

# Living Between the Fences

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## **Snow Falling on Cedars**

Clearmont Library  
May 20, 2008

We had a small gathering to discuss *Snow Falling on Cedars*. Unfortunately we had to cancel the earlier scheduled meeting because of a spring blizzard, so everyone had read the book awhile ago and it took some time to get the discussion on track while people tried to recall the details of the story and characters.

Once we got rolling though, they had a lot to say. As other facilitators have in discussing this novel, I gave some history of Japanese immigration in the US and the internment camps during World War Two. It always surprises me that some people are unaware of Wyoming's place in that history and of the camp near Powell.

In discussing the characters, we compared the three main characters (Ishmael, Carl, and Kubuo) - noting that they were more alike than not. We looked at quotes that told what the values of the people in this community were and at those which explained what constitutes a "good man" to those people. We looked at how different characters perceived the same events in very different ways and the consequences of not trying to see events through other eyes. We, of course, discussed the many forms of racism and other kinds of prejudice in the novel as well and the many other barriers (fences) that impacted the characters and events. We talked about the role of fate, luck, and choice in the novel. I read a quoted form Guterson where he said he writes partly out of moral and ethical duty and asked the group where they might see this reflected in the novel. One person noted how significantly just basic decency stood out when it occurred.

Interestingly, our discussion kept pulling us back to comparisons with *The House of Sand and Fog* which had quite an impact on this group. Throughout, this series was one which allowed for an especially good development of the themes and of tying the novels together accordingly.

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Twenty of us gathered to discuss *Snow Falling on Cedars*, our second book in the "Fences" Series. Several people commented that they were glad for a "life affirming" ending after *House of Sand and Fog*. The group appreciated the structure of the book, finding that the countering of courtroom scenes with flashbacks or "homey" scenes

made for a most readable novel. One woman had brought maps and pictures from the area and passed them around. I talked about the author, his other books (including the new novel, *The Other*), and his writing style. We moved on to talk about the importance of the setting, the impact of the snowstorm on the trial and the courtroom inhabitants, the moral issues brought up in the book, the characters, both major and minor. Readers came prepared with lists of the "fences" they found in the book: inability to understand one another's culture, racism, outsiders versus islanders, religious differences, impact of war, violence, tolerance, truth, justice, desire for land, and more. I asked the group to comment on what they thought was at stake in the courtroom trial. We followed that with a discussion of the characters; how they were affected by the war (both battle and internment), what they wanted from life, how they fit in on the island. In the end we spent most of our time on Ishmael and, by extension, Hatsue. Why was he attracted to her, was there love on both sides, and why was Ishmael unable to move on with his life?

Guterson argues that novels should present moral questions. He does so in this book..... and seems to suggest that in an indifferent and chaotic world an individual has the responsibility to make the best moral choice that he/she can make. In the end Ishmael does this.

Barbara Gose (10/12/08)  
Reading Wyoming  
Wyoming Humanities Council

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Tongue River Library  
September 25, 2008

Fourteen people gathered in little Rancheater to discuss *Snow Falling on Cedars*. I gave a brief bio on Guterson, noting especially his contention that literature should raise ethical and moral issues, and that he wasn't much in favor of modernism. That statement got us started on our discussion of the novel and we spent some time debating the ethical and moral issues surrounding the characters and events. At one point I digressed to the historical background of the Japanese immigration, the hostility toward Japanese even before WWII, and the paranoia after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. All of this, of course, we related directly to the novel.

When we talked about how we stereotype certain groups, one lady said "Well the thing is the Japanese WERE sneaky. Look how they snuck up on us at Pearl Harbor!" She went on to tell how well she remembered that period and the resentment of the Japanese. She said that her mother even destroyed her Japanese china so as not to have it in the house. We talked a lot about the whole issue of racism and prejudices and where they comes from and how the novel illustrates that people are often blind to their own prejudices. We agreed that blatant prejudice is easy to recognize and criticize, but the other subtler forms are more insidious and dangerous.

This discussion got into current events and I kept having to steer them away from the upcoming Presidential

election! This novel, as do the others in the series, lends itself easily to a discussion of “fences”; the group by now comes prepared with all sorts of thoughts about the different “fences” in the book.

They were interested in hearing what else Guterson had written, and wondered about the “ethical and moral” issues in his other writing.

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Hello Everyone,

On Tuesday night (9/30), 7 of us discussed *Snow Falling on Cedars*. I presented some information about David Guterson’s background and interests; his use of his father as a model for Nels Gudmondssen, the defense attorney, and his love for *To Kill a Mockingbird* and its similarity as a courtroom-centered drama attempting to right racial wrongs gave us some points to discuss. I share Guterson’s love for Russian literature and so it’s no wonder to me that I loved his novel. We discussed the many “fences” separating people in the island community: racial, cultural, professional among others.

We had a lively discussion about the reality and depth of the characters; most of the participants felt Hatsue, as a young girl and as the wife of Kabuo, was the strongest of the characters. Ishmael’s name, as the stranger and wanderer from the Bible, seemed to identify key elements of his personality and foreshadow his life.

I also presented a comment of Guterson’s for discussion: “Fiction writers shouldn’t dictate to people what their morality should be, yet not enough writers representing moral questions for reflection, which I think is a very important obligation.” I asked what moral questions were presented by the novel, and we discussed several, then agreed that Ishmael’s final choice to almost not present crucial information, was an intriguing one and essential to his character’s development.

The structure of the book was a source of controversy. One participant felt that it would have been more effective to tell the story of the characters’ youth in a simpler, chronological fashion, up until the internment and the war years and then use the courtroom as the center of focus. We all agreed that it was a gripping story, beautifully told, and even after a rather warm discussion, when I asked which of the books we’d read this year was their favorite, almost everyone agreed it was *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

Mary Karen Solomon  
Chair, Humanities and Social Sciences  
Colorado Northwestern Community College

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A total of eleven gathered at the Niobrara County Library to discuss *Snow Falling on Cedars*. I provided some information on the author, his literary aesthetic, and the history related to the text. The Japanese internment and related issues (such as the issues of ethnic grouping and profiling) consumed much of the early discussion. The

text acted as more of a springboard into related issues, but certainly issues of fences and the theme of this series. We also spent some time considering symbols and possible meanings. For example, the group spent some time discussing the significance of the upside-down stamp, if it is a symbol, and what it may symbolize. Names were also considered—does Ishmael compare to the narrator of *Moby Dick*?

We ended with one member of the group suggesting that the novel is very contrived and predictable, which led to a discussion of how fiction works and whether or not the “contrived” events (like the *deus ex machina* of the log at the lighthouse) hinder the effectiveness of the novel. Again, a wide ranging and interesting discussion. A good group of readers with many solid thoughts and ideas related to literature.

Wayne G. Deahl  
Division Chair: Arts, Humanities, Social & Behavioral Sciences  
Eastern Wyoming College

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On October 5, seven ladies met during the lunch hour at the Hay Library on the Rock Springs campus of Western Wyoming Community College to discuss David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

We all felt that the novel was very well researched and authentic. Some of our contributing members had memories of animosity toward the Japanese during WWII, especially on the West Coast. Some group members commented that our U.S. culture programmed hatred into its children during this time. Youngsters were encouraged to hate “Japs”. Another member related this to Ishmael’s final thoughts at the end of the book—“the Human heart is a mystery”—and it is only maturity that allows understanding. Those same folks who had been encouraged to hate can now look at the situation differently so many years later.

Several of us had difficulty “getting into” the novel initially, due in part to the flashback nature of the story. However, we all agreed that the flashbacks were ultimately very effective and contributed nicely to the build-up of the mystery on which the story hangs.

We did connect the novel to last month’s discussion of *The House of Sand and Fog* and saw that they both focus on the concepts of LAND and BELONGING. We talked about the fact that we like to assume honesty in dealings with friends and neighbors over issues of land, in particular, but it seems to be the unfortunate rule of thumb that things do not turn out the way we’ve planned. We also looked at how the law participated in the land disputes between Kathy Nicolo and Colonel Behrani and also between Kabuo and Carl. The island culture became an interesting concept as well—a microcosm in which people cannot afford to make enemies but in which it seems impossible not to offend someone some of the time. This setting was essential to the story and a good breeding ground for the clash of cultures that we observe there.

Of course many of our ideas revolved around the “fences” concept. We enjoyed looking at Kabuo in the courtroom and how his stoic demeanor contrasted starkly with Judge Fielding’s sleepy appearance. Kabuo wears a mask through which he intends to portray dignity and suffering. He is proud of the sacrifices he made for his country through his service in the war. In addition, we learn from Hatsue’s lessons with Mrs. Shigemura that this stoicism is valued in Japanese culture. Unfortunately, the mask Kabuo wears creates a fence between the accused and the jury—they see a haughty pride in his appearance and judge him based on this perception.

It was impossible not to address the relationships between Hatsue and her two lovers. We wondered if Hatsue really loved Ishmael, or if he was just a figure from her childhood with whom she was comfortable sharing her dreams. Nature is meaningful for their relationship. When they meet in the woods Guterson gives lengthy descriptions of the green ferns and the water dripping down over the cedar tree. The scenery is beautifully described (as a native of the Pacific Northwest, it made me homesick!) and gives them privacy in order to conduct their secret relationship. When she and Ishmael meet in the cedar tree for the last time, she pushes him away, telling him “this is wrong.” When she shares a similar moment with her new husband in the internment camp, she rejoices because it is “so right.” Was she programmed to ultimately accept only a Japanese man as her mate, we wondered. It was interesting to see that both men seem to fall in love with Hatsue while she’s picking strawberries in the summertime. Both Kabuo and Ishmael have fond memories of Hatsue in the strawberry fields.

Kabuo initially lies to the authorities about speaking with Carl the night of his death. The townspeople don’t understand why he would do such a thing. However, past experience has shown Kabuo to keep quiet and cooperative. When the FBI visits the Miyamoto family and takes their things, they have no choice but to cooperate. When the U.S. government sends the Miyamotos and other Japanese to internment camps, they have no choice but to cooperate—even though they’ve done nothing wrong. Kabuo knows that he has done nothing wrong in his dealings with Carl, but experience has shown him that he is suspect anyway.

Ishmael, on the other hand, intentionally hides information from the authorities. When he does decide to share it, he shows it to Hatsue and her family. Perhaps he wants her to see him as a savior or a hero. Perhaps he wants her respect or gratitude. We agreed that Ishmael feels that he doesn’t measure up to his father. Comments in the novel seem to support this idea. At one point Hatsue says, “put this in your father’s newspaper”, and another character says, “he’s a good boy, but not quite his father.” This sense of lacking may also be connected to Ishmael’s war participation, which some of us deemed “senseless” and “impotent”. Ishmael struggles with his loss of Hatsue and a hoped-for future with her and the loss of his arm. Upon return to the island, he takes over his father’s newspaper, but remains an isolated observer for the most part. He has the job of “reporting” others’ lives and activities but does not actively create his own life. Nels’ impotence causes

him to be intimidated by Mrs. Heine while she’s on the witness stand. Ishmael’s impotence causes him to be hateful toward Hatsue and yet obsessed with her. He is a man who cannot get past his own dead dream, and it affects all that he does.

Dianna Renz

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22 people showed up for our first session of the new series; several were new people to the group which was nice. I began by introducing the series and explaining the themes we would be discussing related to the idea of “fences”. I gave a brief bio of David Guterson and then asked the group to throw out some examples of fences - both literal and metaphorical - from the book. They “got” this right away and launched into a lively discussion of the major elements in the novel. Many of us were surprised to hear that some people in the group had not been aware, until lately, of the Japanese internment in the US during World War II (in spite of Heart Mountain even). Some of the points I outlined to especially consider were as follows:

- What are the values of the community? How is a “good man” defined?
- How did the values of Kabuo and Hatsue differ from the Anglo community? Why/how did this create problems?
- How are Ishmael, Carl, and Kabuo alike?
- Where are examples of the racism and why is it ironic?
- Implications of the setting on the characters and events.
- What position does Guterson seem to be taking? Is the novel generally affirming or not (since he does tend to be fatalistic in many ways and he does suggest history is a continuum)?

We looked at several quotes from the book, especially from Ishmael and Nels.

I asked the group whether they think we have we in the US become more or less racist since 1954. We agreed that we all have certain prejudices, even if not racist ones, and that the key is in recognizing that. Since our discussion occurred the evening before the anniversary of 9/11, we naturally drew parallels between the paranoia described during WWII and what we have exhibited in the US in the last 6 years.

Overall, it was one of the longest sessions we’ve had and could have gone on even longer. What a group.

Norleen Healy  
Story Library  
September 10, 2007

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One member of the group had grown up in western Washington very near to the setting of the novel. His

family lived across the road from the Filipino family who raised strawberries. He spoke about the childhood memories that the book had evoked.

In response to my question about the "fences" that group members had perceived in the book, he said that he saw religion -- such as strict Lutheranism vs. the Buddhism of the Japanese as boundaries between people. The group also mentioned islanders vs. outsiders as bounded groups.

I mentioned that I thought that the experiences of some characters -- such as war -- bound them together in ways that transcended the others fences that separated them. Agreeing, one participant then pointed out the scene in which Kabuo and Carl confront each other as "a bloody Jap" and "a Nazi s-o-b."

Other members of the group also related to the book on a personal level. For instance, a man who had grown up in Evanston talked about the gulf between the Chinese and the Anglo kids when he was growing up. "We just didn't associate with them," he said. One Chinese-American man who grew up here has attained some wealth and has given community historical projects considerable support over the years. "He has kicked down the fences," Charles commented.

We talked at length about the role of the snowstorm in the story. The man from western Washington spoke about how unusual such a storm was and thought Guterson might have modeled the storm in the book on the great blizzard of 1949. "The snow is a great equalizer," he commented. It destroys fences and brings everyone to the same level." I pointed out that the trial has also created a storm in the community to which the natural storm is parallel.

The discussion turned to how symbolic fences in the community had kept people apart and comfortable until the snowstorm and the trial forced them together and brought simmering emotions to the surface, especially fear, making people in the community take sides in the trial.

When I asked what they thought would happen after the trial was over, some people thought nothing would change. Another said that the fear would subside, but that the trial (and the storm) would become a community story.

We then considered Ishmael and his obsession with Hatsue that made him withhold the critical evidence in the trial. One participant thought that Ishmael's belief that Hatsue belonged to him just as Kabuo believed the land promised to his father belonged to him. But someone else saw them as two separate issues. "The question of the land is an issue of moral justice," he said, while Ishmael was "hung up" on his relationship with Hatsue.

This was a good book to use as the beginning of the series -- all the readers enjoyed it.

Barbara Bogart

The Newcastle group met on February 11, 2009, in the Weston County Library meeting room. Eighteen members gathered to discuss David Guterson's Snow Falling on Cedars. Before beginning the discussion of the book, we went over the guidelines and format for the discussions, introduced ourselves to each other, and identified the order in which we'd be reading the four selections for this series.

As part of our introductions, I asked the participants to describe what they remember of the 1950s, the time frame of the story. (Only one participant was too young to remember the 50s.) This brought about many memories of that decade, as well as references to WWII. Several members were born in December 1941, and a few older members actually remembered Pearl Harbor.

This discussion led to a handout I'd prepared on the historical background of the novel. We discussed Japanese culture, including the *samurai* mentality and skill; policies regarding Japanese immigration and citizenship; as well as the internment camps of WWII. Several members had been to Heart Mountain and shared details of that site. Others had hosted Japanese exchange students in recent years, and one described the prejudice she had felt toward that visitor by another member of our community, as recently as 15 years ago. As we began our discussion of the book, we talked about Guterson's setting - a fictional island, but very similar to his home. We also talked about his incredible level of detail in the novel, as well as the thorough research he'd done while writing it. Japanese culture, WWII, deep-sea fishing, and the legal system are examples of content he used very accurately and with great detail.

As we discussed the events of the novel we began with the use of the trial as a framework for the story. The novel begins with it and ends with it; other elements of the book are triggered by what is happening in the trial. Many of those elements unfold through flashbacks, which could give a disjointed feel to the plot but don't, due to Guterson's skillful weaving of events and information. We also talked quite a bit about Ishmael's character, and the inner struggles he had with his love of Hatsue, his conflict with his father's expectations, and his 'disability' due to his war wound. We felt the storm in the book, which would be very unusual for an island in that area off the Washington coast, was symbolic of the many cold and confounding ideas in the novel; it also increased the feelings of isolation in the book.

We discussed several thematic threads running through the novel, particularly the theme of racism. Content in each chapter contributes to that concept, and we compared the racism of today to the racism surrounding WWII. Our final discussion point was the last line of the book - no one seemed to have a solid understanding of what Guterson was trying to say through his comparison of 'accident' and 'the human heart,' but we all had a theory.

