

Books That Made a Difference

(Note: This book series is currently retired)

BOOKS THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE 1

OVERVIEW	1
FOR FURTHER READING	1
GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE SERIES	2
NATIVE SON	5
FOOLS CROW	21
SILENT SPRING	25
CATCH-22	29
I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS	35
ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST	40

Overview

The six books in this series demonstrate the power of imaginative literature to change individual thought or even social policy, to cause readers to rethink the attitudes and prejudices of earlier generations. Sometimes, they are works that have made it impossible for readers to see and react to "difference," whether of race, religion, nationality, gender, class, or sexual orientation, in the way their parents and grandparents did. At other times, they have forced readers to reexamine inherited attitudes toward the world around them and reformulate their place in and responsibility to that world as citizens and individuals. They have, in a sense, broken down perceived boundaries between "ourselves" and "others" and put human faces on stereotypes or social problems.

Published near the mid-point of the twentieth century, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) was the first major novel by a black American writer to reach a wide white audience, and its impact on our culture resounds to this day. The novel traces the seemingly inexorable descent of a young black man, Biggar Thomas, through a pair of meaningless murders. In doing so, it raises questions about such controversial issues as the ability of races to coexist and the necessity of violence in precipitating cultural change.

When Joseph Heller titled his World War II novel, *Catch 22* (1961), he introduced a new phrase into the English language. According to "Catch 22," a person avoids a thing by accepting something worse than that thing. The novel's hapless hero Yossarian struggles with this circular logical trap in an upside-down military world where the phrase comes eventually to symbolize the absurdity of all institutional logic. Heller's blackly comic satire underscores the horror of war and the power of modern society, especially bureaucratic institutions, to destroy the human spirit.

Rarely does a single book alter the course of history, but Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) did exactly that. It is a passionate and carefully documented call to arms against the indiscriminate use of chemical pesticides and

weedkillers. Based on information Carson gained during seventeen years' work with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the book generated great controversy, including a campaign against it by the chemical industry. The book was instrumental in launching the environmental movement. It is without question one of the landmark books of the twentieth century.

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) pits defiant anti-hero Randle P. McMurphy against a life-denying authority figure, Nurse Ratched, in an archetypal battle for the souls of the patients in an Oregon mental hospital. The action, as filtered through the eyes of hospital inmate Chief Bromden, involves a fight to the death between the forces of individualism and the those of conformity, the latter represented by the Chief's metaphoric vision of society-at-large as the Combine, a power-hungry machine-like force. Both widely criticized and widely admired, the novel encapsulates many of the issues that fueled the social rebellion of the 1960s.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) Maya Angelou recounts growing up as a young black woman, with a constant awareness of racial difference and her own racial self-hatred. Raised first by a hardworking, sternly religious grandmother, then reclaimed at the age of eight by her mother and raped by her mother's boyfriend, Marguerite blames herself for her plight and retreats into silence. That silence is overcome with the help of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, who shares with Marguerite her love of recited literature and poetry. Eventually, Marguerite finds her voice and, through that voice, breaks from the cage of adversity, prejudice, and powerlessness.

Fools Crow (1986) by James Welch tells the story of the Lone Eaters band of the Pikunis--the Blackfeet--at a time in the late nineteenth century when they can see clearly that their way of life is being irrevocably changed by the flood of Napikwan--white people--into the northern Rockies and Great Plains. Facing their own destruction, the Pikunis must move through self-doubt and despair if they are to remain at peace with themselves and with the world around them. *Fools Crow* calls on us to examine anew our daily actions in relation to the history of the American West.

For Further Reading

For further exploration of books that made a difference, look for these titles at your local library or bookseller. WCH cannot provide these titles for addition or substitution in the above series.

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*

James Carroll, *An American Requiem*

Doris Grumbach, *Coming Into the End Zone*

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Randy Shilts, *And The Band Played On*

Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of the Earth*

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

General Comments on the Series

The new series for 1999 is "Books That Made a Difference." It's an attempt, within the narrow constraints of a six-book series, to look at works that have made a difference in the way we see "others" and the world around us in the last half (or so) of the century. Titles included are *Native Son*, *Silent Spring*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Catch 22*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *Fools Crow*. Besides Bob Young and me, committee members for the series were Peter Anderson (fellow bdtalker), Katherine Kelly (WCH board member), and David Romtvedt (former BDP scholar and current board member).

Judy

Somehow the books in this series are a bad mix, even if they are books that made a difference. *Native Son* (perhaps substitute Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*?) should not be the first book read in the series. Sequence of books always makes a difference. *Native Son* and *Silent Spring* were the first two we read and both present difficult and/or unpleasant subjects that "turned off" all but the most diligent readers. However, *Fools Crow* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* were well-received; *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was generally well received - some did not finish it - (but what about using *The Monkey Wrench Gang*? It would definitely lighten the mood of the series and provoke lively discussion.) *Silent Spring* is a hard sell but it obviously fits the theme.

Marcia Hensley 02-03

This excerpt comes from Jill Foltz's final evaluation of the series in Evanston. She briefly summarizes the group's conclusions about why each book was included in the series, and since that's a key question in all the discussions, you may find her summaries interesting:

Native Son--When we placed this in the context of the time, we concluded that the book opened the eyes of everyone who read it to the fact that blacks were not what had been portrayed in the movies! We think the anger shocked and surprised even the most liberal of readers, but more than any scholarly treatise on the topic, it emphasized the need for a change.

Catch-22--The men of our group who had served in the armed forces really identified with this book, but so did the rest of the participants because we see *Catch-22* scenarios in our daily lives; we think the field of education can illustrate nearly every point made! Heller was great for writing down what many had observed, and that's what made this book a good choice.

