, and never really had it in the first place? What kind of man was this Mr. Gutman, to spend 17 years pursuing the bird – to what end (especially considering that he ends up dead by the end of the book)? It's not a book that leaves one with a lot of optimism for the human race, really, especially considering that it ends largely where it began – with Sam Spade back to dealing with the wife of his dead partner, who he was previously having an affair with. This may put the lie to some of his claims that he was trying to protect his own honor by turning in Miss O'Shaughnessy.

First They Killed My Father **By Loung Ung** **from *Living with Violence: Conflict in Contemporary Cultures***

Series: Story
Place: Torrington
Date: May 7, 2012
Discussion Leader: Court Merrigan
Participants: 2

In Torrington two stalwarts and I met on the EWC campus to discuss *First They Killed My Father*. The thing that struck all of us was how unrelenting the book was in the sheer terror visited upon the Cambodian people by the Khmer Rouge. One reader commented that she could only read the book in small chunks, since it was just too much to take. So many things horrible things happened to the little girl and her family, things that most in America are totally unaware of. Most discussion of that era about Southeast Asia focuses on Vietnam and the American pull-out; rarely is it discussed that when we pulled out of Vietnam, we also effectively abandoned Cambodia. We had some discussion about how the Kissinger/Nixon policies of the time created the political circumstances that allowed the Khmer Rouge to rise, such as the secret illegal bombing campaign that American B-52s carried out on Cambodia and the corruption of the Cambodian regime under Lon Nol. We also discussed how the leader of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot, was originally educated in France, bringing home radical communist ideas that he then attempted to apply to Cambodia, with absolutely devastating results. Pol Pot also spent time with the northern hill tribes, who were isolated from the politics of the state, didn't use money, and were more or less egalitarian. These two poles influenced Pol Pot when he began his murderous reign over the country.

We discussed the ambiguous role of Ung's father in the book. Since she wrote the book from the perspective of a child, it contains a child's naiveté. Clearly Ms. Ung's father was good to her, and like most small children (she was five when the Khmer Rouge took over the country) she worshipped her father. But before the downfall of the Lon Nol government, her father worked as high-ranking officer in the secret police. The Lon Nol government was well known for its extreme corruption and human rights abuses, including the torture and murder of political dissidents. Though we will never know for sure, it is highly likely that Ung's father was implicated in some of that activity. It is mentioned in the book that there was an attempt on his life, and that he had bodyguards. Also, while Ung describes the standard of living of her family as "middle class," in a country as poor as Cambodia, it is likely that they were far better off than just middle class. Peasants were starving in the countryside, and her family had three cars and she went swimming at the "club." It is likely, therefore, that her family was the beneficiary of some of the proceeds of political corruption. One of the participants read a review of the book on Amazon that made just those points, sharply criticizing Ung's perspective on the genocide as being from a privileged and possibly racist perspective (Ung is Chinese-Cambodian, and thus has lighter skin and somewhat different facial features from many other Cambodians). As a group, we thought that while those points may very well be valid, it does not take away from the validity of Ung's own experience, and that the horrors that her family endured in the years of the Khmer Rouge rule surely outweighed any crimes that had been committed previously.

One of the few spots of humor in the books comes when Ung and her older brother and sister-in-law are preparing to embark to America, and are told they will be going to Vermont. Not knowing much about America, they assume that it will be much like California. Though the book ends before any details emerge about that experience (there are two sequels), we thought she must have been in for some major culture shock!

We thought that, if we had it to do over again, we probably wouldn't have ended the series on such a hard-to-read book, though the lessons contained therein are worth learning for anyone. The Khmer Rouge truly plumbed the depths of human savagery, and Ms. Ung, we agreed, has been very courageous in not only living through the atrocities, but also writing about them, shining a beacon of light on the horrors that took place in Cambodia. We compared the Khmer Rouge soldiers to Nazi SS officers, wondering how they could live in these communities, go home to their families, and yet carry out such atrocities against their own countrymen. We did not arrive at answer to this question.

All in all, a very hard read to take, but one well worth doing.

Grapes of Wrath

By John Steinbeck

Discussion group: Ten Sleep, WY Ten Sleep Library
Book: GRAPES OF WRATH - John Steinbeck
10 people present
Date: January 27, 2014
Leader: Elouise Rossler

We had a lively discussion on a cold winter evening. The major topics covered included the themes of family, religion, sanctity of life, wealth vs. poverty and transience. The book was published in 1939, but many of the same themes are in the forefront of today's news and daily life. We discussed the differences between the migrants from Oklahoma and the illegal immigrants of today regarding first, legalities, second the reasons for transience as well as the similarities of lack of land and food causing movement and setting up a society of family (both blood and otherwise) and creating a structure to govern this society.

The religious symbols were many - Rose of Sharon, promised land, journey of Israelites and these came together in the Preacher, who felt he wasn't worthy to preach any more. His strong values had been trampled so completely by the downfall of society about him; he became fearful. Highway 66 became the symbol of seeking "the promised land" with other "pilgrims."

One of the ironies revolves around the two murders committed by Tom Joad and evolves into the question: Is the weight of all murders equal? Or do the circumstances surrounding the act make a difference?