The group agreed this book is one of the best they've read recently. We closed our meeting with several clips from

the movie. It is very well done, but might be difficult for viewers to follow without having read the book first.

Phyl Sundstrom, Newcastle

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A small, but powerful, group braved the elements to discuss our last book of the season. Everyone who attended seemed to really enjoy this book and its message. We began by discussing the underpinnings of the racism in the novel. Most people said they understood why Executive Order 9066 was issued, but didn't quite agree with the way it was handled. We came back to a familiar topic in the Living Between Fences series: xenophobia. There was an immediate, irrational fear that came along with the policy. Soon, every person with Asian ancestry became the enemy. Rather than being considered American, the Asian-Americans in the novel are seen as spies. Kabuo fought on the German front, but after the war was seen only as a remnant of the enemy. Perhaps the most interesting conversation in the entire novel revolves around that idea. Kabuo and Carl are discussing the war on the night of the accident and Carl remarks that everything is different since the war. Carl cannot see Kabuo for the childhood friend he once was. The war turned Kabuo into the enemy because he looks like the enemy. Kabuo retorts wittily that Carl looks just like the Nazis that he was killing. The difference is that Kabuo doesn't seem to confuse race with nationality. The novel seems to suggest that somewhere America forgot that it was fighting another nation and not a race. Everyone agreed that Kabuo's trial is not about murder; it's about being Japanese.

Everyone seemed to really enjoy this series and is looking forward to next year.

Chris Hilton

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Ten of us met at the Albany County Public Library to discuss *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson. It was another great discussion; the two books we have read in this series so far have connected well with current issues and so have served as openings to good conversations about issues of prejudice and conflict.

I started the meeting by passing around the photo essay by Ansel Adams, etc., about Manzanar that Guterson mentions in his acknowledgment. I found the background on the original version of this book quite interesting (including the fact that at the time people were burning copies of it, which stands in contrast to the iconic way people view Adams today). I figured that Heart Mountain would be mentioned, so also brought in *The Heart Mountain Story: photographs* by Hansel Mieth and Otto Hagel of the World War II internment of Japanese Americans.

One of the other group leaders mentioned that her group found this story to be life-affirming. I asked this group if they felt that way, which brought up a wide variety of answers. We also talked about the possible symbolism of

Ishmael having lost his arm in the war, about his name, and about how the effects of the weather that takes place during the trial, the fact that this is set on an island, and the connections of the various characters to the land has on the story. I also asked what they thought Ishmael would do with his knowledge of the Coast Guard records, as well as about the meaning of the last paragraph.

We are on to *Tortilla Curtain* next. This fall, it will be a Ft. Collins Reads book, and the author will be there in early November (<http://www.fortcollinsreads.com/>), so I suspect a few from our group might head down there.

Kelly Grove

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After providing the group with some basic biographical information about the author, I shared a quotation from Guterson which I thought might help guide our discussion. In an interview, he said that he did not intend *Snow Falling on Cedars* to be a historical novel, a romance, a regional novel, a story of place, or a war story. Guterson said, "It was written primarily to explore and consider a basic philosophical question about the human condition. In a universe so indifferent to our fate, how best to endure, to go on?" We did not dwell unnecessarily on Guterson's intent, but we did return to this quotation a few times throughout our discussion.

I then asked what similarities readers saw between this novel and *House of Sand and Fog*. Again, we did not dwell on this topic, but some participants mentioned the clear presence of cultural fences and of characters sometimes resisting what they know is right.

Like other groups that have discussed this novel, we also talked about the Heart Mountain Relocation Center. There was a general consensus that Guterson accurately represented the treatment of Japanese-Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and life in the internment camps.

Our discussion then moved to the relationship between Hatsue and Ishmael. I think we all agreed that Hatsue never loved Ishmael the way he needed to be loved (although she clearly cared for him), but we were unable to agree on what role cultural differences played in that. Did her cultural upbringing prevent her from considering a non-Japanese man as a life partner? Does it matter?

Talking about Ishmael naturally brought us to the topics of war, loss, and silence. Carl Heine, Jr.'s silence is a result of his war experience, but that silence is fairly accepted because it is already a part of the ideal fisherman identity that represents the "good man" on the island. I asked the participants what problems silence causes in the novel. Of course Ishmael's silence about the records he found in the lighthouse nearly allows Kabuo to be wrongfully convicted of murder. It also seems that the people of the island remain fairly silent about the way prejudice and the effects of the war have kept them separate from each other. To me, that's why the scene in which Kabuo calls Carl a "Nazi bastard" is so powerful. Kabuo has said what no one else on the island will, and there seems to be a strange healing

and a connection between the characters in that moment. And it's that possibility of reconciliation and connection that makes Carl's death soon after even more tragic.

As we discussed the last two paragraphs of the novel, we returned to the quotation from Guterson which I had shared at the beginning. Guterson seems to be suggesting that we cannot control the cruel and random forces of nature and war, but that our responses to those, which we can control, should be moral and compassionate.

We covered other topics before ending with a general discussion of prejudice today and of the natural human tendency to categorize. Some participants felt that prejudice is very much alive and well today, even if it is not as overt as it was in the 1940s and 1950s; they said the only difference is in *who* is now labeled "the Other." One participant has lived overseas and has many Muslim friends, and she suggested Muslims are now the group facing prejudice that comes from fear and, perhaps, a sense of helplessness.

Overall, the group seemed to have enjoyed the novel, and the discussion was, as usual, lively and enlightening.

Jennifer Sheridan, Powell

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First, thanks to all of you who responded with helpful suggestions for book discussions. I always learn helpful techniques from our group of humanities scholars.

Seven people gathered at the new Lander addition to discuss Snow. I spent more time at the beginning than I usually do in order to discuss a) Manzanar and other internment camps, b) the history of Japanese immigration and the laws and orders that followed, including the apology of 1988, and c) Guterson's biography and subsequent novels. After that introduction everybody jumped in with comments on the structure of the book, themes, characters, and the importance of place. We discussed the impact of war, of loss, of land, and the time and place on the major, but also minor, characters. One member of our group brought up the unwillingness of men in general to talk about their feelings and we looked at the three central male characters in that regard. The beautifully drawn minor characters were appreciated. We loved Guterson's descriptions and while lengthy at times, how they helped to flesh out the story. As we are near the Wind River Indian Reservation, we talked about prejudice and racism and how more subtle, even institutionalized, racism is hard to combat. How do we overcome boundaries or fences that separate us?

We ended by declaring that we loved the mystery!

Barbara Gose Reading Wyoming Wyoming Humanities Council [www.uwyo.edu/humanities](http://www.uwyo.edu/humanities)

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I brought copies of *Manzanar* by Armor and Wright, with photographs by Ansel Adams, which includes a long

essay about the history of the internment by John Hershey, and gave the 8 member group a brief history of Executive order 9066 and its effects. Since we also had a camp in Wyoming, I passed around *The Heart Mountain Story: photographs by Hansel Mieth and Otto Hagel*. The images prompted some women to remember the internees who took up farming in Shell Valley after being released, becoming friendly neighbors. Even the oldest among us were surprised to learn some Japanese families in Worland lived there before the war, and drove the ninety miles to Heart Mountain, visiting and bringing helpful items. I pointed out a house in Manderson built around two barracks from the dismantled Heart Mountain camp. Others remembered German prisoners of war, imprisoned at the fairgrounds in Basin, helping to bring in the sugar beet harvest, and joining around the noon table.

As to the fictional names on San Piedro Island, someone quipped "There was enmity in Amity Harbor."

We wondered what the author wanted us to learn from the book. David Guterson said, "It was written primarily to explore and consider a basic philosophical question about the human condition. In a universe so indifferent to our fate, how best to endure, to go on?" When asked how his Japanese-Americans neighbors respond to their characterization in the book, Guterson says they were too polite to criticize it.

We ended with Pg 460 the last line. "Accident ruled every corner of the universe except the chambers of the human heart." Our group thought we cannot control the cruel and random forces of nature and war, but that our responses to those we can control should be moral and compassionate.

There is a long, interesting interview with the author on BBC  
[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/worldservice/wbc/wbc\\_20090209-1146a.mp3](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/worldservice/wbc/wbc_20090209-1146a.mp3)

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Eighteen people attended the group. As before, the discussion was lively, with the difference that everyone responded positively to this book. Unanimous approval does not always make for the liveliest interchanges, but discussion lasted a good two, energetic hours.

We began by discussing the issues of immigration generally, based on the issues raised in the book. It was clear that the island had been a land of immigrants from the beginning. This led to a discussion of why the Japanese immigrants remained separate and were not "melted" in the melting pot of the United States. People remarked that it was partly a matter of appearance, which led to a discussion of prejudice more generally, and raised the question of whether we, as a species, are hard wired to be suspicious and leery of those who look different. Added to this, we discussed the questions of culture, and whether it is possible to retain one's sense of self while adapting to a new culture. Opinions varied. Some maintained that everyone needs a core sense of

themselves that includes the culture of one's family and heritage, as well as of one's immediate environment. Others believed that it is better to have an amalgam of different cultures than a melting pot. That led to a vigorous discussion of how a culture should handle the issue of subcultures whose practices not only differ from those of the dominant culture but are in violation of it. Examples are the practice of child brides, or clitoral circumcision.

Two other central topics were the effects of war on individuals and societies. People noted the irony that Kabuo Miyamoto, who volunteered for the army, killed Germans, while the German, Carl Heine, killed Japanese, both for the American military. All the veterans were marked by the war, to their own detriment. That brought us back to the question of prejudice and its basis in fear. We discussed the human tendency to see what we fear in others when we do not understand. The best example was Kabuo's stoicism, which for him was a way of staying with his inner being, while for many of the American observers it was interpreted as arrogance and callousness. The stereotype of Japanese treachery and sneakiness came into the discussion, and several of the older participants recalled the fear and hysteria attending the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, which led to the internment camps. We discussed the ways that all these issues were played out in the relationships among the characters in the book.

We also spent some time discussing the presentation of the difference between American and Japanese culture, contrasting the importance of independence and individuality to the centrality of interdependence and community. Some questioned whether this distinction was based in reality or was a stereotype.

Finally, we commented on the title and its symbolic implications of burden, weight, beauty, cold and danger. Someone observed that the cedar started as a refuge, for Ishmael and Katsue, but in the end there was no refuge for anyone. As a footnote, we made the connection between this Ishmael and the Ishmael of Moby Dick - both of them observers and survivors, damaged but alive.

As always, the discussion wove between personal experience, the book, and contemporary political, moral and social issues.

Stephen Lottridge

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Lincoln County Library - Kemmerer  
April 16, 2013

Five people from Kemmerer, including myself, came together despite the spring storms last Tuesday evening to discuss David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*. I started off by providing some background information on the author, including his deep connection with the northwest, his love of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the fact that his father is a defense attorney, and his belief that literature should present readers with moral questions to ponder. The discussants could definitely see how *To Kill a Mockingbird* influenced the framework of the trial in *Snow*

*Falling on Cedars* and found it interesting that the author's father served as the inspiration for the Nels Gudmundsson character.

We discussed the structure of the novel and how the author builds the trial slowly and deliberately, withholding certain information for a time and providing a rich backstory in the form of flashbacks. Most of the group really enjoyed this approach, agreeing that it functioned to illustrate the influence of the past on the present, though one attendee felt it was a little hard to follow. The group talked about the metaphoric role of the snowstorm on the story and the struggle between free will and chance - the snowstorm representing the uncontrollable incidents that affect the lives of the people on San Piedro. So many of the events in the book are a result of chance - Carl happens to be killed, Kabuo happens to be in the area that night, etc.

The group was able to identify the "fences" that played a role in the story, mainly prejudice and silence, which are similar to the barriers faced by the characters in both *Tortilla Curtain* and *House of Sand and Fog*. The Japanese-American community and the members of the white community can't seem to understand each other, nor do they seem to try, other than a few more enlightened characters. In Kabuo's trial, the white community views his calm, unreadable demeanor as suspicious and cold; however, in Japanese culture, that sort of demeanor is more suggestive of strength and innocence. Silence also serves as a barrier - other than Etta Heine, the people of San Piedro are very quiet about their prejudice - the fears and suspicions and dislike simmers beneath the surface. That is what made the conversation between Carl and Kabuo on the boat the night of Carl's death so poignant and interesting.

The topic of prejudice led to a discussion of WWII, Manzanar, and Heart Mountain. One attendee in particular had strong memories of this time and the pervasiveness of anti-Japanese sentiment. He stated that "The U.S. government was very good at spreading anti-Japanese propaganda". Another discussant reminded us that a couple of Japanese-Americans from our own community were actually confined at Heart Mountain during the war. We questioned why the fear and hatred was so focused on the Japanese-Americans and not the German-American community since we were at war with Germany as well. One person suggested it was because the Japanese-Americans *looked* different but another attendee argued that it was likely because Japan had actually attacked America and Germany had not.

Other items we discussed included how Ishmael's love for Hatsue seemed to us more of an infatuation than the real thing, how Ishmael was always compared to his father but never felt he was up to the task, how the war had changed Kabuo, Carl, and Ishmael, how much we loathed Etta's outright hate and racism, our favorite characters of the story (Nels Gudmundsson, Helen Chambers, and Hatsue Imada), how the very detailed descriptions of the environment of San Piedro made us feel as though we were there in person, and how Kabuo's guilt over the people he had killed in the war made him feel as though

the trial and his possible death was some sort of punishment he deserved.

Finally, the group talked about the final paragraph of the book, deciding that the author was simply pointing out that things happen in life that are beyond our control and that the only thing we can do is choose the way we react – hopefully with love and reason. Everyone present very much enjoyed this book and felt it was the perfect finale to our series. We also enjoyed a delicious treat of strawberries and cream during our meeting, which was kindly provided by one of the attendees – very fitting to the book we were discussing! We are all looking forward to next year!

–Leanna Flaherty

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Three of us gathered at Eastern Wyoming College to discuss *Snow Falling On Cedars*. All of us were quite taken with this book; it manages to be both a page-turner and an exposition of a certain moment in American history seen through the telescope of a particular location. We appreciated the sheer amount of researched knowledge that Guterson brought to the text. The internment of Japanese Americans was an issue in the local area, as there was a substantial population of Japanese Americans in eastern Wyoming / western Nebraska that were similarly affected. We compared the hysteria at the time concerning the loyalty of Japanese American citizens with the current worries that many people currently seem to have about the loyalty of Muslim Americans. We identified a major difference between now and then, namely, the nation-state of Japan was America's open and formally declared enemy after Pearl Harbor, and we brought total war to that nation, up to and including the firebombing of major cities and of course the atomic bombs; whereas, despite what some bumper stickers would have you believe, we are not currently "at war" with the religion of Islam. The identity of Muslim Americans are often tied up with other regional, linguistic and national identities, as well, making the situation a good deal different in that respect, too. All of us though, too, that there was simply no way that Americans would countenance the widespread internment of a massive group of American citizens on the basis of their religion, as Japanese Americans were interred on the basis of their nationality at that time. At least, we hope so.

We agreed that had *Snow Falling On Cedars* been merely about the internment of Japanese Americans, it wouldn't have been nearly as strong a book, but tying up the plot with the story of a little plot of seven acres of strawberry ground made all the characters, even the bad ones, a lot more human. We thought of how Etta Heine, Carl's mother, scrupulously sent the Miyamoto family the sum total of their payments on the strawberry ground, an act of honesty that she didn't necessarily have to do, considering that the Miyamotos were interned in the desert at the time and could have done nothing had she decided to keep the money, but then after that at least honest act, instantly turned around and sold the farm out from under them. This while her son was off fighting the war, too. She wanted the money, she wanted the security, she never really wanted

to be a strawberry farmer's wife. We didn't think Guterson was as successful in drawing the human out of all his characters (I, for one, am not entirely sure, that he got past the "inscrutable Asian" stereotype of Kabuo Miyamoto, despite a few inner monologues), but in general he succeeded a human portrait of a remarkably diverse array of characters. It was interesting, too, how the immigrant status of the Japanese families was never in question, even to themselves (see the Alien Land Act), but other recent immigrants, such as the Heine family, never had their status similarly questioned. But it never seemed to occur to any of the characters at the time to question this; whites had unquestioned rights to the land; Asians did not.

We also drew a bit of a parallel from *Snow Falling on Cedars* to *Grapes of Wrath*. Some of the descendants of the Okies who showed up penniless in California in the Great Depression are today some of the biggest and wealthiest landowners in the Central Valley. The Japanese immigrants showed up the island in similarly humble circumstances, and we speculated that these days they are likely the big landowners on that island, as well. Perseverance and thrift ultimately bear fruit, even if it takes a generation or two.