Silent Spring--Most participants, while they didn't choose this book as their favorite, think this book was probably [WCH's] choice when [the Council] first came up with the category. Before this book people merrily used all sorts of insecticides, herbicides--all kinds of "icides" with little thought. After the book came out was the surge of environmental activism and the important changes from which we all reap the benefits today. We all want the sequel!

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest--As with the other books of the series, this book served to open eyes to the reality of mental institutions. Since our group knows the State Hospital in town, the book reminded several participants of incidents closely connected. And we believe, that the result of the popularity of both the book and the movie caused important changes in the field of mental health.

Fools Crow--This book was the happy surprise for our group, for none of us had read it before. The group felt of all the books, this probably brought the least amount of change, yet it was eye-opening. It felt real. Dee Brown's evaluation of it as being "balanced" in its presentation rang true to us who have watched the cowboy movies and read some Native American History.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings--Reading the voice of an African American woman of the 1940s and 1950s, we had not appreciated before the difficulties of getting into print during these years, especially for a woman and a black. Her voice is authentic, particularly in the first parts of the book. While the book did Angelou recognition, it was to be years before the important changes occurred in our society that would make it easier for more voices like hers to be heard.

Jill Foltz

From Bob A. Brown (Lusk group)--excerpted from his final report for the series. (fyi--*Catcher in the Rye* and *Zen and Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* were on the short list for the series from which the committee narrowed to the present six titles.)

The considerable strength of this series seemed to derive from the challenging themes present in the books selected. A weakness that seemed to be present, particularly in *Native Son*, *Silent Spring*, and (to a lesser degree) *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, was that members in the group tended to dismiss the books' relevance to their current lives. Our collective denial (perhaps especially in Wyoming) regarding racism, mental illness and its manipulation, and the proliferation of herb-

and pesticides, added to the difficulty for the group in identifying with the principal characters in these books. Several thought these books expressed concerns about situations "then," not now. The recurring theme of the individual living in a situation beyond his or her control, and how the individual chooses to act in this dilemma (which I tried to emphasize), brought some response. This was facilitated in *Fools Crow*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and (to a lesser degree) *Catch 22*, largely I think because the group's members identified with the principal characters, and "liked" the books and their stories. Two books which might be considered in the future for this series would be *The Zen of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Robert Persig) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger). Several people, inside and outside the group, have expressed enthusiasm for these two, as books that "made a difference" in their lives.

Bob Brown

[excerpted]

The key questions posed to leaders of the "Books That Made a Difference" series: Why or how did this book make a difference? Why did they select these particular books for this series? I tackled these questions from two directions.

First, I anticipated such sticking points for my groups before the series began, so I pressed the matter up front by asking participants at the beginning of the first session to name a book out of the blue which they believed made a difference to them personally, either because it influenced their lives in some way or because it just held a place of significance in their memories. We made a list (and later copied it to share, because a lot of people came up with interesting books).

Then I asked them the general questions:

- * What does it mean for a book to make difference?
- * Do books every really influence history or culture, or is it more the other way around?
- * What other more subtle ways (besides influencing history) might books make differences?
- * How do we quantify the difference a book makes?
- * How does popularity (or canonicity) play into it?
- * Can books that comparatively few people have ever read be said to have made a difference?
- * What is it about books, as opposed to other forms of broadly-disseminated communication, that might make lasting impacts? For instance, is there a difference between a book that makes a difference and a movie that makes a difference?

* What sorts of books (fiction, essay, memoir, biography, political or social critique, etc.) seem to make the biggest impacts within our culture?

* Do books make as big a difference today as they once did (or seemed to)?

I just raised all these questions in fairly rapid succession, barely giving participants time to think about them, take notes, respond a little if they felt like it, and then we moved into the first book. But throughout the series, meeting after meeting, I kept coming back to these general questions in varying forms relating to the books under discussion, and at the final sessions in both locations, I raised them all again for deeper discussion.

The admittedly simplistic points I wanted to drive home via the general questions above were threefold: 1) There are fundamentally two levels at which a book makes a difference: personal and social. Each so-called level involves a whole slew of variables. 2) It's very difficult to identify how a book might make a difference and what books have made the biggest differences. There are no formulas. 3) The books selected for this series represent different ways in which books might make differences, not the works that have been the most profoundly influential. [True, in some instances I felt a little defensive about the series, because participants would say things like, "I don't understand how or why this book made a difference," or "Why did they pick this book when such-and-such a book was so much more influential," or "Exactly how did this book change our culture?" Also, I feel a trifle defensive because I helped select these books.]

Second, at some point during their respective discussions, I described the books in the series as follows:

Catch 22: This book made a difference because it identified a fracture between blithe myths about the military and the War and the appurtenant realities (glossed over in the '50's), while simultaneously anticipating a comical, absurdist, almost surreal style which would come to dominate broad culture in the '60's. Significance: stylistic.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: This book has made a difference because it is one of the most widely-used texts for teaching high school students about varying cultural experiences in America, and the strengths and weaknesses therein have become part of the texture of education in this country. Significance: educational; cultural.

Silent Spring: This book made a difference in the simple sense: It was widely read and politically influential. (But it also is worthwhile noting that this book didn't, as is sometimes grandly claimed, start the American environmental movement.) Significance: political.

Fools Crow: This book made a difference to a limited slice of American culture, specifically Native Americans, among whom the book is venerated, and particularly the younger generation of Native American writers, artists and historians. Significance: creative; personal.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: This book was never intended or received as an expose on mental health practices, but it made a difference as a lasting work of art which assembled the most trenchant aspects of '50's counter-culture (especially the Beats) and prefigured the disintegration of respect for authority, organizations and power. It's still echoing today in such places as the cartoon strip Dilbert. Significance: prophetic.

Native Son: This book was the first "politically-correct" modern adult racial novel, read by millions of liberal-minded white people, most of whom it disturbed. Like Angelou's book, this novel is usually used today as a teaching text, and its reverberations continue through academic channels. Significance: social period-piece.