Age old questions of ownership vs morality, wealth vs poverty and the results, and the structure of family and the position of religion in the "new" society are wrestled with in the book and we agreed also are being wrestled with today.

The ending seemed out of character to some. It also seemed depressing to most, however the leader saw a ray of hope in the change of Rose of Sharon's attitude and the fact that sanctity of life had become important again.

Tortilla Curtain

By T. C. Boyle

Discussion Group: Ten Sleep, WY Ten Sleep Library
Book: TORTILLA CURTAIN, T. C. Boyle
Leader: Elouise Rossler
February 10, 2014

In the book TORTILLA CURTAIN, Boyle follows the pathways of a up-and-coming couple and a poor illegal Mexican couple who live unwittingly near each other. The group had sympathy for the poor couple, however as the book evolved we began to see a side of Delaney that could have given some answers to the problems of both, had he been strong enough to pursue the pathway of

truth. He learned of the hypocrisy involved with his neighbors and wasn't sure how to handle it. The group discussed the tremendous differences financially and socially and how people built walls to protect and to keep out the "other side of life." Walls in large ways and small were symbols of many ways that both suburbanites and immigrants use to create a realism for themselves and hide other realisms. Another symbol was the coyote - the first image of the Mexican immigrants to the suburbanites. We discussed the coyote image and its everyday use as a symbol of the illegal immigrants today. The images found by Delaney on his camera of who the real culprits were changed the game somewhat in most minds. It is difficult to see one of your own as the "coyote" for it brings to bear feelings of guilt and shame. The immigration issue was discussed in some detail. Some thoughts on how to solve it were shared. Many questions were still looming as we departed to other issues.

The final gesture by Candido to Delaney - reaching for his hand in the swirling flood water- seemed to open the door to hope for both sides.

Snow Falling on Cedars

By David Guterson

Ten Sleep Discussion Group - 7 present
SNOW FALLING ON CEDARS-Guterson
Elouise Rossler, Leader
Ten Sleep Library
February 24, 2014 6:00 p. m.

The group found the book very interesting: two points- we live about two hours from the Heart Mountain Internment Center remains, which are being made into an historical site and we have a young woman in our group who has family, some of whom were and some were not interned during WWII.

We talked about the impact of the island - its isolation, two cultures thrust together, its internment victims, and its war victims. We discussed the weather as used in the book, but which also is a part of the island's persona. The trial, real time, and flashback method used by the author seemed effective in crossing the barriers of time and place.

Themes of the book we discussed were family, cultural differences and how they are often going in a circle, Japanese internment from personal point of view and from our own Heart Mountain Internment history. The discussion also centered on the relationship of Ishmael and Hatsue, how it was ended, and its return at the end of the book. Their were differing ideas regarding the why of its first end. The coming-of-age aspect of the relationship theme was resolved it appeared by Ismael's help to Hatsue thus bringing his acceptance of life as an adult. The World War II victims were many in the town - not by death, but by injury and mental anguish, having touched Ishmael and Kabuo. The struggle between free will and chance was discussed relating to Hatsue and Ishmael. Was Hatsue convinced she must marry a Japanese man or did she submit to her mother's command?

We discussed codes of behavior as used in the book to sometimes get points across and how they played into the conflicts. One of the specifics was Kabuo's very stoic, solemn appearance at the trial was misinterpreted by the islanders and the newsmen.

We also discussed what the verdict would have been if Ishmael had not produced the information from the lighthouse. Some felt Kabuo would have been convicted based on his ethnicity; others held out for a higher level of justice and would have not seen him convicted.

We all agreed this was the best book we have read and enjoyed its many layers of thought and conflict as well as having learned about the time period it presented.

House of Houses

By Pat Mora

Book: HOUSE OF HOUSES

Author: Pat Mora

Leader: Elouise Rossler

Location: Ten Sleep Library

Attendees: 9

Have you ever thought about the concept of communicating with all your ancestors and having them "live" in your HOUSE of HOUSES? Pat Mora has written a book about her family ancestors and her immediate living family that illustrates this concept; at the same time the political scenes and events which helped shape her family in Mexico and the United States is accurately covered.

Most of the attendees had not finished the book, finding the inclusion of much Spanish and the many, many characters to be overwhelming. I approached the book for them from the standpoint of ignoring the Spanish (she explains it in the next paragraph or two) and forgetting the names of ancestors, just try to remember events and consequences. It is very similar to how we often think of our own family trees and ancestors. Instead, I suggested we relate to the idea of the impact each of these people, even many she hadn't met, had on where she is as an individual. After some discussion along these lines, I asked them to write down the names of six or seven people in their lives that they would put in a house of houses. Then I asked them to draw their own houses of houses. Mora had carefully given great detail about the House of Houses she designed. It was very interesting to see the different ideas the readers had and why they designed their house in that fashion. They were very game about this and we had fun talking about this part of the discussion as we laughed at ourselves and realized how "in the box" we often are.

I would like to thank all who came to the discussions. It has been a great adventure; and I will be on to new adventures soon.