One of the participants had seen the movie made out of the book, and reported that it was pretty good, although not nearly as good as the book (isn't that nearly always the case). But it is nonetheless a testament to the power of the story *Snow Falling on Cedars* tells that it received major Hollywood attention. Overall a highly enjoyable read. –Court Merrigan

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Nine of us gathered at Guernsey-Sunrise High School on Oct. 13 to discuss *Snow Falling On Cedars*. Suffice it to say that this one was a bigger hit than last month's book, *House of Sand & Fog*. We all enjoyed this book for its dual nature, being both a murder mystery and a social statement, all while having the virtue of being packed to the gills with artful sentences. We compared the happenings with the Japanese internment camp with what happened in our great state at Heart Mountain; a number of the participants had heard stories of those times directly from folks who were involved, and we all agreed it was a shame on our nation's heritage, somewhat ironic considering that FDR, who signed the executive order consigned tens of thousands of Japanese-descent persons (including children and many, many citizens), is now thought to be a great liberal. We wondered if the today's federal government would be able to pull off such a thing today and concluded, thankfully, that it would not, recent tempests surrounding illegal immigration and so on notwithstanding.

As with *House of Sand & Fog*, at its heart *Snow Falling On Cedars* is a book about what might be our very oldest - a dispute over land. Historical events had an effect on that 7-acre patch of strawberry-growing ground, of course, but a good deal of the book's conflict boiled down to a tension over who owns what, and how. We also reflected on how so many of the soldiers returning from WW II would today likely be classified as having PTSD, something that was



poorly understood at the time, although several of the participants remember returning veterans from that era being thought of as having "shell shock," which was often the reason cited for bizarre or antisocial behavior. We wondered what effect that PTSD would have had on the characters who fought in the war, and what subtle ways it effected them.

We also appreciated the multiple perspectives from which the story was told, and we reflected on the skillful rendering of a character who we learn is dead in the very first pages of the book, yet by its end, we feel we know him very well, based on the experiences that other people had with him. Our group also appreciated the relatively uplifting ending, whereby the main characters is able to achieve redemption, and to go on with his life. This sort of ending is in relatively short supply in books of this type, that have extensive literary aspirations, and I think the general feeling in the room was that it might be better if there were more such books, in that sense. On the whole, *Snow Falling on Cedars* was well-received and shown a light on aspects of the WW II-era experience that are otherwise not often explicated. Court Merrigan

## **Tortilla Curtain**

Seventeen readers gathered to discuss our third novel in the "Fences" series. I opened with a biography of Boyle and the role played by *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and *Faulkner's Light in August*.

Then I asked for comments about the book and this led immediately to a discussion of the humor, or lack thereof, in the book. Some saw humor, others did not. The group liked the fact that we had the stories told from all four of the characters' point of view. We talked about the coyote, both from an environmental standpoint and as metaphor. I had read in an interview with the author that Boyle believes that Delaney's profession as a nature writer is not fully understood. While nature writers are liberal in general, they are, according to Boyle, conservative about population growth and see it as the great problem for the future of civilization. Thus the fear of the great flood of immigrants.

As we examined Delaney coming unhinged, we talked about the safety to be found in cars, in order and routine (the breakfast ritual which disintegrates with the taking of the dogs and later the watch on the wall for the graffiti artists), and in the very invisibility of the Mexicans. I commented that Boyle decided to write this novel as he was trying to figure out his own views on the immigration dilemma. We discussed whether or not he had an agenda or a viewpoint and decided he did not. Individuals talked about their own contact with immigrants and how we in Wyoming would react compared to Phoenix or Las Angeles populations where illegal immigrant numbers are much larger. It is easy for us to sit in isolated areas and judge. But as we looked at Jackson Hole, we saw the immigrant plight in a different light. Where is housing to be found? How does a Mexican immigrant deal with the weather? While the book was bleak, the consensus was that it was very much worth reading.

At the end a reader commented that he liked the book better after our discussion and had changed his mind about its worth. We are all thinking a lot about fences.....

Barbara Gose  
Reading Wyoming  
Wyoming Humanities Council

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Tongue River Library  
October 27, 2008  
13 Participants

I began this time by letting the group talk first. I asked each person to make a comment relating to the novel – anything that struck them in any way.

Interestingly, the first speaker told us a story about an experience she and her husband had had with a Mexican illegal who appeared "out of nowhere" at their ranch here in Northern Wyoming. She related the experience and the people to some in the novel. This opened the door to a lot of discussion about the immigrant issues in our country – issues we all agreed were terribly complicated. Other people talked about the strong sense of place the novel evoked; one person said she felt like she could go and find the place where Candido and America camped if she were in that part of California. Comments were made about the characters and the juxtaposition of points-of-view and what effect that has on readers. We all felt the most sympathy for the Mexican girl who was victimized by everyone and by her own culture. We talked about the irony how Delaney sees himself as a liberal humanist and preaches that philosophy contrasted to his behavior. He was, admittedly like many of us, able to buy into the theory of humanism as long as he wasn't really personally tested. Eventually, driven by fear and frustration, he blames the Mexicans for everything just as his neighbors do. Boyle does a good job of showing the progressive growing fear of "aliens" in our midst and, we felt, forces us all to examine our own attitudes. The novel is fraught with ironies and we had a good time exploring them. The tie to "fences" and "borders" is obvious on many levels and the group got into that. I ended by telling them some of the background on T.C. Boyle and the themes that pervade most of his writing, especially black humor and his interest in the vacuity of the American Dream. I explained about his sense of human beings as remaining essentially primitive, in spite of the "advances" of civilization, easily resorting to the predator of prey notion. I find this book almost as painful as *House of Sand and Fog*, mostly just for the downward spiral that occurs through fate and circumstances to essentially "regular" people.

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Nine of us braved the elements last night (blowing snow, icy streets, high wind warning) to discuss *Tortilla Curtain* at the Niobrara County Library. Given that there were other events going on, this was a good group. The text sparked many comments, and discussion began all by itself. I had done no introductory comments or suggested

no directions when the group began to exchange ideas. And as others seem to have discovered, the book elicits either a difficulty to finish the text or complete eagerness to get it read.

There certainly seemed to be no middle ground. All found the text to be depressing, but for various reasons. Some found the events and characters to be completely depressing, while others suggested the idea of “man’s inhumanity to man” and the bleak outlook for any solutions or redemption contributed to the negative feeling of the novel. There was discussion of the significance of the baby—blindness and death—Delaney’s character changes, the nature of Mexico, the hardness of life, the symbolism of the wall and walls in general, and finally that there are no sympathetic characters. It generally seemed that all felt the reading of *Tortilla Curtain* was worthwhile, but all generally agreed glad to be done with it. While discussion was lively for a while, discussion tended to fall off quickly and not lead to greater depth.

All in all, an interesting evening but an unusual discussion.

Wayne G. Deahl  
Division Chair: Arts, Humanities, Social & Behavioral  
Sciences  
Eastern Wyoming College

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Hello Everyone,  
We met last Tuesday night in Baggs (Nov. 25th) to discuss our last book for this season, *Tortilla Curtain* by T. C. Boyle. There were eight of us, and we had a most interesting discussion. The group is composed of good readers and energetic debaters, so they began by discussing a way to continue reading and discussing for the rest of the winter, coming up with books that would work for studying western history. I was so pleased the attitude wasn’t just pleasure that we were finishing! I’m going to try to come up to Baggs to participate in the discussions for winter, if the weather just cooperates.

This series of books on fences and boundaries has been well-liked. The *Work of Wolves* was unanimously popular with everyone who came to the discussion; most people really enjoyed *Snow Falling on Cedars*. The *House of Sand and Fog*, with its style bifurcation between narrators and the inexorably sad ending, was not as well loved. But it was respected! However, just about everyone enjoyed *Tortilla Curtain* and found the characters believable and enjoyable. We discussed the symbolism of *Candido* and America’s names, and the difficulty of their situation. Readers’ hearts bled for them: everything they tried failed, and they were so hard-working and optimistic, just wanting to get an apartment. Their goal should have been realistic, yet the group agreed that their plight was convincing and moving. People were more divided in their feelings about Delaney, the yuppie eco-journalist. His actions seemed contradictory and uncentered at times. We discussed the obstacles limiting the Mexican illegal immigrants and the various fences they tried so hard to cross with such little success.

I gave some background on T. C. Boyle, aka T. Corghessian Boyle (the name used for his short stories in lit anthologies), who gave himself the middle name Corghessian when he was 17, and has reduced it, later in life, to T. C. So many of us need to trim or tidy up or reduce or paint in positive paint the things we did at 17!

Besides discussing characters and themes, we talked about plot. I asked the readers whether they felt the plot was excessively governed by coincidence – there are lots of coincidences in the novel – and if that impaired with the novel’s effectiveness. Most agreed that there were indeed many coincidences, but felt that it hadn’t bothered them, they had found the novel successful anyway.

As I was reading the last disastrous plot turn, based on a calamitous fire breaking out, driving everyone in Delaney’s neighborhood from their homes immediately after celebrating Thanksgiving, and almost administering the coup de grace to America and *Candido*, I briefly thought to myself for a minute, “contrived and unconvincing,” then realized it was a week before Thanksgiving, and the story all over newspapers and TV news featured the fire in southern California driving people from homes. Contrived and unconvincing? No, rather it was Thanksgiving in California, per usual.

Sincerely,  
Mary Karen Solomon

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The Rock Springs group met in the Hay Library at Western Wyoming Community College on Friday, September 7 at noon to discuss *The House of Sand and Fog*. Including myself, thirteen women attended the discussion. We seemed to agree that the novel was exceptionally well-written and “authentic”, but quite depressing.

One woman stated that this was the “best book” she’d read for the Reading Wyoming series. She was particularly intrigued by the changing view point from Kathy Nicolo to Colonel Behrani. Someone else stated that the mixture of characters is amazing and richly detailed. We all agreed that the changing first-person narrative contributed to the clash of cultures which was evident in the novel. The characters clearly do not understand one another and make assumptions about each other. Kathy and Les assume that the Behranis are wealthy-but they don’t know this house is his last effort to keep the family finances sound. Colonel Behrani calls Kathy a “whore”, and is annoyed by her haunting presence in his life-but he evaluates her from his own perspective as an Iranian man, rather than seeing her as a human being.

We also discussed how Colonel Behrani keeps the truth of his life from his wife and daughter, in particular. He leaves the house every day dressed as a business man, but then changes for his job with the highway department and again for his work at the convenience store. It seems that appearances are so important that Behrani is willing to make sacrifices that some of us would consider huge. It was clearly important to the Behranis to “keep up appearances” for the sake of marrying their daughter into a nice Iranian family. When the girl and her in-laws come

to visit the Behranis at the home in Corona, the Colonel can see the disappointment in his daughter's face. It makes him angry-but he is the one who has kept her in the dark for the last several years. She expected something more because that's what she's been led to believe.

Kathy and Lester make an interesting couple. Several people said that it seemed Kathy was a "less sympathetic" character because she had admitted to having a drug and alcohol problem and appeared irresponsible by not opening her mail. On the other hand, she avoids cocaine (and alcohol at the beginning of the book), and perhaps she hasn't been opening her mail because of her despondent state-her husband just left her. Lester seems to go too far in trying to care for troubled women. We talked about his one illegal act of planting evidence at the home of a man who was beating his wife. Lester wanted to save this woman. He also wants to save Kathy, and volunteers to help her move out of her house when she says she has no one to turn to. Several days later she tells him that she's living in her car, so he buys her a hotel room. The situation grows more intense from there on out.

We agreed that Kathy and Lester have moments of "insanity", and alcohol use only makes it worse. When she's sitting alone at the fishing cabin, Kathy thinks that Lester isn't coming back, so she begins drinking heavily and then heads up to the house in Corona. One of our group members, a recovered alcoholic, shared that when you are in this "alcoholic state" you feel you have no bargaining power, you're at a loss, with no hope. This must have been how Kathy felt as she sat in her car in the Behrani's driveway and tried to shoot herself in the chest. She must have still felt that hopelessness when she took all of Nadi's Halcion pills. By the end of this scene, the Behranis have saved Kathy's life twice, but when Lester arrives to see Kathy on the floor and his gun on the kitchen counter, he jumps to the conclusion that they have harmed her and runs to her defense.

Throughout the last chapters Lester realizes several times the new charges that will be brought against him, but he continues down this path until it is really too late. By the time he comes up with the plan for him and Kathy to go to Canada, he knows he's in too deep. And Kathy still just wants her house back. Still, we decided that Lester wasn't all bad. After all, when he's questioned by the police, he admits to everything-and he could have tried to deny it all. Throughout the novel the Colonel has been a character that we disliked, in general-but he's really done nothing wrong to anyone. He purchased the home legally and with no deceit; however, Esmail tells him that he should have given the house back to Kathy. After Esmail's death we feel some sympathy for the Colonel, who is shattered by his loss and tries to win his son's life back with a Nazr to his god. It is now that he says he should give the house back to Kathy-and money on top of it-in order to erase this mess.

As I read this amazing novel, I often turned to the front cover to ponder the title of the book. I knew there had to be something there, but I just couldn't figure it out. Here I must give credit to recently retired English Professor and discussion participant Karen Love. She connected the title

to a famous verse from the Bible, which says something like "Don't build your house upon the sand." Karen explained that this was the house of sand because the characters had no rock or solid ground on which to stand-all their lives were in a state of upheaval. This is the house of fog because of their lack of clear vision. The "fog" clouds judgement and prevents understanding. Wow. What a thoughtful analysis.

We enjoyed meeting and discussing this month. We look forward to talking about *Snow Falling on Cedars* in next month's discussion.

Dianna Renz

I started with some background on T. C. Boyle. When I said he was noted for his bleak vision and black humor, the group almost as a whole declared that they saw NO humor, black or otherwise, in the novel. Many seemed to find it unremittingly bleak. We talked a bit about black humor, how it's used and what the intended effect is and then went into a discussion of the novel itself. Some of the questions we considered were as follows:

- How is Delaney an ironic portrait? How does he see himself? How does the reader see him? How does Boyle seem to feel about Kyra and Delaney?
- The novel is fraught with ironies. What are some other ones? Think about fences and walls and borders.
- How can we characterize Candido and his wife, America? Does Boyle idealize the Mexican immigrants or present a more complicated view?
- What is Boyle saying about contemporary America? Can we see ourselves at all in this novel?
- What view of humanity does the novel suggest?
- Is there anything affirming in the novel?
- Where do we see Boyle's penchant for research? Did you learn anything?

I was a bit taken aback by the vehemence some of the group expressed about the novel. Some felt it to totally exaggerated in terms of character (stereotypes, they said) and plot. On the other hand, others defended it on both accounts. We also had a pretty heated discussion about immigration. We agreed that the issue was almost hopelessly complex and that Boyle did illustrate that. Even those who were frustrated with the book had to admit it was compelling. I had to admit that (against all my principles) toward the end of the novel, I couldn't stand it anymore and had to read the ending before I got to it. The book seems to elicit strong reactions, one way or the other, which makes for good discussion.

Norleen Healy  
Story Library

October 3, 2007  
15 participants

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We had a small but intensely interested group for this discussion. Some people enjoyed the book, others hated it. Discussion revolved around several issues:

- (1) the likeability of the characters. Even though the characters were not likeable, the reader could relate to their difficulties and see their point of view.
- (2) the shifting of the story to the conflict between Col. Behrani and Lester and how each one's cultural biases -- "fences," if you will -- prevented him from seeing the situation clearly. Both of them were shown in the role of taking care of their women. Kathy was shoved to the side of the story even though the original conflict was between her and Behrani over the house.
- (3) All of the main characters seemed to be driven by fear and used rationalizations to account for their actions.
- (4) the author's purpose in writing the book wasn't clear to us. We agreed that it was an intriguing premise for a story (could that really happen?, someone wondered), but it didn't accomplish anything except perhaps to convince the reader that "life sucks" (an actual quote from the discussion). There was no redemption, no change in any of the characters, no hope.

Finally, we considered alternative endings for the story. A mediator could have been called in to resolve the problem, or at the end, Kathy could have gone into treatment again and been reconciled with her family. We agreed that if Kathy had died, the county would have done nothing to rectify the situation.

Barbara Allen Bogart

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The Newcastle group met on April 15, 2009, in the Weston County Library meeting room. Twelve members gathered to discuss T. C. Boyle's The Tortilla Curtain.

Our lively discussion for this session centered more on immigration, illegal aliens, the current situation in Mexico, the United States' response to trouble anywhere in the world...and our "need" to fix things everywhere. We tracked this tendency throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and into today's activities in Iraq and Afghanistan. We avoided discussing politics, but we had many participants who had traveled internationally and were able to share observations based on their experiences.

