

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.

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

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.

Hello Everyone,

On Tuesday night (9/30), 7 of us discussed *Snow Falling on Cedars* in Baggs. 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 Los 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

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.

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

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

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 unremittably 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

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

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 20th 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

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, "munee." 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

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

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).

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

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

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

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

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.

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 Delaney 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

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) 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

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

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

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

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

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

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 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 I also learned more about Meyers 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

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

House of Sand and Fog

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.

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!

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

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
Division Chair: Arts, Humanities, Social & Behavioral
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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

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