The so-called "significance" of each book listed above is reductive, I know, but I opt for a single position from which to launch discussion. I want solid footing for that launch. In every case, as I proceeded through this series, I gave the groups preliminary ideas (and where appropriate, warnings) for the upcoming book.

For instance, before they read Native Son, I prepared them with the admonition that Wright set out to write a book that no one - black, white, rich, poor, liberal, conservative - could feel good about, and to read the book mindful of the changes that have taken place in race relations over this century. Before they read Fools Crow, I asked them to be thinking about how Indians have been depicted by others and by themselves over the century, and how self-perceptions among Indians might have changed along the way. Also, even though it should be beneath us, I always noted if an upcoming book was especially vulgar or violent, even with these two relatively sophisticated groups. This acknowledgment on my part that some readers have delicate tastes seems to get us around the shocked-and-outraged syndrome when readers hit rough books unforwarned. Two other comments regarding these stage-setting comments made to the groups: First, I always try not to poison the well by describing too much about a book beforehand. Usually, I only suggest a philosophical core idea readers might want to be thinking about while reading. It's only in rare circumstances that I caution readers (requiring some explanation) about the upcoming book in any way. Second, I heartily recommend that discussion leaders be very familiar with all the books in this series before the series begins. The discussion leader can do a much better job of couching the book in relation to others in the series if the books are known quantities beforehand.

The final issue with this series: I found (not surprisingly) a lot of participants had already read several or even most of these books in years past. This had two negative effects: 1) Some would-be participants were disinclined to join the book discussion in the first place because they'd already read some of the books and remembered them (especially Native Son, Cuckoo's Nest and Catch 22) as bothersome or unpleasant, and 2) some participants skipped sessions, or attended but didn't re-read the books (even though they last read them in school thirty years ago). I approached the second problem thus: I described

how books undergo evolutions in our culture and within an individual's mind and memory; I asked participants to read the books anew, from the point of view of their own life experiences; I asked them to be aware of the ways the books seem different now than they did on first reading years ago, because that in itself is pertinent to the theme of the series. I'm looking forward to leading this series with other groups in the future. It's a difficult series to lead, frankly. It's not a series without problems - I'm anxious to hear what the participants have to say about the books and the theme. But I think the series as a whole has a lot of value and power.

Peter Anderson

A while back, Peter Anderson told us that he began this series in Jackson with a discussion of what books had personally made a difference to the members of the group. Jamie Chapman, the PD at NMWA, attached a copy of that list to her final report. I thought you might be interested in seeing the books they chose.

Books that Made a Difference for members of our discussion group:

Diary of a Woman Homesteader
The Whitest Flower
Refuge
The Sparrow
various C.S. Lewis books
The Great Gatsby
The Catcher in the Rye
Follow the River
Teacher
Patterns of Culture
books by Tony Hillerman and Ed Abbey
Watership Down
The Magus
The Black Stallion
Charlotte's Web
Mutant Message Down Under
The Sun Also Rises
Under the Volcano
The Grapes of Wrath
Tracks
Silent Spring
the Bible
Markings
The Brothers Karamazov
100 Years of Solitude

I'm going to post a longish summary comment from Carol Deering, the project director of the Riverton group. Carol typically prepares a pretty thorough final report of the group's experience with the series they've just finished, and I think this kind of overall perspective may help people who are beginning the series in 2002 (we already have seven requests for it for next year--quite a large number for a series that's been around awhile):

For each book, the group thought long and hard about whether or not it made a difference: a difference because of the time it was published, a difference because of

subject or treatment, etc. At the end of the series, we compiled a list of books we thought made a difference to each of us [see attached] Two of the books (*Native Son* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) are on "The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-1999" (American Library Association, Office for Intellectual Freedom)

I believe *Native Son* made a difference to most of us, but we wondered if Wright wrote as much for blacks as for whites. He blew the lid off what a writer could say about life in the black community. He doesn't spare anyone. It must have been a powerful book at the time, since the Book of the Month Club turned down Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* to accept it. Barbara asked a good question, though, "How much have we as a society learned when even today our head black (Colin Powell) refuses to go to the global conference on race.

Catch-22 was no one's favorite book, partly, I think because many people didn't see the humor. This was our first discussion after the September 11 attacks and the bombing in Afghanistan, so that was probably understandable. We figured the book made a difference in the 1960s and influenced protestors. We did like the way Heller's use of repetition deepened our knowledge for the characters.

It was hard to believe Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* forty years ago! She was instrumental in banning DDT, but today we use more specific poisons, possibly more toxic. Perhaps the government is better now, but the homeowners are not. Some readers felt that the emotional presentation demeans the science, and that the political introduction polarizes readers. Still a powerful book!

I was sick and sorry to miss the discussion on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, written after Martin Luther King's assassination, perhaps contains a bit of retrospective revisionism. Several in the group had read other of her books (and seemed to like them better). There was some discussion of her use of language (switching from Black to white, etc.) and the quality of her writing. We wondered if this book impacted the Black community. I later found a list of top influential books from the Black perspective, and yes, it was on the list.

My favorite book in this series was *Fools Crow*, and I think that feeling was shared by several of the participants--perhaps because of the strong presence of Native Americans in our area. We discussed the life/role of women, the resignation of a third wife, etc. This book dealt with many universal themes (juvenile delinquency, adultery, pettiness, etc.) as well as the spiritual element of examining thoughts and dreams. It made a difference, perhaps, because the language let us enter into the Native perspective without preconceived notions.