One of our participants had just returned from a trip to the Southwest, so she shared what the border area is like. She talked about the futility of a wall being built...illegals will just tunnel under it. She talked about being stopped by the police and having her vehicle thoroughly searched, despite her opinion that her family could not look less threatening. And, she talked about how times have changed since she first visited that area decades ago.

When we discussed the book, we were especially interested in the main characters...their development and their contrasts. There are many parallels in the story, such as the contrast between the wealthy couple trying to protect what they have, and the illegal immigrants struggling to survive. We found Delaney to be the most interesting...not a stock character, but one who is a thinker. We noted the ironic relationship between Delaney and Cándido, from opening to closing scenes.

We discussed symbols, such as the "tortilla curtain" and the coyote. We discussed themes, like the physical walls being built and the figurative walls dividing people, as well as pursuit of the American Dream. We also looked at an interview of the author that presented his perspective on the book's themes, his approach to writing, and his take on California's unique place in the illegal immigrant struggle...including Proposition 187 and the reference to John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath at the beginning of the book. We noted that a movie of the book is due out in 2010, starring Kevin Costner and Meg Ryan.

Phyl Sundstrom, Newcastle

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The first half of our discussion focused on the first chapter because it sets up the relationships and character conflicts that persist throughout the novel. We spent the majority of that discussion gaining insight about Delaney's character and his reaction to the accident involving Candido. Most agreed that Delaney's response to hitting Candido with his car is unusual. One person argued that Delaney lacks human compassion and reacts the way he does because Candido is an illegal immigrant. For most, this incident would be a life-changing experience, but Delaney takes \$20 out of his wallet and gives it to Candido and continues on with his errands, dumping his recyclables. Late in the first chapter Delaney begins to think about his liberal-humanist ideals, but never fully admits that he missed a golden opportunity to express them. Conversely, Candido, after being hit by Delaney's car, uses the accident as an opportunity to gain a few dollars from Delaney. Rather than a trip to the hospital, Candido merely rubs his fingers together and says, "muneee." We had some discussion about whether this action is extortion, and ultimately, did not come to any real conclusion. However, we did come to a consensus that these two characters are far from perfect, and one gentleman even went as far as describing Candido as a "loser."

The next aspect of our discussion turned to the lives of the two families in the novels: Candido and America (mother of his child, not the country) and Delaney and Kyra. Both families face struggles, which seem to revolve around the theme of surviving in America. Although Kyra and Delaney live in a posh neighborhood, they still have their struggles. For instance, they would like to upgrade their home, but cannot for various reasons. Candido and America likewise have their struggles. They are mainly fighting to survive and must brave society and the elements to do so.

One discussion that was enlightening was our discussion of the wall that is being built around Kyra and Delaney's

neighborhood. Most in the group thought it was timely because of the discussion of walls, here and there, along the U.S. border. This brought us to a small discussion about xenophobia or a fear of a specific group of people.

There were a few aspects of the novel that we did not discuss but would have been worthwhile. For instance, at one point, America (the character) is raped by two men, while she is pregnant. This gruesome scene could be viewed as a metaphor; however, we did not discuss the implications of immigrants raping America (the country) and what Boyle intended with that scene. Overall, it was a successful discussion where participants recognized key moments in the text and many of the primary arguments the novel makes.

Chris Hilton

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Usually I start discussions with a bit of biographical information about the author, but this time I immediately asked each group member to talk about something that he or she found interesting or discussion-worthy. Almost more than usual, then, our discussion jumped around, so this summary is not particularly chronological, nor is it inclusive of every topic we touched on.

One topic of discussion was the realism of the novel and of the characters. Group members familiar with the plight of some Mexican immigrants, particularly illegal immigrants, thought the situations in which Cándido and América found themselves were very believable; no one seemed to think the novel was too full of coincidence or contrived situations. I think everyone agreed that Boyle created deep sympathy for the Rincóns, despite their flaws (well, Cándido's flaws, really). There seemed to be disagreement about the realism of Delaney and Kyra and about whether or not Boyle conveyed excessive contempt for them. Some group members found the Mossbachers to be realistic, while others thought they were stereotypes. It didn't seem that anyone had *sympathy* for the Mossbachers, but we were able to connect to them through their hypocrisy. We discussed the discrepancy between Delaney's perception of himself, or his ideal self, and his real self. How many of us find difficulty living up to our expectations for ourselves? How many of us are willing to recognize the painful discrepancy between who we think we are and who we come across as through our actions?

We also talked about the difficulty—or perhaps impossibility—of emotionally distancing ourselves from this novel. Some group members talked about the unpleasantness of the depth of connection they felt to this novel. We talked about how these feelings come, at least in part, from the fact that we are implicated in a very direct way in this novel—in so much as it is a critique of the excesses of the lifestyle of many Americans. Group members really got a kick out of the fact that T.C. Boyle is obviously wealthy, living in a Frank Lloyd Wright house in Santa Barbara. Maybe Boyle finds it as difficult as Delaney does to really act on his ideals.

The ending was a topic of energetic discussion, one to which we returned more than once during the evening. One group member insisted that it would be impossible for Cándido to successfully rescue Delaney from the rushing water; he would try and fail. The rest of us found no evidence in the text to support this; most of us thought Cándido would save Delaney. There was some discussion of what might or should happen after that. But most of our discussion revolved around whether the ending left us with a feeling of hope or of despair.

As we talked about the ending, we also wondered: What's the solution? Is there one? Boyle presents us with no solution to the problems associated with illegal immigration. I was apparently the pessimist of the group, saying that, even if Delaney establishes a connection with Cándido and helps him get a job, and the Rincóns live happily ever after, we're talking about a problem that affects millions of people. The participants were quick to argue that real change happens on a personal level; we must each reach out to the open hand in front of us, as Cándido did. Oh, if only there were more people in the world like there are in this discussion group! What a wonderful group of individuals!

Jennifer Sheridan, Powell

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Twelve of us met at the Albany County Public Library to discuss *The Tortilla Curtain*. I started the discussion by asking for a moment from the book that really stood out, for whatever reason (liked it, hated it, found really disturbing, etc.). Other questions I asked included: did you want a clearer ending/solution from the book; what does this book say about the American Dream; what is the purpose of *Dom Flood*; did you like getting the story from four different voices and did you think they were all equally represented; and did you feel like you got to know the characters? This book had a strong effect on people, for various reasons. Some found it too realistic, while others found themselves questioning their role in society and worrying about being too much like Kyra and Delaney. I used the Penguin Reading Guide interview with Boyle when we talked about the significance of the title and the ending ([http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/tortilla\\_curtain.html](http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/tortilla_curtain.html)).

This book fostered a really good discussion, again about quite timely issues. Even though the books in the series have brought up really difficult and emotional topics, and are books that many in the group admitted to being ones they never would have picked out on their own, everyone always comments on how glad they were to have read them. I really like the series as well, especially in thinking about the connection between such seemingly disparate books over the concept of the house and the ways this has played out in each book.

Kelley Grove

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*Tortilla Curtain* is our third book in the *Fences* series and the seven women who gathered to discuss it lamented

that we are nearing the end of this series. They all agreed that this is the best series yet, full of topical themes, strong writing, and well drawn characters.

The group was so glad to have read this book, painful as it is. I began by providing information about T.C. Boyle's life. We veered off immediately into a discussion of his latest book, *The Women*, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Dragging us back to the topic at hand, I mentioned that this very week Ft. Collins is using Tortilla Curtain for its "everyone reads" event and Boyle will speak. Alas, it's not as if we could go across town to hear him! We spent most of our discussion time on the characters, especially Delaney. By talking our way through the novel we examined his systematic loss of control. In this regard I am indebted to a scholarly review on the subject of "whiteness." The reviewer argues that Delaney's fear is of the loss of his constructed life. It's not a racial fear so much as a loss of what it means to be white, power, privilege, and above all, control. We looked at environmentalism. Again, I am in debt to a critique that maintained that environmentalists like Delaney are liberal in all areas EXCEPT immigration, for excessive numbers will despoil the environment. The image of the coyote and its dual meaning in the novel came in for a good discussion. Kyra and America were discussed, especially in terms of America's rape versus the confrontation with Jose Navidad and his partner. Certainly, Kyra was "penetrated" via the invasion of her coveted home. We didn't do much with the political topic of immigration, except to point out how it has taken a back seat in the current political debate. Lander readers are insightful; several pointed out that our economy impacts illegal immigration and that financial support is being sent from Mexico to Mexican immigrants living here. Inevitably, we turned our attention to our Indian population and how, for some of them, their situation is both similar and different from the problems faced by California illegal immigrants. We look forward to our last discussion. Barbara Gose

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As expected, this book about the clash between Mexican immigrants and landed Anglos in a gated community in California, engendered a lively discussion for the 11 participants.

Many had watched the video links I had sent earlier of interviews with the author.

Here are a few video interviews with Boyle. I suggested if they were to watch only one, to watch the tour of the Frank Lloyd Wright house in which the author resides, built in 1909, in Montecito, near Santa Barbara, 88 miles north of Topanga Canyon, the setting of *The Tortilla Curtain*. His wife and three children, have restored the house.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fH\\_XNEFj\\_Rk&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fH_XNEFj_Rk&feature=related)

Boyle talking about book *The Women* about Frank Lloyd Wright

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esCo7R8QL7w&feature=related>

Boyle talks about writing at USC, including a comment about his story liberating turkeys at Hedda Gobblers

Turkey Farm. Boyle commutes to USC where he teaches writing.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jj1Q1BwsZ4I>

Tom Boyle, who did not have books in the house, is from a working class background, so he haunted his public library. He was born Thomas John Boyle, and made up a new middle name Coraghessan from his Irish heritage.

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Twelve people attended this discussion. The discussion was impassioned and lively, with many disagreements. Parts of the discussion were dominated by one person, herself a former writer, who kept insisting that it is a badly written book. That, of course, led to considerable heat but relatively little light. Many of the participants had excellent observations to make, however, so the discussion ended up being generally productive.

We began with a discussion of the issue of immigration generally, and then hispanic immigration specifically. This led us to a perennial theme, the question of whether we are hard-wired to be suspicious of those who are different from us. Many people made subtler observations, however, about the issue of numbers, education, language, financial status, material affluence and other "fences" that influence how we respond to the "other." Part of the reason that this discussion was so heated, I think, is that the issue is before us today. We are living it in the present in a way that most of us are not living the issue of Japanese immigration around WWII or Iranian immigration after the fall of the Shah, the topics of the other two books we have read so far.

We discussed many of the ironies in the book, including the fact that the Mexican woman is named America, and the man Candido; that Delaney has Pilgrim on his license plate and uses the word in his columns for magazines, yet he is far from a pilgrim with his expensive cars and exclusive community; that the first "Pilgrims" were just that - religious pilgrims - and that they were completely undocumented immigrants. We noted the Biblical resonance in the birth of the baby in the shed, with the animal (cat), because there was "no room for them in the inn," and the destruction by fire and water, with its Biblical reference. While one person objected to these symbolic resonances as a cheap way to make a novel "serious," others felt that they gave a richness to the story. That led to the question of whether we would recognize a savior in the modern world, or simply see her/him as a dirty, uneducated intruder.

We discussed the idea of the book as satire, and talked about the necessary typing of figures in satire, as compared to the more elaborated character development in non-satiric fiction. Despite the typing of the characters, some people could identify with Delaney to some extent, with his desire to be open and liberal, but his abstract view of humanity and his final rage as his view of the world slips away from him. All the walls and fences come down in the end, and the "enemies" end up together in the flood that smashes the barriers. We also talked some about the artificiality of fences in the sense of political boundaries or walled-off areas. And we identified the many ways that people on opposite sides of the fences mistake each

others' motives and intentions, and make assumptions based on ignorance and fear. Finally, we discussed the dangers of grouping people by national origin. Hispanics prey on each other, as do the anglos in the gated communities. There are no monoliths.

Stephen Lottridge

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Lincoln County Library - Kemmerer

January 22, 2013

Six people from the Kemmerer community met last Tuesday evening to discuss T.C. Boyle's Tortilla Curtain, the book we chose to read first in the *Living Between the Fences* series. I had prepared some talking points ahead of time and started off the discussion by asking the group how they felt about Boyle's approach to telling the story through the individual perspectives of each of the four main characters portrayed in the novel. All seemed to agree that this approach allowed us to get to know the characters more intimately, or, as one person put it, it was as though we were "looking into the thoughts and dirty little souls" of the characters. We then moved on to discuss the likeability of the characters. Delaney was unanimously disliked, as was Kyra. Some had mixed feelings regarding Cándido due to his "machismo" and his occasional mistreatment of América. Overall, the group seemed to have the most sympathy for América. Most felt she suffered the most and had the truest heart, though one person thought that it seemed like she had not married Cándido out of love, which made her appear to be an opportunist. This led one group member to suggest that perhaps none of the characters were entirely sympathetic - all were flawed - but "even flawed people deserve basic human respect and dignity", referring in particular to the struggles of the Rincóns. The discussion of the characters centered around Delaney, for the most part, who all disliked for his apparent hypocrisy and weakness. Delaney claims to be a "liberal humanist" and yet his behavior does not reflect this philosophy. He idealizes nature and the environment and yet his lifestyle is that of a wealthy, sheltered yuppie. The attendees were disgusted by his treatment of Cándido after he hit him with his car and one person argued that people showed more emotion after hitting a dog than Delaney did after hitting a man. In fact, he seemed more concerned with himself than of Cándido. In comparing the two male characters, all felt that Cándido was the better man.

The group also spent a good deal of time discussing Delaney's descent into near madness. Delaney seemed very isolated in some ways and was lacking in social skills. He is also very attached to his routine, which seemed to give him a sense of control, and when it started falling apart he started falling apart as well and couldn't adapt to the changes around him. Delaney is battling with what he sees as his ideals and with his growing fear/hate of Mexican illegal immigrants and this continues to feed his guilt over how he treated Cándido. He blames Cándido for his problems (graffiti on the wall, the fire, etc.) as an escape from his own guilt and to justify his own bad

behavior towards him. One member of the group pointed out that it was pathetic how Delaney was "losing it" due to his comparatively small misfortunes - if anyone had the right to go crazy it was Cándido, (or América) who worked so hard and who asked for relatively little and yet was constantly met with failure and tragedy.

Eventually, I steered the group toward a discussion of all the different "fences" or boundaries that play such an enormous role in the book. The more obvious boundaries were debated, such as the "tortilla curtain" between the U.S. and Mexico and the gate and wall being constructed at Arroyo Blanco, but other types of boundaries were also addressed. For example, the group discussed communication - or lack thereof - as a barrier and fear of the "other" as a barrier. The characters' own personal "walls", were deconstructed by the group, such as Delaney's strict routine and how he seems to feel in control as long as it is in place. One attendee also talked about how Kyra is wound up so tight and even though we were reading about her from her perspective, she still did not reveal much about herself. She never let down her guard, desperate to protect her image. We discussed the futility of building bigger, stronger fences - the coyote still manages to get over the six foot fence and the wall does not keep Cándido out when he is in search of supplies for the shelter he is building - and how poignant that lesson is to the characters and the readers alike. Another discussant pointed out the irony that the guy who wants to build the wall around the neighborhood to keep out undesirables also hires Mexican immigrants to build to wall because *it suits his own needs at the time*. This, the group agreed, is what happens often in real life.

The discussion of fences and boundaries inevitably led to a conversation about the illegal immigration issue. One attendee mentioned that the friction with Mexican immigrants seems to her to be more intense due to the fact that they look different, noting that there doesn't seem to be as many issues with immigrants who appear "white". Another argued that the friction might be due to the fact that the numbers of Mexican immigrants flooding into the U.S. is vastly greater than those from other countries. Another mentioned that it was difficult to tell the difference between immigrants who simply were looking for a better life and those that are involved with drugs. Overall, however, everyone seemed to sympathize with immigrants - after all, we are all descended from immigrants ourselves. This discussion was extremely civil, open-minded, and honest.

Interestingly, the conversation veered off to the issue of gun control for awhile, which was instigated by our discussion of how the people of Arroyo Blanco kept getting more and more extreme and paranoid about keeping the "other" out in order to protect themselves. One member mentioned that there seems to be a loss of human connection - a dehumanization of the Mexican immigrants that seems to occur, particularly when the residents are evacuated during the fire, that is fueled by "mob mentality".

We also briefly analyzed the purpose of Dom Flood's character in the story. One discussant stated that his character represented the "height of hypocrisy" in that Dom had broken the law and still led a life of luxury and

yet the Rincón's, who also broke the law, in a sense, are suffering throughout. A prisoner has more rights and more comfort than a couple who are willing to work very hard for a better life, without cutting corners

The conclusion of the story was also a primary topic of discussion, however, the most important idea that came out of that part of our conversation is that the readers seemed to walk away with a restored faith in humankind. Some of us - Cándido in this case - manage to keep our heads up even in the worst situations. Though Cándido was treated so poorly by Delaney, he still reached out a hand to help him when needed. What a lovely way to end our first session and what a fantastic novel to have moved us all so deeply! We are all looking forward to our next discussion!

~Leanna Flaherty

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Four of us gathered at Eastern Wyoming College to discuss *The Tortilla Curtain*, by T.C. Boyle. As with all the books so far in this series, I found that the discussion quickly meandered out of the book proper into discussions of the larger issues it raised, which is interesting, because in interviews, Boyle has downplayed the political angle of this novel. Specifically, he refused to state his position on Proposition 187, the anti-immigration bill that passed in California in 1993, two years before *The Tortilla Curtain* was published, and which surely was reflected in the happenings of the novel. In this respect Boyle is quite a bit different than Steinbeck, whose sympathies in *The Grapes of Wrath* can hardly be doubted. The Joad family may have their faults, but there's no question that Steinbeck regarded them as occupying the moral high ground as compared to the people already in California that they encounter. Boyle offers far less of a moral perspective, preferring to paint everyone, as one of the participants pointed out, with the same dark brush.

Indeed, no one comes out looking good in this book, besides perhaps the relatively innocent girl America. But even she dissembles with her husband, who is so wrapped up in his fantasies and machismo that he does a near complete job of alienating her. On the other hand, as we discussed, everyone in the book has their reasons for doing what they do – the penniless immigrants looking to better their lives by coming to the United States, and Delaney and his real estate agent wife, looking to preserve the peace and success of their own lives. Taking on their own terms, none of these folks are really “bad,” (well, maybe that convict who used Mrs. Mossbacher's mother and the big canyon fire as a way to escape house arrest), but at least in the case of the Americans, we might say that perhaps they were selfish. Having said that, however, one of the participants pointed out that perhaps Boyle's point is to force us to look around and see who is suffering in our own midst, just as the America and Candido nearly starve in a canyon not even a mile away from the Mossbacher's luxurious home. Surely there are people in straits just as desperate in your own neighborhood, Boyle may be saying.

Another of the participants pointed that Candido is likely a play on Voltaire's *Candide*, who always saw “the best of all possible worlds,” whatever horrible things were actually happening. Candido is not himself an optimist, referring to himself several times as perhaps the unluckiest man in the world, yet nonetheless he persists in trying to bend the world to his own vision, whatever happens. And in the end, he's not a bad man, is he? He pulls the “white hand” from the flood (whose hand we presume to be Delaney's), when he could just as easily have let his antagonist, who moments before had pulled a gun on his little family, go in the current and drown.

Speaking of “bad,” we were all a bit taken aback at Delaney from the beginning. His true character shines through when he hits a man with his expensive automobile and then turns him loose into the canyons with a twenty-dollar bill. Who does that?!? The sheer callousness made all of us root against Delaney from the beginning. Here is a man who can express the deepest sympathies with trees and coyotes, but not towards his fellow man in need. And yet, aren't all of us living in comfort here in the First World a bit like Delaney? Maybe a lot like him? These seem to be the deeply discomfiting questions that Boyle is asking. We just didn't quite feel the force of his follow-through, is all. He questioned, but not \*too\* deeply. So on the whole I would say we enjoyed the book, though it wasn't quite *Grapes of Wrath*-worthy, but it would have been interesting if he'd gone deeper, and shown what happened next, as well. (I think that's a sign that a book is good – people want to read a sequel!). –Court Merrigan.

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Eleven of us gathered at Guernsey-Sunrise High School to discuss *The Tortilla Curtain*, by T.O. Boyle. This book provoked a range of reactions in our group, which was larger than it has been. This might have been a coincidence, but might also speak to the timely nature of the subject at hand. *The Tortilla Curtain* was published in 1995 but it reads as a much more contemporary book than that, because the issues it brings to the forefront are with us still; in some respects, they are with us in even stronger measure. Just today comes news that various governors across the US are wanting to refuse Syrian refugees, to say nothing of immigration (illegal and otherwise) remaining a hot topic among presidential candidates. In some respects, though, as we discussed, in the end - as with other books in this series - the book comes down to disputes about property. Who has the right to put up fences, and where? Why do some have so much, and some so very little at all?

Boyle, of course, does not offer us much in the way of answers; we discussed how the book is a good deal less didactic in that sense than its inspiration *The Grapes of Wrath*. A lot less righteous rage runs through the book, more a sense of foreboding and corruption. We concluded, as it were, that America and Candido were folks a good deal more deserving of our sympathies and respect than the hypocritical Delaney Mossbacher, a man who's never had to do much of anything in his life yet enjoys privileges fit for a king, while America and Candido scrape for bare survival in a canyon only a stone's throw away. Who runs a man over, and then offers him twenty dollars to go away? We marveled at the skill Boyle



employed to intertwine the threads of the various characters' lives, although there was some feeling that the unrelenting darkness of the book offers the reader little hope, and some of the participants were not particularly satisfied with the ending. It seems highly likely that Candido pulls Mossbacher from the flood at the end of the book (standing atop a US Post Office, symbol perhaps of the enduring power of institutions?), even as his own daughter drowns in the deluge, and one could possibly derive hope from it that Mossbacher will see the error of his hypocritical ways after being so rescued, but there isn't a whole lot in the book to lead us to believe that, really. This is the ambiguity that lies at the heart of the novel, which doesn't yield up easy answers or trite solutions.

As is usual for our engaging group, the discussion wandered far and wide from the content of the book itself to discussion of more general issues, particularly those involving immigration and racial politics. We discussed how in the near future whites in America will be a "minority majority," and how over the generations the purveyors of culture change and evolve, so that what is recognizable in one generation may not at all be two or three generations hence. Social change comes rapidly when it comes (cf., marriage equality). We wondered, then, twenty years later – what became of folks like America and Candido? Did they ultimately find their way? Did they starve? Did Candido get his small house with a porch and a rocking chair, or was he snowed under by events? Some participants would like T.O. Boyle to write a sequel, which I would also find fascinating. And if they did make it – what next? Like *The Tortilla Curtain* itself, we didn't have very good answers, but I think our group enjoyed having the opportunity to ask the questions. –Court Merrigan

## **The Work of Wolves**

On Tuesday evening, Oct. 28th, seven of us met at the Baggs Library to discuss *The Work of Wolves* by Kent Meyers. It was a busy night and I was afraid our numbers would reflect it; several of our usual attendees were occupied with community meetings or political activities, so I was grateful for the loyal turnout of the rest of the group. The lively discussion about the book began before we had all even sat down. Everyone there had enjoyed the book and had points to discuss: we talked about the various fences, some of which turned into cages, and the ways in which they both restricted and motivated the characters.

These conflicts were monetary, racial, cultural, familial, and were well represented in the main characters of the novel. We all agreed the characters were a delight; we liked them, cared about them, and learned from the dilemmas of the four protagonists, two Native American young men, a cowboy, and a German exchange student. Reading Norleen's report on *Tortilla Curtain* (our next and last book for this year) and its painfulness makes me doubly happy that we had such a good time with *The Work of Wolves*. Not that the work is an easy or light read: the issues are serious and relevant, and a couple of instances in the novel are downright painful as well. But the novel

enthralled us all and brought us into its world, a place we recognized and learned from.

I read a few excerpts from an interview with Kent Meyers discussing his writing and in particular, this book. In it, he says the one thing he hopes a reader comes away from the book with insight into the work of wolves in an environment; when man changes the environment, man must then fulfill the function of those elements he has eliminated, that the reader understands the title's meaning. I had to compliment my group, since that was one of the first things they had discussed – and understood well! From reading the interview and Meyers' answers to questions about his work and its characters, it is clear that he cares about and respects his characters; while he has insight into their behavior, they are themselves with freedom to grow, to do things he doesn't understand. In relation to the fences/cages discussed above, Meyers says, "I believe that we live in an age where imagination—as opposed to "reason" or "logic" or "psychological determinism"—is perhaps our most crucial intellectual resource. More and more we are being told that we are creatures of our genes and our histories, but in my experience imagination has the power to float free of these things, to shatter and re-create, to change the narratives and structures of our lives in ways simply not predictable ....."

In discussing the four young protagonists, and the conflicts they were working through, each of us had favorites, ones we identified with and understood best. But all of the characters, including Magnus, the villain of the piece, were different and compelling, enriching our imaginations and insight. At the end of the novel, Magnus, the controlling, robber-baron antagonist, continues his evil ways; he is a force of nature that cannot be contained. However, all of the young men have earned moral autonomy, bringing with it freedom and insight to make their individual contributions to this troubled world. A couple of our readers need to write sequels: they had figured out what was ahead for all these young men. The characters went on living and developing for them: What more can we expect from a novel?

Eleven readers gathered to discuss this final book in the "Fences" series. As so often happens, those who didn't enjoy the book found much about it to appreciate as the discussion progressed. The few negative comments centered on Meyers' writing style (too rambling for some) and unconvincing characters (stereotypical to some). Most of us loved the book, especially the setting and the characters. We were taken by Meyers' attention to even the most minor characters (reservation dogs, for example!). It was noted that Meyers did a remarkable job in allowing his characters to describe their inner thoughts and secret lives. For the reader, this meant that we watched the characters develop. Some of the questions and topics that we discussed were the trust that developed among the four young men, power versus innocence, what decision does Rebecca make, the importance of land, how one puts to rest his or her demons, how cages can be self-inflicted, and the amount of research done by the author. We took each family and

discussed the dynamics among the members, finding Earl's family the most fascinating. We finally spent some time reprising the novels in the series and what we learned from them. We agreed the series is among the best and most important. We ended by talking about other reading group opportunities at the library and possible series choices for our WHC group next fall.

Barbara Gose, December 1, 2008  
Reading Wyoming  
Wyoming Humanities Council  
[www.uwyo.edu/humanities](http://www.uwyo.edu/humanities)

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Nine of us gathered last night in Lusk to discuss the final book in our series, *The Work of Wolves*. Before the discussion, time was spent considering which series to apply for next, as the group is very interested in continuing the book discussions. The discussion considered that Meyers lives and works just across the border in South Dakota, and his work is accessible and recognizable to those of us who live in the high plains desert. As a result, many said this was their favorite in the series.

The first topic was the tension created by wanting Magnus to suffer more for his deeds, and wondering what sort of punishment our four young men would receive. This tension keeps the story moving, and that there is not a full resolution at the end of the book contributes further to that effect. Some time was spent considering Carson. One member suggested that he had very limited goals, but others felt he grew and became a dynamic character through the course of the story. Willi and the interesting convergence of German culture was discussed. The relationship of land was seen as an important, and timely, idea. As land becomes more valuable if it is sold and broken up into bits and pieces, this new "fencing" of property is certainly occurring in Wyoming right now. We also spent a bit of time discussing morality, ends and means, and a quote from Meyers in which he suggests that it is imagination which allows us to break out of our cages (especially in reference to Willi's grandmother). All agreed this text certainly fits the theme and is a fine story, well told, with incredible numbers of connections between characters, events, and ideas.

A good group and a most enjoyable discussion.

Wayne G. Deahl  
Division Chair: Arts, Humanities, Social & Behavioral  
Sciences  
Eastern Wyoming College

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Tongue River Library  
November 24, 2008  
15 Attendees

This was a good book to end the series. It's a bit less "depressing," they said, and offers excellent opportunities to explore all the themes we've talked about for this "fences" series.

They were interested in Kent Meyer himself, especially knowing he's practically a neighbor, living up there in Spearfish. I explained the experiences he's had that helped him tie together the Native American, ranching, and German elements into the story as well. One person said that at first she found the group of boys to be an "unlikely" one, but eventually accepted it because it didn't seem forced. Several of the women in the group have traveled in Europe and testified to the on-going fascination Europeans, especially Germans, have with the myth of the American West. When we went around the group talking about what thoughts we came away from the novel with, one insightful person said that, to her, the novel illustrates how "after death, the relationships struggle on." Another said something about it shows each generation carries the burdens of the former. Of course, not all comments were that philosophical. Several were mad that we don't get to know what Rebecca ends up doing. (I told them that when Kent Meyer was asked that he said he could "care less"!).

We talked at length about all the major characters; there was quite a debate about Carson's father –some were very sympathetic to him and others thought he did a terrible thing in selling the ranch. The discussion moved into related issues of the reservation problems, stereotyping, difficulties of small ranchers in this area, the environment, and the future in the West

As I said initially, there are a myriad of ways to relate this book to the idea of fences and boundaries, and the more the people talked about that, the more they came up with. We concluded by reviewing the four books and the series in general. Several long time participants said that they particularly enjoyed this series in spite of the "depressing" stories.

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On Friday, November 2 six local women met in the Hay Library at Western Wyoming Community College to discuss T.C. Boyle's *Tortilla Curtain*. To begin our discussion, I handed out some "connections" quotations that I'd recorded from my reading (they are attached here), and also read a question and response from an interview with the author that I found online.

Q. What is the significance of the title of the book?

A. The title comes from a common phrase for the Mexican border, the tortilla curtain, and I envision it in this way. We have the Iron Curtain, which as an image is impenetrable. You picture this wall across Eastern Europe. Then we have the Bamboo Curtain with regard to China. As I see it, that isn't quite as impenetrable as an iron curtain. It shatters easily and has gaps in it. It's not uniform. And now we have the Tortilla Curtain, which is the opposite of the impregnable. It's three strips of barbed wire with some limp tortillas hanging on it. The central question of this, and of the images of walls that appear throughout the book—the walls, the gates, walling people out, what do you wall in, all of that—has to do with us as a species and who owns what. Do you really own your own property? Do you have a right to fence people out? Do we have an obligation to assist people who come over that border, that wall, that gate? How is it that Americans are allowed to have this incredible standard of living while others do not?

All of these questions, I think, are wrapped up in my view of our debate over immigration.

This began a lively discussion about a novel that we all agreed was depressing, but intriguing in its complexity. Boyle gives us no easy answers to the problem.

- As I was reading, it struck me that this novel doesn't really have a clear-cut "beginning" or "end." It starts smack-dab in the middle of the car accident involving Candido and Delaney, and ends smack-dab in the middle of another catastrophe-the mudslide from the hill on which Arroyo Blanco rests. At this point in the discussion, we all were reminded of our surprise at Candido reaching down to save Delaney from the mud, when Delaney had just threatened his family at gunpoint.
- Alicia wondered about the accuracy of Candido's character-he's been to the U.S. several times but has very limited English (the book portrays him as having almost no English skills). She thought this was not an accurate portrayal; in her experience working with immigrants, illegals work hard to grasp the English language so that they can passably work here in the U.S. without problems.
- Alicia's doubt also brought to mind the question of whether one man can realistically encounter so much catastrophe. Candido wonders the same thing: "All he wanted was work, and this was his fate, this was his stinking pinche luck, a violated wife and a blind baby and a crazy white man with a gun, and even that wasn't enough to satisfy an insatiable God: no, they all had to drown like rats in the bargain." (353)
- Sally brought up Dom Flood, wondering about his function or purpose in the novel. I also had noticed that Dom appeared out of nowhere halfway through the novel, and suggested that his imprisonment (in a "mansion" at Arroyo Blanco) was mirrored in the next chapter when America is imprisoned in the canyon by her husband after the rape incident.
- Alicia suggested that the fire in the novel may have been modeled after a real fire in the early eighties that she had experienced in that area. However, Boyle mentions the Santa Ana winds several times, and the time is Thanksgiving-this is strikingly similar to the fires that recently flared up in Southern California last month. It seems as if this piece of the plot is not far from reality at all.
- We all agreed that we felt sorry for America, who followed her husband to the U.S. in order to seek a better life, but finds only sorrow and shame. Louise and Sally proposed that they would have been better off going back to Mexico, but Alicia and Fern pointed out that there was nothing more

for them there-they'd been living out of the dump in Tijuana prior to their trek up north.

- Sally felt that the novel portrayed wealthy Californians like Delany and Kyra as superficial. Kyra is concerned about the Mexican presence bringing down the property values, but doesn't give a second thought to how those human beings will survive when she helps to shut down the labor exchange. Lynne, however, disagreed, finding Kyra to be a conscientious mother who is concerned about her son's health and her family's financial well-being.
- We all were struck by how the wealthy Californians were happy to use the inexpensive labor of the Mexican immigrants to keep up their lawns, build fences, and repair homes, but they didn't want to see the laborers in their neighborhoods.
- A summary comment? This novel really epitomizes the concept of man's inhumanity to man-and sadly, most of it is unintentional. Tortilla Curtain shows us that often we're too wrapped up in our own worlds to be concerned about others.