In answer to a query about whether the series promoted the discussion of humanities issues and values, Carol wrote:

We managed to discuss Bigger's estrangement from the religion and folk culture of his own race as well as from the glamour of the dominant civilization; communism. white "blindness" in attempting to help minorities; guilt, violence, and pity as ineffective reactions, etc. We discussed the "wag the dog" heritage which began in *Catch-22*, along with bureaucracy in the military-industrial (and educational) complex, and related the book to present day news events. We discussed the connection of cancer to poison use and disposal, the ethics of poisons banned in one country and sold overseas; how do we keep a balance between nature and control; how personal decisions can make a change--people put their jobs at risk to help Carson. We discussed racism, and a child's growing awareness of it, the matriarchal structure of the Black community, speaking out about sexual abuse, etc. And we discussed women's role in a nomadic society, and a native culture with nowhere to go (even Canada was a questionable salvation). Most of the books were sad but inevitable expressions of deep humanities issues and values still with us today.

Native Son

In the beginning of the discussion of *Native Son*, no one found any redeeming qualities for Bigger. As the discussion proceeded, this intense dislike began to abate somewhat, as group members began to consider his fear and how it drove his behavior. Nevertheless, the consensus was that he was a sociopath, and that Wright had chosen an extreme character and situation for this protest novel. In contrast, to other groups' (I have led) votes on sentencing, this group voted six to three for life imprisonment versus death, a victory of sorts for consideration of poverty and racism in Bigger's life.

Bob A Brown, 1-8-04

No one liked this book or felt that it made a difference. I was in the position both of defending Wright's decision to create a character, Bigger, who had no redeeming value, and making the case for the impact of this book in 1940 and today. The group argued the following points. By choosing this type of character the whole premise of the book is destroyed, for Bigger is not sympathetic. Wright's approach is wrong if his intent is to win support for his cause. The only reason to have Bigger kill Bessie is to make sure that he is killed for these crimes because a good lawyer could have got Bigger off for the killing of Mary, even in 1940. These readers felt that Bigger was simply an evil person and would have killed anyway, just as an evil white person, or person of any color would. In particular, Max seemed incapable of understanding the impact Mary's murder had on Bigger's sense of himself as a man (last scene). They didn't feel that Wright was successful in arguing for the environmental/cultural explanation of his destruction. I provided background on Wright. One member wished she had been given this

information (especially Wright's communist involvement) before she read the book. I had previewed the book for them, but did not provide biographical information.

If I do the series again, I will provide not only information on the subject of the next book, but also a quick bio of the author.

Barbara Gose 0203

After I went into depth on Wright's life, participants thought more positively about the book. Several said the book was about a time in America before they were born and a part of America they had never seen or known about. We talked about all people who feel no empowerment in their lives. *Native Son* is still making a difference.

Richard Kalber

Most participants didn't "quite finish" the novel. The last section of speeches was slow going for some. However, all but one kept their books for another day to finish after our discussion. The largest discussion connected the anger=violence to the recent youth violence in the schools, especially Columbine. Wright took us right inside the mind of that angry youth to show us how his first impulse seemed always to be a violent one. He thought violence could solve his problems when in fact it made them worse. Another facet related to the violence is his impulsive behavior--act now, think later. Most of our participants have spent their lives in areas where there are no significant numbers of minorities, plus many hadn't really thought about the segregation issue much before reading this novel. Some even questioned the "reality" of such reaction to Bigger's crime. The essay at the end of the book showed that such sweeps of black areas and no warrant rights for searches indeed were a common occurrence in those days.

All in all, for every participant, a new understanding of Black circumstances in the 1930s and 40s helped him/her appreciate the anger of the disenfranchised in our country. Great discussion!

Jill Foltz

Today's Chronicle of Higher Education [Friday, November 12, 1999] on-line at <http://chronicle.com> has a brief review from the November/December issue of "Oxford American Magazine" by Anthony Walton, who contends that Wright was "one of the first gangsta rappers who spread the news about the bad brothers in the city and what they were prepared to do .. to anyone who got in their way in their search for personal liberation, or, if not that, then nihilistic self-assertion." "For all Wright accomplished, writes Mr. Walton, in certain ways his persona as a novelist was a performance, doing what others expected of him. . . what he felt obligated, as a black man with a certain amount of power to do." The article itself is not available online, but

information about the magazine may be found at <http://www.oxfordamericanmag.com>

Bob Young

First of all there were only five people, two of whom had actually read the whole book. At first there was some predictable resistance, but I had sort of anticipated that. Wright is writing with a strong agenda and that's where we started: what that agenda is, where it comes from, and does it affect the reader in the way he intended? We talked about how fear, frustration, and isolation drive Bigger. Because I find this novel amazing, and because I figured not too many would get through it, I had some passages that I felt they had to hear/look at in our discussion, so I actually read a little to them! That took our discussion to some good places outside the novel. One older, retired man lived in Kansas during the period described so he recalled some relevant incidents and experiences. The other participants are natives of Clearmont and have rarely encountered blacks, BUT have lived on the edge of the reservation all their lives and could see the parallels. We also talked about how empowering acts of violence can be to people who never experience empowerment any other way.

Since the last book we discussed was *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, they wanted to talk about the differences in the black protagonists of approximately the same period. As it turned out, we had a good discussion that went on as we were walking out to our cars!

Norleen Healy

Our discussion of Richard Wright's *Native Son* began dramatically with several readers sharing experiences of reading the book in 1940. Those reading it for the first time responded with their feelings of "discovering" the novel in 1999. It was clear from their stories that this book has made a significant difference at its original publication and continues to affect readers because of its timely themes of racism, conditional environment, and questions of justice.