Dianna Renz

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20 people came for our final discussion in this series. To a person, they loved the book. I think it's one which seems to resonate with this particular area and population. Also it isn't quite as much a "downer", as one person said, as the other books were. I was able to find a couple of good interviews with Kent Meyers on line ([www.curledup.com/intmeyer.htm](http://www.curledup.com/intmeyer.htm) is an especially pertinent one) which helped get the discussion going (not that this group needs that!). We talked about the 3 central characters and what each brought to the situation with the horses. Each of the three has his own history that ties in well with the theme of the series. Each comes from a father-son relationship that is difficult for different reasons and, for each, the events bring about a coming-of-age. We discussed the depiction of the contemporary Native American community and felt it was realistic and illustrated the problems as well as the coping mechanisms. Every seemed to especially like the Norm character for his self deprecating humor and for his wisdom. Of course Magnus Yarborough was thoroughly maligned by the group and brought out much discussion of all the "outsiders" coming in to buy up ranches in our Big Horn area. Since Kent Meyer referred to this novel as an "anti-Western", I asked what that means specifically when looking at this book. We had an intense discussion about the theme of "cages" and how it relates to our overall theme of the series of fences, boundaries, etc. The book effectively illustrates that we are all "caged" in some ways and that, in most cases, we can choose or not choose to stay in our cages. This Story group core has been together for several years and have done many of the series, so by now they have a common source of other books and authors they can relate to our discussions which enriches them

considerably. I go there feeling challenged and I come away invigorated.

Norleen Healy  
Story Library  
December 3, 2007

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Nine people attended this lively discussion. I began it by asking why Boyle told the story through the voices of all the main characters. Consensus was that it allowed the reader to understand what was going on more fully by seeing the action from more than one point of view.

One participant saw the story as the devolution of Delaney from self-satisfied, self-absorbed prig into obsessive rage. Others were caught up in the struggle of Candido and America to survive. One woman commented on Kyra as an ambition-driven woman who failed as both a wife and a mother.

There was some discussion of why and how the baby was lost in the flood and of the shocking ending of the book. One man said the ending was a moment of redemption, which made the whole book worthwhile to him. Others didn't like the fact that the book was a social novel, with a political purpose. One woman said that the book was entirely predictable and that she felt manipulated as a reader; another said she didn't like the book because she just "likes a good story." Some commented on how frustrating it was to read about the characters' struggles to survive, but others said that it gave them something to think about.

What was wonderful about the discussion, however, was the high comfort level with which people listened to one another's comments, no matter how much they disagreed with them.

Barbara A Bogart

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The Pinedale book discussion group at noon in the library with enthusiastic readers. This book was enjoyed as much or more than the others in this series as part of the "Between Fences" program. This book completed the 4 book series and it is recommended to everyone.

The idea of people building cages to keep themselves safe in was brought from the book into our lives, like the bird that will leave its cage temporarily and returns because that is where food and water and safety is. We talked about the fear of reaching out and expanding our own boundaries. Where is our comfort zone? The group talked about the invisible boundaries we set for ourselves, sometimes unconsciously.

Also talked about the author's life experiences that he used in this novel. People raised on farms or ranches could resonate with Carson Fielding when his parents sold the ranch, as they could with his father for having spent his life on the ranch when his life's desire was to be someone else.

The group liked the way the author placed individual stories of the main characters into the novel while at the same time weaving them together.

The American Indian wisdom was most telling of Americans. There were several pieces but one quote should get people interested in this book. The Indian, Uncle Norm, tells his nephew, "White people find a forest, cut it down to settle; find a prairie, plant trees; find a swamp, drain it; find a desert, put water on it. They put wheels on their tepees. Now days to be an Indian you need a motor home and play golf."

Do we take down our fences or encompass more within them?

Dick Kalber

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The Newcastle group met on May 13, 2009, in the Weston County Library meeting room. Twelve members gathered to discuss Kent Meyers's *The Work of Wolves*. Before beginning the discussion of the book, I shared having the privilege of attending a book talk by the author the end of April. I was able to hear him read his work, to ask several specific questions I had from reading this novel, and to listen to discussion of a few common themes with the audience.

As we began our book discussion, we talked about characters, especially the less major characters which we found especially interesting. Uncle Norm and Ted Kills Many were mentioned first, which led to a discussion of other Native American characters and their community in the novel. Because our town is part of the Black Hills area, we are especially aware of stereotypes and interested in how Meyers created characters that went beyond those standard ideas.

Several good interviews of the author provided most of the topics for the rest of our discussion. We were interested in Meyers's background, growing up in MN and then moving to Spearfish to teach at Black Hills State University. Many of his characters, the way they talk, and even the seed for the story came from getting to know his students over the years. One of our members had read another of Meyers's books—*The River Warren*—after finishing *Wolves*, so she shared that experience. We talked quite a bit about Willi and the German connection in the novel, and several members expressed frustration at not knowing more about Rebecca and Carson after the novel's end.

A list of discussion questions prompted us to discuss the title...what the phrase means and how the main characters did "the work of wolves" when they destroyed the horses rather than letting them suffer and slowly starve. We also discussed the concept of cages in the novel...which extended far beyond Willi's grandmother's bird cage...to the cage Rebecca felt, the cage Magnus created for the horses, the cage Native Americans feel...and even the cage Carson seemed to break out of through the new relationships he developed.

The group agreed this book is their favorite of the series. We closed our meeting with a discussion of next year, as well as the sad news that long-time Newcastle book discussion leader, Bunny Shurley, had passed away the day before our meeting.

Phyl Sundstrom, Newcastle

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Several people in the group commented that Kent Meyers' *The Work of Wolves* was the first they felt they connected with on a personal level. Some added that many of the characters are familiar and similar to people they know in their personal lives. Everyone seemed to agree that Meyers' work captures several western themes and that fact alone made it easy to read for them. After initial reactions, we began by discussing the manner in which the story is told. Several participants were confused by the non-chronological style of the story's action, and a few didn't realize that the story, from introduction to end, takes place over an extended amount of time. We discussed why Meyers might choose to tell the story in this manner, but we did not come to any consensus. However, we did agree that the story is about different cultures coming together because they strongly share a common belief. We discussed that style of the story puts the focus on the individual characters and the very different worlds that they come from. Outside of this story it seems that Nazis, Cowboys, and Indians don't belong in the same world, but the individual storylines, mixed with the main plot, explain how such a meeting can occur.

Many participants agreed that Carson, the strong, silent type, is too good to be true. Several people pointed out that most people wouldn't act the way that he does. He always seems to do the right thing, even when the right thing is executing horses to save them from a worse fate. He is easy to latch onto, but he has no flaw to make him truly interesting. Throughout the novel the reader finds himself or herself agreeing with his actions, no matter how extreme they may be. Even when Carson falls in love with Rebecca he does not enter into an affair because he respects the sanctity of her marriage, even though she is married to an abusive, power-hungry husband.

Willi, the German exchange student, fostered some discussion about human and animal rights. Willi feels so strongly that the horses need to be freed that he is willing to commit murder to make it happen (he later determines that there are better ways of protecting the horses). Throughout the novel, the various "flashbacks" remind Willi of his past and the atrocities of the German people. His grandfather was a member of the SS and his grandmother a member of the Lebensborn. As Willi becomes more cognizant of his past, his resoluteness becomes firmer every day. Most found it comical that the German rallies the "troops" to prevent atrocity.

The crowd favorite, Earl Walks Alone, captured the attention of many readers. They connected with his humanness. As he goes through the novel, attempting to remain unnoticed by his tribe and society, he becomes more involved in it than ever before. He displayed weakness, and people seemed to connect with that.

Many agreed that the point of the novel, and there are so many, is to show the world coming together to fight for justice. Former foes, cowboy and Indian, American and German, come together to prevent cruelty.

Chris Hilton

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I want to echo a sentiment I saw expressed in many other summaries of discussions about this book—it's a wonderful book with which to end the series. I started the discussion by asking how the book fits our theme of "fences," and group members seemed to agree that at least some of the fences we saw in the other novels are broken down in this novel. Group members loved the four main characters, who would normally be separated by cultural, economic, and geographic boundaries but were brought together by a common cause. We also discussed how accepting of each other and their differences those characters became.

We also talked about the significance of the scene in which Willi suggests that they could kill Magnus Yarborough (rather than kill the horses). This scene is important in terms of at least a couple themes of the novel—that of cages, seen and unseen, chosen and involuntary; and the theme of creativity in seeking nonviolent solutions. We also talked about how this is the scene in which the characters realize that they need to focus on the horses and not on Magnus; what they are about to do is for the sake of the horses and is not about revenge. This allows their act of killing the horses to be noble and morally right.

There was a short discussion of Goat Man; some participants were unsatisfied by his role in the novel. I'll admit that I didn't have the time to research Goat Man, but the more I thought about the novel, the more I came to see him as subversive. "Goat Man" was almost an anti-scapegoat; the Lakota people in the novel were happy to "blame" things on him, things they knew needed to be done. Goat Man protected those who took morally right but perhaps illegal actions.

Of course, we talked about the title. The characters explicitly tell us that they are doing "the work of wolves" and that humans are forced to do such things when they alter nature. Personally, I was disappointed by the small role that this theme seemed to play in the novel, but others in the group pointed out a few parts that supported the theme.

We ended our time by talking about the series as a whole. This led to an interesting discussion of the role of land and houses in all four books and to a general discussion of the emotional attachments we (perhaps Americans, particularly) develop to land and to our childhood homes. I asked the participants how this series compares to other series they've done (since this is only my second), and they said they enjoyed it very much. They seemed happy with the sense of closure and hopefulness created by *The Work of Wolves*, and they look forward to the challenge of a new series of books next year.

Jennifer Sheridan, Powell

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The Work of Wolves was a great book with which to end this series because, although not without its very difficult moments, it was lighter in tone. It was also really well-liked by everyone. We talked about the style of the book, with people appreciating the writing and getting to know each character (although some, including myself, wanted to know more about Ted).

Some of the questions I asked included: how they felt about the way the book ends for each of the characters; how the story is marked in the beginning and very end by young versions of Carson; how people felt about Carson's decision to not tell his parents of Magnus's cruelty; about the relationship between Earl and Norm, especially the robbing versus stealing discussion; about Willis's relationship with his father and grandmother; and, of course, we talked about fences and the different ways they manifest themselves in this book. I had sent out an interview before the discussion that I think people really appreciated having read, because Meyers talks about cages and imagination and I think it helped pull the story together in a nice way: [www.curledup.com/intmeyer.htm](http://www.curledup.com/intmeyer.htm) I also learned more about Meyers's writing process from this interview: <http://prairieden.com/interviews/meyers.php>

Finally, we ended with talking about the series as a whole. I asked what their favorite book was (as far as the one they took the most pleasure from while reading), as well as which book they felt was one they were glad to have read, even if they didn't always enjoy it. All books were appreciated for the issues they raised, and the way they worked together as a series.

Kelley Grove

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Seven readers braved the bitter cold to participate in a wonderful discussion of this book. As other discussion leaders have written, this book is a positive way to end the Between Fences series. I began by presenting biographical information about Meyers, including a brief synopsis of his new novel (September, 2009), *Twisted Tree*. We all loved *The Work of Wolves* - the characters, the landscape, the intersecting stories, the themes, even the dogs! We discussed nearly everything, and there is a lot to talk about with this book. The readers led the way and we started with Germany and Willi. We investigated his father's background and the purpose of his birth. This led to an examination of his parents, his grandmother, and the cages they all occupied, including Willi. To include this "foreign" element, Willi, in the story was a great choice, our group felt. We got an outsider's look at our way of life. We moved on to Carson and his family, with much debate about Charles, the father. I admitted that I found him a weak character until I read the author's take on him. Meyers envisions him as ACTIVELY choosing his life, knowing full well the sacrifices he is making, understanding the loss of his son to his father. We discussed the reasons for and rightness (or wrongness) of Carson's decisions concerning selling the ranch. We

brought Rebecca and Magnus into the mix, talking about the use of language versus violence, Rebecca's ability to reach Carson in part through her willingness to share her life stories. We concluded by discussing the Indian characters, Earl and his family, Uncle Norm, and Ted and his (lack of) family. This led us to look at Meyers' belief that imagination is important and how this plays out in the book. Finally we compared this book to the others in the series and talked about which we loved the most, since we loved them all. *House of Sand and Fog* was the hands down favorite, as we felt we learned the most from it and that it was the most topical in today's turbulent times. It has great themes of class, the American Dream, greed, immigration, inability/unwillingness to understand others, and more. In some series it is a stretch to tie the books together through their overarching theme. Not so with this series. There were fences, barriers, cages everywhere! This is just a great series, fellow book discussion leaders..... Barbara Gose

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This was the favorite of the series, because it was not largely negative like *House of Sand and Fog* and *Tortilla Curtain*. The group like the interesting, well-developed characters, plot elements, and insights into Indian, German, and ranch culture. We appreciated the author's research into the Lakota spiritual world, as well as the German Indianer groups and *Lebensborn* project.

While we shared wine, coffee and hors d'oeuvres, we talked about future book choices. Since we have read all but four of the available series and don't intend to read *Living with Violence* or *Women of Mystery*, we wonder if there will be new ones added each year? To that end, we decided to formulate some of our own. Our working series follows, including one suggested book for each: 1) *Epistolary Books: Letters from Yellowstone* by Diane Smith; 2) Barbara Kingsolver books: *La Lacuna*; 3) *Banned Books: Huckleberry Finn*; 4) *Great Youth fiction for Adults: The Giver, Touching Spirit Bear, Julie of the Wolves, and Silence of the Bone*; 5) *Best world drama*; 7) *Topical books: Reading Lolita in Tehran; The Kite Runner, and Persepolis*; 8) *Geography of the West: Cadillac Desert, The Crack at the Edge of the World, Rising from the Plains, or Basin and Range*. We will develop these ideas over the next month and let you know what we come up with. Suggestions for titles for our series are appreciated. We appreciate the opportunity to gather together in friendship and share our love of reading.

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Twelve people attended this last session of the series. We had to spend some time choosing next year's series. The rest of the two hours we spent discussing the book and the series, *Living Between Fences*, as a whole.

We began by discussing the various families, focusing on the creation of family stories and myths and the role they play in the characters' lives, and in our own. That led to a discussion of the role of story in the book generally, and how story can both give meaning and direction to our lives, and can command us, as well. We talked about the way this is a coming-of-age novel, with each of the young men coming of age in different ways and with different results. For each of them, that involves coming to terms,

in a more conscious way, with their own histories and their own choices. These topics encouraged participants to think about their own histories and choices. In addition, we talked about the ways we tell our stories, partly by what we do say, and partly by what we don't.

We discussed the issues of the environment, and the fact that the issues of cultural clashes between Native Americans and Caucasians was subordinated to the story of the young men's quest. Some people observed that, by the third generation, immigrants are no longer seen as immigrants, and the acceptance and integration has occurred. That led to a general discussion of whether, in fact, exclusion of the "other" is lessening as people of racial and ethnic background come together, or whether that is simply a hope for us all.

We concluded with some comparisons of the books, focusing on the ways we separate ourselves, or try to, and the ways we come together. Most people agreed that this is a coherent series, and an excellent one, even if some or others of the group did not like one or another of the books. It is a tribute to this particular book that participants kept wanting to return to issues raised in it, rather than broaden the perspective to include all the books.

As always, discussion was lively and deep, and had to be stopped at nine o'clock, even though people had much more to comment on.

Stephen S. Lottridge

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Lincoln County Library - Kemmerer

February 19, 2013

Five people from the Kemmerer community, including myself, met last Tuesday evening to discuss Kent Meyers' The Work of Wolves. I had again prepared some talking points ahead of time and started the discussion by asking the group how they felt about the opening scene of the book, when we are introduced to a teenage Carson Fielding and Magnus Yarborough, and what key elements of the novel were revealed in that scene. The group thought the scene set up the ongoing dynamic between Carson and Magnus, in which Carson, despite his young age, comes out on top leaving Magnus perplexed and annoyed that he could not wield his power over the former. It is clear from this scene that Magnus does not like to be ignored - he wants to be in control and he wants to be feared. Carson, however, remains in control of the situation, though perhaps without realizing it, and has absolutely no fear of Magnus. This exchange sets the tone for the entire novel. When the two meet again later in the novel, this dynamic remains. Carson "wins" simply by being himself - in the end, Carson realizes that by ignoring Magnus he reinforces his own power over him.

As in the first book of the series, Tortilla Curtain, the author told the story from the perspectives of all four of the main characters - Carson, Earl, Ted, and Willi - and the discussants again seemed to enjoy approach. The group agreed that all the primary characters were likeable in their own way, though one person actually felt that Willi's story was more of a distraction that did not add anything to the

main plot. Others, however, found Willi's background fascinating and enjoyed his story immensely. We had a long conversation regarding which of the four characters had the most to gain by rescuing the horses. Most of us felt that it was difficult to choose which benefited the most but we did agree that Ted's experience was perhaps the most significant in that he chooses life - rather than following through with his brief thought of suicide at the lake - and also appears to choose sobriety in the end.