A significant part of the discussion focused on whether or not we viewed Bigger as a product of his circumstances, specifically racism, as his lawyer suggests in his dramatic appeal in part III of the novel. Many readers likened this appeal to the rationale offered for Aaron McKinney's and Russell Henderson's motive in the murder of Matthew Shepard. We discussed several parallels, and compared the oppressive weight of classism to that of racism. Because of the ghastly nature of Bigger's crimes, readers found it almost unanimously impossible to empathize with his character. We discussed Wright's purpose in creating such a character, raising the question of whether or not Bigger embodies the stereotype of Black men at the time. Many readers felt he did and wondered about Wright's point. We discussed Wright's desire to present us with a character that would evoke our own guilt rather than pity, as characters in his earlier work did, as that is the effect more likely to make a lasting difference. I also introduced

one critic's controversial question in a 1940 condemning review that asks, if we interpret Bigger to be a product of conditional environment, what stops other Black men from killing? This question led us deeper into Bigger's character and the complex web of family, race, and class politics in which he found himself trying to be a human being with free will. This discussion was charged with energy from our previous discussion of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In this way, the series theme and our discussion of racism has strong continuity.

Diane Leblanc

An easy book to lead in discussion. My role turned out to be mostly one of prodding the discussion to return to the novel, since it had a tendency to unlimber everywhere else. But even that I didn't find problematic, since the general topic of race relations made a fascinating and stimulating core for your basic humanities-related social exchange.

Native Son is something of a war horse. Everyone had encountered the book somewhere before. Most found it oppressively sad. I actually began the discussion by pointing out that Richard Wright had set out to write a book which no one - right, left, black, white, rich, poor - would be comfortable with, and he apparently succeeded. That seemed to get the dialogue off on the right foot. From there, it's easier to tackle the thing as a work of art.

To the perennial question, "Why was this a book that made a difference?" I responded that it was the first novel by a black writer to be read by a significantly-large, educated, white audience, and it foreshadowed the strain of militancy which in later years would come to see race relations as essentially hopeless, and efforts to reconcile classes as essentially futile. At least, that's how many people have interpreted it.

Peter Anderson

This book was well-received by the group, though I found the discussion to be frustrating. Wright's dramatic, sensational presentation of the problem of racism made it difficult to discuss anything but racism. Since we had discussed racism thoroughly in terms of Angelou's book and Welch's book, & since our entire group is white, I began to feel as if we were "beating a dead horse."

We spent some time talking about what happens when one's life is controlled/defined by fear--fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of whites, fear of what one might become. Do we see violent acts occurring in today's world that might be caused by the perpetrator's feelings of fear? The Daltons who donate money to black organizations charge an inflated rent to their black tenants. This led to an interesting discussion of whether or not one can be unknowingly racist. Someone pointed out that Bigger is the only developed character in the book. We see others as he sees them--as types rather than individuals.

Carol Bell

Since our edition included biographical information on Wright as well as information on "how Bigger was born," I opened the discussion with a request for reactions to the book. The group was split into two basic camps: one group found the book to be a "real page-turner" while the other found the book "difficult" due to the reader's inability to relate to the main character and to some of the subject matter. For example, I admitted that I attempted to read the book twice before I made it past the grisly scene describing Mary's murder, beheading, and cremation. The vivid images combined with the novel's mood of profound despair brought me to a halt. On the third try, possibly because I knew what to expect, I was able to read on. I found, like the others in the group, the "read" to be one of gripping suspense. Based on these reactions, we opened our discussion with a consideration of why Wright wrote the novel with a central focus on the life and actions of such an unempathic main character. Some felt that

Wright was trying to shake up the complacent majority with a character so despairing, so hate-filled and violent that readers would be compelled to see America from a totally new perspective. Others commented that Wright may also have intended to rattle African-Americans who had become trapped into a submissive routine. Many expressed surprise that Wright's novel was published at all, considering the prevalent attitudes of the time. We continued the discussion with comments on the relevance of the work to a reader in the year 2000. We'd like to believe much has changed regarding the American "racial problem"; however, the novel's actions and the facts of recent events such as racially motivated shooting in Chicago and Los Angeles this past summer, the Diallo case, the African-American targeting several whites in a shooting incident on the East Coast all strongly suggest that Wright's portrait of America is, unfortunately, an accurate one. We had to admit we were very uncomfortable with that image and noted that discomfort may be a partial reason for the negative response some readers felt toward the book.

I shared copies of another of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems with the group, "We Wear the Mask":

We wear the mask that grins and lies
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes--
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties--
Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.
We smile, but, O great Christ our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise.
We wear the mask!

We discussed the ideas in the poem in relation to the novel. A dominant concept seems to be that the consequence of always hiding your true self, of continually "masking," is the destruction of the individual and of the society in which it occurs. Those ideas generated discussion of other writers who seemed to wrestle with some of the same ideas. For example, the idea that personal guilt and social conventions can affect the character's thinking and actions as seen in Dostoevsky, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allen Poe's works was considered. *Native Son* might be considered a psychological novel, in which the reader explores the inner machinations of a criminal mind. Others speculated the novel may be more of a social treatise, especially when the lawyers' closing arguments to the court are considered. Readers felt it was clear that Wright intended to not only highlight the shortcomings of the American political and social systems, but that of communism as well. We also discussed the significance and impact of images used repeatedly throughout the novel (sight/blindness, black/white, hunger/food, fire & furnace/cold & snow) in relation to action theme and reader response.

We compared Wright's book and our previous selection, Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in their depiction of the African-American experience. The group noted it was easy to warmly identify with Marguerite in Angelou's novel while the reader felt merely a suspenseful and sometimes horrified fascination watching Bigger's march to his final doom. (One member commented it was similar to people flocking to the scene of a horrible accident.) In addition, it was obvious that the individual character's sense of self-esteem and connection to community plays an important role in advancing each book's action and themes. In Angelou's book, it is that close family and community connection which is a significant factor in Marguerite's development and ultimate triumph; in *Native Son*, Bigger's negative self image and sense of isolation and disconnection from even his family and friends has an obvious influence on his self-destructive thinking and behavior. Finally, Angelou's novel leaves one with a sense of optimism while Wright's novel leaves one with a sense of doom. Interestingly enough, the group saw these two works as companion novels; that when paired as they have been in our reading sequence, they present a more complete image of America. And that is how Wright's novel "made a difference" to this group of readers--we all had a new sobering perspective of the world in which we live, one that we would have been unlikely to have had we not read these two books in this particular sequence.

Resources I found useful:

Kinnamon, Kenneth and Michael Fabre, eds. *Conversations with Richard Wright*. University Press of Mississippi: 1993 (this is a collection of journalists' interviews with Wright. The interviews reveal the man Wright as one who passionately wants the white journalists and their readers to listen to his experiences as a minority in America. The reader will hear his views on problems in America, as well as Europe, as he "struggled to reconcile Marxism, Freudianism, and existentialism to

the political realities from 1945 to his death in 1960." The interviews also deal with Wright's techniques and the dominant themes seen in his work.

Wright, Richard. *12 Million Black Voices*. Thunder's Mouth Press; 1941 photo direction by Edwin Ross and 1998 foreword by David Bradley. (Wright's poetic and political text and the folk history of black America presented in black and white photos selected from the Farm Security Administration files combine with Bradley's historical and literary context to provide a rich and immediately accessible source for anyone interest in Wright's powerful ideas, emotions, and work.)

Ebba Stedillie

Nobody said outright that they liked this book, although a few admired it. Many had read it before, and several of these said they hadn't read it a second time because they remembered it as terribly depressing. A major thrust of the discussion: Desire to learn more about people who transcend miserable backgrounds rather than succumbing. This was related directly to *Caged Bird*, which this group had read a couple months earlier. Participants raised crucial questions. Has the racial situation in America changed much? Are people who come from terrible backgrounds rougher and crueler? Does poverty drain a person emotionally?

Being beside the Wind River Reservation, the group spent a lot of time talking about the similar situation (poverty, prejudice, violence) as they understand it to be on and near the reservation. That segment of the discussion was truly interesting for me, although I noticed a distinct uniformity of opinion about Indian issues - I guess I'd describe it as a sort of polite, comfortable distance. Only a couple of participants seemed really close to the Arapaho/Shoshone realities of life, from what I could tell. The O.J. Simpson trial came up, inevitably, which I wasn't hoping for, but which proved a useful comparison to the trial in the novel.

Just as we were finishing up, I asked whether so-called propaganda novels can ever be art, which elicited some great observations from participants about the nature of, respectively, art and propaganda.

Peter Anderson

Information on Richard Wright's life experiences led to a presentation on Jim Crow etiquette and Jim Crow laws, Black Codes. The group, particularly those from the South, shared their experiences where these laws were practiced. This included talking about minstrel shows and talking about Spike Lee's new movie *BAMBOOZLED* featuring black-face Blacks.

Wright was thought exceptional considering his lack of formal education, however, his wide reading was noted. The group marveled at his ability to project such great imagery--e.g., in the attempted escape scene.

Members read passages from the text that they found interesting. After reading a passage from the newspaper account of the trial, one person brought up the subject of how different a news report would be written today.

Bigger's wall was much like the walls parents impose on their children, employers impose on their employees, etc., that make them fearful and have low self-esteem. Bigger's rage was compared to today's road rage. He finally realized how he was affecting others.

Most members felt sympathy for Bigger as noted in a secret vote following the discussion of the trial. Fourteen voted for life, and one voted for death. Incidentally, this person told her vote, and she never reads the books, but takes part in some conversations.

In a recent response to Newsweek's question, have race relations improved since the "60s"?

40%--yes, they're much better.

30%--yes, but there have been as many setbacks as gains.

27%--no, people are just quieter about their prejudices.

3%--no, very little has changed.

Bunny Shurley (Newcastle group)

It was a dark snow packed stormy cold night, and yet we had it good turn out for this discussion. It was on such a night that Mary Dalton was murdered. We had a good lively discussion. We began by discussing the universal application of Wright's message. Wright himself, in studying oppression in Russia, saw that the plight of one race being oppressed by another is not unique to blacks. Our group saw some parallels with the Native Americans in the near by reservation. We delved a little into the philosophy of existentialism and self-determination. There was some disagreement about whether or not Bigger Thomas ever made any decisions or was just swept along. There was some discussion about contemporary society being oppressive, or oppressive things happening in a generally non-oppressive society. The group was hard pressed to find redeeming qualities in Bigger Thomas. However, they felt he did soften and become somewhat insightful toward the end. Some in the group believed in capital punishment and others did not. Regardless, most felt Bigger should not be allowed on a work release program. We also compared the book to the movie version. The group was sent two different editions of the book. One was the original 1940edition. This "original", however, was originally published after having been edited. Others in the group read "The Restored Text Established by the Library of America" which contained more sex and violence. This was Wright's uncut version. Some in the group felt this was what we all should have read.

Bob Eldan (Lander group)

Note: I was not aware that we had two different editions of the book and am most concerned about it. The substitution was made at Ingram, our book supplier--evidently they ran out of the edition we ordered and sent us another (this happens occasionally with books that are "classic" enough to have multiple editions). I noted the different covers, but assumed both editions were the same text, i.e., "complete." I will check all this out and try to make sure that the sets of books we send are the full edition. Judy

The group did not like *Native Son*. Several people did not attend the discussion because they disliked the book so much. Those who did attend saw worth in it after the discussion. We discussed the character of Bigger, and several of us thought he was a sympathetic character although Wright did not intend for him to be. We discussed the role of various whites in the book and the role of Communism. We talked about how other Blacks coped, what Bigger discovered during his ordeal, and the definition of his tragedy. We talked about the various images in the book.

Participants could easily see why this book made a difference because it so strongly shows the dehumanization of Blacks.