The group was able to identify many of the different "fences" that played a role in the book. For example, Earl was trying to break free from the role of "typical Indian" and through he meets resistance from all sides, his experience with the horses gives him confidence along with a newfound appreciation of his own culture. He also breaks free of his past - when he swears at his mother during their fight it changes their relationship and she is able to view him as an individual separate from his father. The discussants felt that Magnus's need for control was the biggest "fence" of all. The others are able to break free from their various cages (except, perhaps, Willi's grandmother, clinging to a failed philosophy) but Magnus remains locked in his role in a cage he built himself. No one had any hope that he would ever change.

We all loved the way that Meyers brought the different cultures together - a group of misfits, as one discussant called it - in order to fight for a common belief. The main characters formed a bond in their pursuit of justice, and were each inspired in some way to move past whatever it was that previously held them back. The group felt that this book was very uplifting and inspiring, despite some of the more shocking and sad aspects of the story. We are all looking forward to our next discussion!

-Leanna Flaherty

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Three of us gathered at Eastern Wyoming College to discuss *The Work of Wolves* by Kent Meyers. Interestingly, I was the only one of our group to be reading the book for the first time - the other two had already read it in other reading groups. It is the sort of book that's good fodder for these discussions - lots to discuss, and unlike some other books I could mention (looking at you, *Grapes of Wrath*) the ending, while not entirely upbeat, gives room for hope for the characters. That is indeed one of its more endearing qualities. It also does give a lot of insight into the characters themselves. In particular the character of Willi is a good trick - just when you thought there was no more mileage to wring out of Nazis! One of the participants had some knowledge of the Lebensborn project which is referenced in the book. I wasn't entirely convinced by the role that predictably nefarious Nazi program played in the plot, but it was also a new angle and that added a level of interest.

We spoke of the tough lives on the reservation, and also of the tough lives of ranchers. Not very many books are able to successfully and convincingly bring together a rancher and an Lakota from the reservation without dipping into stereotype, and we appreciated Meyers' deft touch in this regard. Throw exchange student Willi in the mix, and you've got a nice bit of combustion there. The

evil rancher was perhaps a touch too cardboard cut-out, and we really don't get much insight into the inner lives of the women in this book, except insofar as they are reflecting on the men in their lives. We discussed in this connection what it must be like to have worked so hard for so long, like Carson's father, and then suddenly to have this windfall appear as if from heaven, offering a chance of escape with some money in hand. And then you have Carson who, with the enthusiasm of youth, doesn't realize what a potential boon that is. Still, unlike heroes in a lot of books, he walks away from the ranch with a pile of cash (even if he doesn't know what to do with it).

We also discussed how disturbing the scenes of animal cruelty were, and wondered just how Magnus Yarborough could have been that deliberately cruel, and why. Was he simply a sociopath? Or was it a trap by which he intended to lure Carson in, and take his revenge somehow? The book is of course not clear on this point, which adds to the interest, but also leads on to the suspicion that Yarborough is a bit of a caricature. Deliberate cruelty to animals – especially horses! – is such total anathema to the farmers and ranchers of our group's acquaintance that the whole crux upon which the book turns almost beggared belief. Having said that, we did find it well-written and evocative (even if I, reading from a writer's perspective, found the tick of little one-word sentences used as points of emphasis to be a little off-putting). On the whole, it made for a satisfying conclusion to this series.

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Eight of us gathered at Guernsey-Sunrise High School to conclude our reading series for the fall. Attendance has been great in this group this fall, with this meeting having the least attendees; among the reasons cited for not being able to attend were "kids Christmas recitals," which is natural at this time of year (mine are next week!). This group is great for discussions, though, and our talk about *The Work of Wolves* did not disappoint. As if on cue, the whole group zeroed in on the moment when the villainous rancher Magnus Yarborough brutally kills the cow in the pasture. Perhaps it especially resonates because we live in this part of the country, but we all agreed that it was an excellent way to highlight the true character of that rancher, since killing a cow in that manner is so unthinkable, you would have to be, well, a very bad man to do so. We also found it interesting the way that Meyers did not allow Carson and Rebecca to consummate their affair; we felt that most writers would have allowed to happen. Instead by allowing Carson, in particular, to maintain his "innocence," we were able to gain better insight into all the characters. That said, we did feel that Rebecca was the most weakly drawn character of the lot, she seemed mainly to be a foil to explicate the characters of the men around her. But what overall makes the book work is how every other major character does develop and change (from bad to worse, in Yarborough's case), so that we arrive at a different place by the books.

Some of the participants were a touch baffled by the inclusion of the German exchange student / Nazi grandmother subplot; it wasn't exactly clear how that directly played into the book's happenings. It does seem to

me that it is a \*touch\* clichéd at this point to bring in Nazis every time there is a German character. However, as we talked about the various historical sites around our area, such as Ft. Laramie and Mt. Rushmore, we all could remember that it sure did seem like there were a lot of Germans around. There is evidently a whole subculture of Germans who are fascinated with the American West (in an interview, Kent Meyers talks about a German writer, sort of like a Zane Grey or Louis L'Amour, who wrote a bunch of bestselling books set in the West, even though he himself never set foot in America, and these books have evidently been hugely influential in German pop culture), and like to come see for themselves these amazing places. Proud Wyomingites that we are, we allowed that this was a good thing to do.

As discussions tend to do, we drifted into topics somewhat distant from the book itself, including a discussion of the series as a whole, and how the "fences" and "borders" theme is certainly relevant these days given current events. One participant didn't think \*any\* of the books were very uplifting, although I would say that both *The Work of Wolves* and *Snow Falling On Cedars* have fairly positive endings, especially the latter. *Tortilla Curtain* and *The House of Sand & Fog*, though ... yeah, it's tough to find a whole lot uplifting in those. That led to an interesting discussion on the difference between what we might call "serious" literature and those books more explicitly written to entertain, like a Harlequin romance, say. I think it all sort of depends on what you are looking for, and at different times and places you will be looking for different things. I do think books written purposely to edify their readers tend to be dull as sin, a book like *The Work of Wolves* manages to supply insight - and lots of amazing descriptions of landscape and place which we all agreed were wonderful - without being pedantic about it. We concluded the evening with some discussion as to what series the group would like to undertake next. I think we are leaning towards *Muslim Journeys*, certainly apropos these days. –Court Merrigan

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## House of Sand of Fog

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Tongue River Library  
August 25, 2008  
13 participants

For our first meeting of this series, I began by talking about the series itself, asking the group to think about "fences" in every way that they could, and then explaining what the series would be asking us to explore.

In my mind \*House of Sand and Fog\* is difficult and painful because of the horrible downward spiral the characters get into, but the group said that while they agreed that it was unrelenting and depressing, to a person they found it compelling.

They wondered about the background of the author, so I spent some time explaining how he tells of his coming to this story and these characters (I found lots of good



material on Dubus on the internet just by googling). We talked at length about each of the characters. It's interesting how different people in the group react to the characters and how they assign blame depending on their point of view. They got into a lively discussion over this.

We talked about the barriers ('fences') that helped perpetuate the situations in the story. The group readily saw the cultural issues and the reality of how these same issues are impacting our country now, both internally and externally. While new people come in and others come and go, the core of this discussion group has been together for several years now, so they're comfortable expressing their opinions and challenging each other (and me!) which makes for a stimulating evening.

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Baggs, WY

Hello everyone,

We had our first book discussion meeting in Baggs tonight, discussing the House of Sand and Fog by Andre Dubus III. Out of the sixteen people who took books to read, we had 9.5 show up for the discussion (one was just over one year old and hadn't read the novel). It was a lively discussion: we began by talking about how "fences" affected all the main characters; we then moved on to the characters. Everyone had strong opinions about them; we all agreed we knew people like Kathy, and they often caused trouble. I was particularly interested in the Iranian characters, since I had taught English in the Shah's Air Force in Tehran back in 1976-1978 and I was impressed with the accuracy of the description of the Colonel and his family. The Farsi was mainly accurate (minus a couple of little quibbles here and there), and his upright, hard-working, proud and slightly stiff nature reminded me of military men I had worked with at the language school. Cultural details of the family and their lifestyle were right on target. I was particularly impressed with Dubus' depiction of the Colonel's (mainly secular) religiosity. His attachment to his religion, very different from that of the devout Ayatollahs ravaging his country, was subtly done.

We discussed point of view and Dubus' skill in using first person narrators to represent Kathy and Colonel Behrani. The voices were so distinct that no one ever became confused about who was speaking. The characters were all flawed in their own individual and realistic ways; a couple of participants felt that the ending was unrealistically catastrophic, but most agreed that, given the troubled, foreign, and irresponsible characters, the ending, depressing as it was, seemed realistic and perhaps inevitable. We admired the skill with which Dubus created the backstories for Kathy and Lester; we didn't like what the characters ended up doing, but most of us felt it was clearly in character.

Dubus' pacing of the novel was admired also: he begins by more leisurely creating the characters of Kathy and the Colonel, then, as the plot thickens, the pace speeds up as well, until at the end, the crisis shatters lives with reckless speed.

Now we're looking forward to Snow Falling on Cedars for next month!

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Sixteen readers gathered to discuss the first book in our Between Fences series. I spent a few minutes, after introductions, to introduce the series and to highlight each book. It seemed important to talk about Dubus' background; how he came to write the book, his writing methods, and his relationship with his father. House of Sand and Fog was "the common novel" for Rochester Institute of Technology and its website offers good lectures to help with discussing the novel. Here's the website: <http://wally.rit.edu/depts/ref/research/sandandfog/>

I have decided this year to forgo my habit of going around the group and asking for opinions about the book. Sometimes it takes up most of the time and occasionally it puts a shy person on the spot. So I simply opened up the discussion. The first comment was by a person who said he reads for entertainment and this book was way too depressing. But he then proceeded to make good comments about character, motive, and meaning throughout the evening! We talked characters and why none of the major characters ever made good choices and how that would have meant a different book.

Fences of all kinds came up continually during the discussion. I spent time on Iranian culture, especially the early drinking scene and its foreshadowing and the relationships within the Behrani family. There was lively discussion about Kathy and Lester, their childhoods, their marriages, and their neediness. We ended with talking about Ismael's death. Who was responsible and why did it occur? And we wrapped up with looking at THE AMERICAN DREAM from all sides and attempting to relate themes in the book to today's world.

Barbara Gose, 9/8/08

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As is usual, Debbie Sturman had a well-organized and advertised discussion series prepared for the Niobrara County Library. Nine of us gathered amidst a rain and lightning storm to discuss the text. After brief introductions of selves and the series, we engaged in a wonderful interchange of ideas. We focused, of course, on the fence metaphor, and property rights related to fences and territoriality. Participants liked the book, even though some found it depressing.

Characters were analyzed for behavior, believability, and whether there is a protagonist in this book. Lester was perceived to be the worst of the group, as he fell so far. One of our participants works at the Women's Correctional Facility and brought up a very interesting point about Kathy's communication at the end of the book, and how it certainly fits her name, her choices, and her "fittingness" for prison life. She communicates by sign, withdrawing from the world but engaging with the prison world. The discussion was free-flowing and moved briefly into other areas, but it was most enjoyable.

Wayne G. Deahl  
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The Newcastle group met on March 11, 2009, in the Weston County Library meeting room. Thirteen members gathered to discuss Andre Dubus's *House of Sand and Fog*.

We began our discussion with one participant stating that this was "a horrible book—the worst book I have ever read." The rest of us understood her reaction and, although we might not have stated it quite as strongly, agreed that some of the book's content is really offensive. I agreed, but asked everyone to bear with me on the discussion points I'd prepared, because by doing the research for our meeting, I had come to respect and appreciate elements of the book which can get lost in the reading experience.

We started with an interview of the author, in which he discussed his background, his knowledge of the Iranian culture, and his philosophy of writing. Of particular interest was his firm belief that his characters take on a life of their own after he has created them. For example, he didn't expect Cathy Nicolo to be an alcoholic; he created her as a drug (cocaine) addict, and then realized after he wrote a scene with her drinking a small amount of wine that she was also an alcoholic! He also tried not to go farther into the Iranian culture than he was capable of, based on his personal experience with Iranian friends and their homes; and, he commented on the difficulty of writing the book with several different characters' voices. Finally, we were interested to learn that the story was inspired by real events that Dubus read about in the newspaper.

As we discussed various plot and theme elements, we noted how important 'pride' was to the Iranian family, especially the Colonel.

From the way he hid his true working environment to the way he focused on his daughter 'marrying well,' he was obsessed with outward appearances and maintaining a level of respect, despite living in a different country after escaping from Iran's new regime. In some ways, he was as obsessed with his 'good life' attempt as Cathy was with getting her house back.

Several times we started to discuss the other main character, Les, but no one liked him and we didn't get far with our discussion. On the other hand, we enjoyed discussing Nadi, or 'Mrs. Colonel' as one group member liked to call her. She was more than the traditional Iranian wife in the final events of the book; she was empathetic in her treatment of Cathy in her home. Of course, none of us liked the ending, but we understood how it fit the Iranian culture, and we agreed that Cathy and Les ended up in the right place for their crimes.

The group agreed this book is one that fits the theme of the series, and allowed them to explore the Iranian culture.

However, most of us would not have finished reading the book if we had started it on our own. The R-rated content is just too offensive. We stopped short of recommending that it be dropped from the series, but we certainly felt it should be accompanied by some sort of disclaimer that it contains a significant amount of offensive content. We normally have a larger discussion group, and wondered if some participants simply decided not to finish the book. While everyone felt they could now appreciate elements of the book such as characterization and the contrast of cultures, all came into the discussion being skeptical that there were any redeeming qualities to the novel.

We closed our meeting with several clips from the movie. It is very well done, perhaps a rare movie version that is actually better than the book. Without its objectionable content, the story is able to rise to the surface of the movie and take center stage.

Phyl Sundstrom, Newcastle

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We had half of our normal group for our discussion of Andre Dubus III's *House of Sand and Fog*. Those who did show up for the discussion didn't seem too surprised that several people elected not to come to the discussion or perhaps even forgo finishing the book. They recognized that there is some material in the book that can make people feel uncomfortable. That seemed like a perfect place to begin our discussion. I did something uncharacteristic and read several reviews of the book (favorable, unfavorable, indifferent) to everyone to show how controversial and powerful this story is to many people. This seemed to encourage everyone to share their "true" feelings about the book. Two people enjoyed it and all the others came to discuss their reaction to the characters. All the participants agreed that the profanity and sex has no clear point; however, they did agree that they are intricately tied to Kathy's personality. We discussed how Kathy is someone who we might know and how she represents a certain walk of life.

Surprisingly, many people felt that the Colonel was in the right throughout the novel, and very few blamed him for strangling Kathy (she doesn't die from it) after her and Lester's plot leads to the death of Esmail, the Behrani's son. We discussed how the Behranis may be a victim of the American Dream. They come to America expecting civility and riches, but they find corruption and struggles. Everyone expressed outrage at the county government for allowing such a conflict to occur. Many believed it should've stepped in and righted the wrong regardless of what happened.

Lester received no pity from the group. Everyone blamed him for the perpetuating the situation. He seems to make the worst decisions at the worst times. Not many people connect with someone who leaves a wife and children to pursue a love affair. Additionally, we all agreed that his actions seemed to contradict his nature and precedent. He is praised for being a good cop by his superiors and trainees, so his antics seem to defy his personality as a cop. We all felt that Lester's pride drove the story to its tragic end.

Trying to make sense of this novel is no easy task. I suggested that we should try to understand each character's point of view. Someone suggested that Kathy may be the most difficult to identify with, but that may be the purpose of the novel. It seems easy to see the Behrani's point of view, but connecting with Kathy is a place many of us are unprepared to go to. Perhaps that is the fence we should try to overcome.

Chris Hilton

After I gave the group some basic background information on Andre Dubus III, we started with a discussion of the characters. I asked the group, "Who do you sympathize with?" While there was great appreciation of Dubus's narrative style, many readers found the characters to be too deeply flawed to sympathize with.

In our discussion, we often returned to the idea of causes (who/what caused this whole tragedy?) and the possibility of solution. Some members suggested that it was Kathy's inability to face life and her refusal to open her mail that started the problem. Others pointed out that, because of her education level and mental state (probably mental illness), Kathy was ill-equipped to challenge the impersonal bureaucratic system that mistakenly took her house from her. More group members were interested in placing a lot of blame on Lester Burdon, which surprised me. Some readers felt that Lester (whose name, they pointed out, sounds like "less burden") is a "sleazy," predatory "jerk" who takes advantage of Kathy in her vulnerable state. They were completely unforgiving of his attempts at taking justice into his own hands, and they felt that, during moments where reconciliation could have been possible, Lester shows up and destroys that possibility. I thought Dubus went to great lengths to show us how Lester became the way he is, and that we are intended to sympathize with him. One astute reader pointed out that Lester lacks self-awareness, which may be why his parts of the novel are narrated in third person rather than in first person. Lester doesn't get an "I" presence in the novel.