Maggie Garner

This was our first discussion of the year. Not all participants finished the book; I commented that I thought part 3 was too much--they agreed. We had a full, free wheeling discussion. This was a great choice for our first session. I provided biographical information and questions on the book itself. There was much interest in its reception in 1940. We talked about communism, its impact on Wright, and his disavowal of it. One member brought up how W.W.II likely diverted attention from the book's impact.

People found the book both painful (many had to stop reading temporarily) and affecting. Virtually all concurred that the book has, should make a social difference. They also (most) believed that reading it profoundly affected them. I was asked to look more thoroughly into the issue of Wright's ease (or not) in getting published.

Barbara Gose (Riverton group)

Don't recall if this source on *Native Son* has been mentioned previously. If not, some may find it interesting.

Ebba Stedillie

----- Forwarded message follows -----
Organization: EBSCO Publishing
From: EpPrint@epnet.com
To: ebbas@acad.cc.whecn.edu
Date sent: Wed, 28 Nov 2001 17:44:16 -0500
Subject: on *Native Son*

Record: 20

15168840039423819980301

Title: To Blot It All Out: The Politics of Realism in Richard

Source: Style, Spring98, Vol. 32 Issue 1, p127, 21p

Author(s): DeCoste, Damon Marcel Abstract:

Discusses the politics of realism in Richard Wright's novel 'Native Son.' Why the novel was considered a form of literary liberation from the protest novel for black American writers who came after it; Wright's view of realism; Information on Bigger Thomas, a character in the novel. AN: 1516884 ISSN: 0039-4238 Full Text Word Count: 10770 Database: Academic Search Elite

TO BLOT IT ALL OUT: THE POLITICS OF REALISM IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *Native Son*

The strategies of the classic realist text divert the reader from what is contradictory within it to the renewed recognition (misrecognition) of what he or she already "knows," knows because the myths and signifying systems of the classic realist text re-present experience in the ways in which it is conventionally articulated in our society. (Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*) But what enabled me to overcome my chronic distrust was that these books--written by men like Dreiser, Masters, Mencken, Anderson, and Lewis--seemed defensively critical of the straitened American environment. These writers seemed to feel that America could be shaped nearer to the hearts of those who lived in it. And it was out of these novels and stories and articles...that I felt touching my face a tinge of warmth from an unseen light. (Richard Wright, *Black Boy*)

I

Although now almost twenty years old, Belsey's forceful dismissal of a realism that, to her mind, "performs...the work of ideology" (67) remains, to this day, a virtual axiom of Anglo-American literary criticism. Despite Rita Felski's more recent claim that "the 'conservative' slams of realism as a closed form which reflects ruling ideologies has been challenged by its reappropriation by...oppositional movements such as feminism" (161), recent scholarship, implicitly or explicitly deploying what Belsey dubs "[p]ost-Saussurean work on language" (3),(n1) has tended to take the diagnosis of realism as reactionary as its starting point in discussions of the realist novel. Indeed, even such a recent reclamation of American realism as William Solomon's 1996 essay, "Politics and Rhetoric in the Novel in the 1930s," begins by conceding realism's effectively conservative character as a mode of ideological "closure" (799). If the ostensibly realist fiction of the 1930s is to be rescued from critical scorn here, this is to be done by demonstrating that it is not in fact realist at all, but rather an attempt to go "beyond" realism and toward a

rhetorical form exhibiting a healthy and "at times extreme skepticism towards the referential reliability of realist modes of narration" (800). Nor has the Wright who, in our second epigraph, praises realism as a kind of personal and political epiphany escaped scholarly censure for just this allegiance. To be sure, Wright's work, and *Native Son* in particular, was initially praised by reviewers for nothing other than the power of its realism. Thus critics who praised Uncle Tom's Children for its "brutal reality" and "authenticity" would likewise applaud in Wright's first novel an "authentic, powerful writing" and a "factual quality as hard and real as a paving stone" (Reilly, *Critical Reception* 2, 28, 50, 61).

More importantly, as regards recent formulations of the politics of literary realism, these first critics and reviewers would see this realism itself as at the very heart of a potent and oppositional political act, as "a considerable factor in awakening a social sense and conscience willing at last, after much evasion and self-deception, to face the basic issues realistically and constructively" (Locke 20).

By 1963, such readings of Wright's achievement in *Native Son* were so current that Irving Howe could claim of the novel that it was not only a disclosure of the facts of racist oppression, but further, a form of literary liberation from the "protest" novel for those black American writers who came after it ("*Black Boys*" (137).

Yet it is instructive that such an argument should come some two years after Howe's own fearful eulogy for Wright, which lamented that his works were now largely unread, his name unknown (Reilly, *Critical Reception* 350). For indeed, by the 1960s, Wright's literary fortunes had waned--so much so, in fact, that his 1954 novel, *Savage Holiday*, would receive not a single American review (Reilly, *Critical Reception* 239)--and had done so in step with the declining esteem in which the realist novel was held in American literary circles. In fact, as early as 1949, the acuity and oppositional character of Wright's brand of realism would come under fire from his own one-time protege, James Baldwin. Seeing in the realist novel only "an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene" (19), Baldwin would further charge *Native Son* with being no more than "a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy" (22). Such arguments would be echoed some fifteen years later by Ralph Ellison, who, in response to Howe's 1963 attempt to redeem Wright from relative obscurity, would accuse Wright's realism of a politically suspect falsehood, of endorsing "the ideological proposition that what whites think of Negro reality is more important than what Negroes themselves know it to be" (114). If Wright's realism had, at least by the time of *Native Son*'s publication, been seen by reviewers as the weapon with which his fiction assailed American racism, by the early 1960s it had, in Belsey-like terms, become a weapon directed against Wright's own politics.