One thing we all seemed to agree on was that, once the action of the novel begins, a solution to the problem is not possible. We discussed the significance of the title and the symbolic importance of the house to Kathy and Behrani. For Kathy, the house represents a chance to do things right, to not disappoint her family; it also represents a relationship with her family, particularly her father, which she can't have. For Behrani, the house symbolizes the American Dream and an opportunity to change his circumstances.

We ended with a discussion of the role of our legal/"justice" system. I pointed out that it was an impersonal, bureaucratic system that started the whole mess, and that Dubus seems to suggest our legal system is similarly impersonal and bureaucratic. The face of the legal system in the novel, Lester, distrusts the system so much that he works outside of it. As we read the novel, we quickly discover that our legal system can't see things

from the multiple perspectives of the characters and can't adapt to the ambiguity of their situations.

Our discussion touched on many other topics, including the fences that kept the characters separate and the significance of the novel's ending. I greatly enjoyed discussing this interesting novel with such an astute and analytical group of readers.

Jennifer Sheridan, Powell

Fourteen of us met at the Albany County Public Library to discuss the House of Sand and Fog. We started with introductions, and it was nice to see some regulars and some new people. It was a stimulating discussion and people came to the meeting with lots to talk about. This book was quite pertinent to current issues, because of housing foreclosures. We talked about issues of culture, money, and pride, and what Dubus III might be trying to say. His novel does a really good job at getting people to talk about different cultures in the U.S. and, as one participant put it, we need to have open and considerate discussions about how we feel. Someone mentioned that, especially with the recent election, things seem to be getting better among people from various backgrounds, although a Muslim woman in the group greatly disagreed with this assertion, pointing to the ways Muslims have been treated since 9-11.

There are some good sources on this book and Dubus. There is a short youtube video in which Dubus is giving a talk at a book expo, and it gives a pretty interesting overview of his background. I didn't play this at the meeting, but do plan to email it out (we have many people in this group who have regular access to and use the internet). I also thought the RIT lectures mentioned by another discussion leader were helpful (<http://library.rit.edu/depts/ref/research/sandandfog/>). I really thought one lecture interesting in particular (<http://library.rit.edu/depts/ref/research/sandandfog/elahi.htm>), for some of the ideas that are raised about the novel, as well as a good background on the religious imagery

Kelley Grove

Unfortunately, most everyone (13 in attendance) in our group disliked the book (I was glad I read it but felt Kathy's and Lester's parts could have been cut by fifty pages and fifty cigarettes). I had sensed this was happening and had urged everyone to attend even if they hadn't finished it, so we could discuss the issues of immigration, lack of communication between cultures, and tensions between upwardly mobile immigrants and downwardly mobile Americans.

"The most rending kind of war is not between two hatreds, but between two hopes...." We discussed the idea that each side of the ensuing property dispute sees the other through the lens of its own culture. I quoted one of Dubus's favorite authors, Flannery O'Connor: "Our beliefs are not what we see but the light by which we see."

I told the group a bit about the author, Andre Dubus III, who teaches writing and also works as a carpenter. He had a close relationship with his father, a short story writer, and spoke of building, along with his brother, his father's coffin.

I asked if anyone noticed the bird in the house imagery that echoed another book we had read. Colonel Behrani: "In my country, there is an old belief that if a bird flies into your home, it is an angel who has come to guide you . . ." Contrast with Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*, whose main character felt like the little bird trapped in her own house.

Dubus shifts point of view from Bahrani to Kathy and back and has them speak in first person, but writes Deputy Burdon's part from third person narrator. I asked why. I read to the group the genesis for the novel in the author's words: "I'd read about a woman who was evicted from her house for failure to pay taxes she said she didn't owe, and they'd already repossessed and sold the house before they realized their mistake. For years, I've wanted to write about an Iranian man I knew, the father of a college friend in the '70s. He was very powerful there, and when he came to America, he ended up working in a convenience store. One image in particular stayed with me: he was in an elevator, I was helping him bring in some groceries late at night, after he'd worked a 16-hour day, and he looked at me and said, "I never thought my life would come to this. I used to work with kings and queens and prime ministers, and now I serve candy and cigarettes to people who don't even know who I was. I never thought this would happen to me." And I looked at him, and I felt compassion for him, but without even being aware of it, the writer part of me was just struck by that trauma....I reread that original article ... and I saw that the name of the man who bought the house was Middle Eastern, and I thought, "What if the man I knew had bought that house... And four years later, there's your book! "

Someone asked why this had to be a tragedy. I replied that the author never writes an outline but allows the characters to reveal themselves to him, and read a quotation from an interview with Dubus. "Believe me, I did not want to write a tragedy. I've got little kids; I don't want them reading this stuff. I did not know Kathy had a problem with alcohol, I believed her when she said it was a cocaine problem and when she started drinking I thought a little wine wasn't going to hurt. And then it started escalating in the writing. I really felt like a helpless witness to the last part of the book."

A few of us had watched the excellent movie with Ben Kingsley and Jennifer Connelly and felt this is a rare case when the movie is better than the book: sixty pages of description could be conveyed by an expression. Our librarian, Becky Hawkins, had listened to the audio book with the author and his wife reading the main roles, and said Dubus did a good job with the Farsi accent. I can suggest the following interviews: Andres Dubus III talks about writing, 26 minutes:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxaOyK7SQbM&feature=Playlist&p=86B9116AB0BD6A22&index=0&playnext=1>.

He likes to write in the morning so he can go from the big room of dreams to the big room of writing.

I also suggest the RIT lectures

(<http://library.rit.edu/depts/ref/research/sandandfog/elahi.htm>)

I can recommend a long interesting interview with Dubus <http://www.identitytheory.com/people/birnbaum3.html>.

There is another on Fresh Air on NPR.

I mentioned in closing that Ben Kingsley considers tragedy life affirming. The group, nevertheless, hopes our next three books are not so depressing.

Just over twenty people attended the discussion. Two were drop-ins who had not signed up yet. The group was a mix of long time attendees, people who have come for the last couple of years, a few returnees from years past, and several new people. As usual, most of the participants were women, with three men, two of whom were the drop-ins.

Discussion was lively throughout, and was still going full blast when we had to stop. Several members of the group expressed an aversion to the book, saying they were emotionally exhausted by it, or that they could see no positive outcome possible and could not continue to the end. A couple of people thought that the literary devices to forward the plot were too obvious, and one believed that the point of view used for Kathy's voice was too masculine to be believable. Despite these reservations, and even because of them, most people had a strong response to the book.

We took the idea of living between fences seriously, and people pointed out a great many "fences" that separated the characters, including places of origin, cultures, economic status, gender, employment, as well as standards, values, and especially assumptions and interpretations. Several people pointed out that characters did not seek information but made assumptions about others based on their own prejudices and experiences. We applied those ideas to ourselves, as well. Several people started out being judgemental of Massoud Behrani for his judgementalness, which led us to discuss the fences WE were putting up between us and the characters. We also talked about how the characters' backgrounds and early experiences shaped their characters and directed their actions. That led to a discussion of the degree to which any of us can be conscious of our motivations and assumptions in a way that allows us to change our behavior in order to invite a more positive outcome. Most people believed that none of the characters had enough self awareness or mindfulness to change, even though the possibility was right before them.

Two of the attendees were from other countries, one an emigree from Russia and one a visitor from Germany. The Russian spoke of cultural stereotypes and their effects on attitudes and actions. We also talked some about the difference between emigres who expect to return to their countries of origin and those who accept the emigration as permanent. While many participants had passionate feelings of attachment or (mostly) aversion to the characters, we moved toward seeing that all of the

characters have some full truth or humanity in them, despite their failings or blindness. Several people had seen the movie, but toward the end, someone referred to the movie, *Crash*, as a comparable world view. Toward the end, I introduced the idea that all of the characters are basing their happiness on something outside of themselves, and that that leads to a feeling of need and even victimization that, in turn, leads to desperate acts.

This book proved to be a fertile basis for exploration and discussion, and most of the participants said that they left with a richer appreciation of the book, even if they still did not "like" it.

Stephen S. Lottridge

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Lincoln County Library - Kemmerer

March 19, 2013

Five people from the Kemmerer community, including myself, met last Tuesday evening to discuss House of Sand and Fog. I began the discussion by asking the group which main character - Kathy or Colonel Behrani - they felt more sympathy for in the first part of the novel. Most of the members of the group felt more sympathy for the Colonel since Kathy had sort of "asked for trouble" by ignoring all the letters from the county. This led us to discuss which character was more sympathetic overall and we agreed that Esmail was the only truly innocent character and was therefore the most sympathetic. The group felt the least amount of compassion towards Lester. When I asked who they considered the rightful owner of the house, once Behrani had paid cash for it and had moved his family in, no one could decide nor could they come up with a fair solution for the conflict that was both realistic and would satisfy everyone involved.

In keeping with the theme of the series, we discussed the "fences" that seemed to bring about downward spiral of the characters. The group agreed that cultural differences were the primary barriers that none of the characters were able to cross - not only in the sense that each character had a different approach and view of the situation based on their own cultural mores, but each was also impeded by the cultural stereotypes they had towards the other. Kathy and Lester could not make the Colonel understand the emotional tie Kathy had for the house and Kathy and Lester could not understand the position that the Colonel was in financially. Behrani was simply trying to do what was best for his family but pride and his perhaps his own cultural norms prevented him from communicating this to Kathy and Lester, as well as to his own family. On the other hand, Behrani could not understand Kathy's obsession with the house and saw her refusal to sue the county over the mistake as a sign of laziness and a sense of entitlement. Their refusal or inability to communicate with each other pushed them all towards their ultimate downfall.

We also talked a little about the title of the book and what the "sand" and "fog" may have represented. One discussant felt that fog always seemed to be rolling in anytime anything bad was going to happen in the novel

and thought the sand represented the happy memories Behrani had of his family vacationing at their bungalow back in Iran. We also discussed the idea of the fog representing the characters' inability to understand each other and the sand representing the story's downward spiral - the house slipping through everyone's fingers as sand would - or perhaps the instability of life.

We discussed the novel's ending and the author's skillful way of continually building the stress and intensity towards the climax of the story, to a point that it was almost unbearable. All agreed that the ending was disturbing and that Kathy and Lester ended up where they belonged. One discussant insightfully noted that it seemed like Kathy had finally made peace with herself at the end - that she herself finally felt like she was where she belonged as she had always considered herself a loser (as did her family). She appeared to accept her situation and did not attempt to fight.

Other topics discussed included why Lester had fallen so hard for Kathy, the complexity of each character, how the graphic nature of the sex in the novel seemed to epitomize the pathetic quality of the relationship between Kathy and Lester, the various pivotal points in the novel where the situation could have turned around had the characters made better decisions, how the memories of his murdered cousin seemed to affect Behrani, how Lester's memories of his first girlfriend and her brother seemed to trigger his hostility towards Behrani, and how it is so easy for people to let their imaginations take over and push them over the edge, such as when Kathy went on a bender after Lester went home to talk with his wife, thinking he wouldn't come back.

Everyone in the group seemed to be glad that they had read the book, despite the dark intensity of the story. One person in the group noted how easy it is to misbehave in this world and how hard it seems to do the right thing. Another discussant likened the story to a Greek tragedy, which I thought was very fitting. Yet another attendee said she felt that reading tragedies makes us more compassionate - tragedies are more realistic because life isn't always happy. All of us agreed that one thing we really enjoy about being part of this reading group is that we read books we wouldn't necessarily normally pick out on our own - our horizons are expanded - and we are all looking forward to the final book of this series!

~Leanna Flaherty

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Three stalwarts gathered at Eastern Wyoming College to discuss Dubus III's (is that where you put the apostrophe?) book. Speaking strictly for myself, this is probably the best book I've read while being involved in this program. I communicated my enthusiasm to the participants, who largely agreed. It just does a masterful job of bringing out various aspects of American life that we are all mostly aware of, but rarely give any thought to. For example, the very concept of ownership. Does Col. Behrani really own the house, since he paid for it? Or does Kathy Nicolo have an equally legitimate claim, since the house was only taken away from her by a mistake of the

county? How about Lester Burdon, so unhappy in his life that he's willing to risk everything for this woman he barely knows? What is the proper way to comport yourself, and where to the lines of moral responsibility really cross?

Like all good books, *House of Sand & Fog* raises more questions than it answers – to wit, I've got answers to none of the question listed above. We did note how Col. Behrani, ripped away from a good (for him) life in Iran, really did take a disdainful and frankly inaccurate view of America and Americans, constantly referring to them as children who are unable to rope in their whims. Then again, he treats his own wife the same way, and in this manner Dubus III managed to portray the Colonel as a real person, not a caricature of an Iranian or a Middle Easterner in general. Then, too, there is the lingering moral question of how much responsibility the Colonel bears for the crimes of the Shah's regime back in Iran. Sure, he may not have actually carried out the torture inflicted by the secret police, but he clearly benefitted from a society run in such a way that dissidents were tortured to death. His wife, too, though likely ignorant of the ways in which the regime operated, still benefitted by living a very privileged life, while it lasted. And now, in America, the Colonel finds himself much further down on the social pecking order; is his striving to improve his situation a classic immigrant's story, or is he only trying to regain some measure of the privilege he never earned in the first place?

And how about Kathy Nicolo? I mean, who throws away certified letters from the county? Even if the county made a mistake, it could easily have been rectified if she had merely lived up to the barest of adult responsibility, right? But then, she's in a rough spot, too, her husband having left her and never really having dealt with her addiction problems. And Lester Burdon, what obligation does he owe his children and the community he is supposed to be protecting? Of all the characters, he may be the one facing the roughest future. As the book eludes to, things will not go easy on a former cop in lock-up. Wasn't he just striving, too?

In the end, that's probably what this book was about, the limits of striving, of ambition, of desire. No one gets what they want; everyone's life is blunted, if not ended outright. Is the message, "don't try"? Or can we read something deeper?

We talked about it, but never arrived at any solid answers. Worth a re-read, I suspect. –Court Merrigan

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Eight of us gathered at Guernsey-Sunrise High School on Sept. 8<sup>th</sup> to discuss *The House of Sand & Fog*. In light of the current resurgence of immigration as hot political topic both domestically and in Europe, we found that the book had a particular resonance that it might otherwise have had. The feeling that was universal among the participants, however, was that book was very dark. The stylistic flair and narrative structure of the book were thought to be strengths, but the unrelenting grimness of the tale was found by our group to be somewhat off-putting. It is true that in the book there isn't a whole lot of

room left for hope, and, besides the deaths of some of the major characters, no resolution for those who survive (although it is strongly implied that Lester is likely to get a shivved in the joint, since as a former cop he's going to the lowest of the low in jailhouse society).

Having said that, we all agreed that the book raised some interesting questions regarding the morality of property, and property itself. The mistake the county makes with regards to Kathy's house is one that everyone could very easily envision – as it happens, Guernsey once had a postmaster who refused to deliver mail to street addresses, for obscure bureaucratic reasons which no one living there ever did quite understand. We didn't arrive at any consensus, actually, as to who actually did "own" the house, Kathy or Colonel Behrani. Everyone in the book, it seemed to us, suffered from the sin of pride, which would let no one admit that they might be wrong, or back down from a course of action once taken. That's what leads to the book's grisly finale, and it was perhaps that very sense of seeming inevitability that most of the participants objected so strongly to.

The book also spurred a wide-ranging discussion on the nature of addiction and the self-destructive impulses that otherwise outwardly healthy and happy people seem to exhibit. Deputy Burdon is Exhibit A in this regard. Here is a man with a family and a good job, and although he originally took the job instead of going on to college as he wanted, there still didn't seem to be any reason why he would throw everything away pursuing this affair with Kathy. We wondered if there wasn't just some self-destructive spark in Burdon's nature (look at the play on words his very last name represents) that would somehow explain why. Or perhaps there is no "why," which is another possibility that the book hints strongly at; we see the characters acting, and we see how they react in the world they find themselves, but we never quite get to pierce the veil and find out "why." We also talked about immigration in general which of course led to a (brief) discussion of the presidential candidates and also how immigration itself as an issue seems to rear its head every few years or so, without ever any satisfactory resolution ever being achieved.

In any case, I think it's fair to say that the group is looking forward to *Snow Falling On Cedars* next time, which I promised is a lot more hopeful if not just as well-written.  
–Court Merrigan