The late 1960s, however, witnessed a further reversal in Wright's canonical fortunes--witnessed, indeed, his "emergence" as a respectable subject for scholarly research and comment--and one once again tied to new responses to the question of the politics of realism. For as the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and early '60s gave ground slowly to the more militant discourse of Black Power, Wright himself--the originator, as Robert Buffer notes, of the very term (Introduction xxxiii)--experienced a literary resurrection and a new political cachet. As Michel Fabre observes, "racial events, totally independent of literary fashion, began to bring Wright's work back into the limelight. As the civil rights movement tended more and more toward Black Power, its leaders became increasingly aware of the relevance of Wright's message" (vii). And, again, this new literary stature and political relevance were seen as stemming from Wright's critical insight as a writer in the realist mode. Thus for so outspoken a proponent of "Black Power" as Eldridge Cleaver, Wright becomes the chosen literary father figure, precisely because, in his fiction, we find a true picture of an oppressive America that must be changed. For Cleaver, Wright "reigns supreme for his profound political, economic, and social reference" (105), and represents therefore both a useful tool for an oppositional politics and a valuable literary model. But this age of renewed respect for Wright as realist and, as a consequence, political critic, would itself soon give way to a new era in the academy that had so recently accredited him, namely that exemplified by Belsey's "post-Saussurean work on language" and its profound suspicion of the politics of referentiality and, thus, of realism itself.

What have become common, then, are analyses of Wright and, especially, of his most famous work of fiction, which undertake, à la Belsey and Baldwin, to reveal the political conservatism Wright's commitments to realism inevitably entail, or, in ways paralleling Solomon's recent argument, to show how oppositional politics survive in this fiction precisely because it in fact eschews realism. Graham Clarke, praising a later African-American fiction that jettisons referentiality in favour of letting "language and style become the dominant forces of the novel's impetus" (48), sees Wright's *Native Son* as still mired in a realism "constrained by the limits of social determinism" (43). Indeed, even Laura Tanner, who, in the face of Clarke's charges "of narrative conservatism," comes to the defense of Wright's novel, does so by first granting that realism is both reaction and "distortion" (132, 134). If *Native Son* is worth defending, it is because, for Tanner, it effectively deconstructs the realism of its own narrative presence; says Tanner of her "alternative reading," the novel offers a "surprisingly radical critique of the type of narrative conservatism attributed to it" (132). A similar argument may be traced in John M. Reilly's recent essay, "Giving Bigger a Voice: The Politics of Narrative in *Native Son*." Here, Reilly sees Wright's novel as subverting the discursive monopoly of the ruling class "by use of a

narrative point of view that draws readers beneath the externals of surface realism, so that as they are led into empathy with Bigger, they will be denied the conventional attitudes of American racial discourse" (46).

Yet such "exculpatory" readings fundamentally misconstrue Wright's realist and political commitments. If realism is worthy of that admiration he lavishes on it in our second epigraph, this is so, in part at least, because realism is for Wright a mode not of narrative conservatism, but of oppositional potential and force; it is, in his view, the primary way in which "words [can] be weapons" (*Black Boy* 272). Indeed, *Native Son* is a realist text that does effectively critique American class and race relations, in ways that would seem to baffle the charges of reaction and conservatism Belsey and more contemporary critics would level at the realist mode. Moreover, in ways largely overlooked by champions of the novel as both realist and oppositional, *Native Son* is a novel about realism, an argument that proffers realism as precisely that mode of discourse which can, contra Belsey, highlight political contradictions and shatter those conventional and shared political "truths," Belsey's "myths," it reveals to be mere illusion and elision. In Wright, realism becomes self-consciously politicized as an analysis of the ways misrepresentation and fantasy foster both oppression on the basis of class and race, and a murderous alienation in the oppressed themselves. More, Wright's realism is here the proposed medium in which such oppression and alienation may be overcome. In *Native Son*, realism itself, as discursive mode, is cast as a struggle against not only poverty and racism, but the popular American myths and values that perpetuate this poverty and racism. If, as Dorothy Redden has argued, Bigger becomes "almost a stereotype of the skulking black brute who violates and kills pale virgins in their beds" (74), the black rapist of lynch mob rationalizations, he does so not only because of the power of this myth to write his story for him, but also because his own renunciation of a realist discourse precludes, in Wright's eyes, the possibility of struggle against this power. Himself committed to the erasure, the blotting out, of both his own reality and its potentially unifying role as a common ground between himself and others, Bigger ends up abetting his own erasure, and effecting the murderous blotting out of other African Americans.

II

Wright's Bigger Thomas is, as we first meet him, an unemployed black man of twenty, living in a one-room, rat-infested kitchenette with his mother, brother, and sister, and rankling at the restrictions placed upon his life by the tenets and practices of American racism. Indeed, at the outset of the novel, Bigger is presented as a very acute observer of the realities of American racism. As Bigger complains to Gus, his partner in petty crime, "They don't let us do nothing" (20), but, apparently, make whites money. For as Bigger knows, the lines of race that cordon off the

squalid South Side are ones that turn a profit for those white landlords and shopkeepers who live elsewhere. Bigger knows "that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat," and knows moreover that, so caged, they pay twice the rent whites do for their slum dwellings (288). Indeed, as he muses sardonically to himself, even bread is one cent more expensive in South Side grocery stores (289). Everywhere Bigger's aspirations turn, these same lines loom, keeping him, in every sense, in his place, and he knows only too well the risks attendant upon straying from this place. As he walks through a wealthy white neighbourhood, Bigger understands fully that he is a target here, a figure perceived as a threat, a criminal, the dread black rapist of Southern lynch-mob rhetoric: "Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought he was trying to rob or rape somebody" (49). His boyhood dreams of being a pilot or a soldier have run into this same barrier, the school of aviation barring black students as the army of Uncle Sam admits them only "to dig ditches" and "scrub floors" (409). Thus the lessons young Bigger has learned well are ones of his own imprisonment, of American blacks being yoked to the service of the white world. As he himself articulates his experience of African-American reality, white Americans "own the earth [and] say black folks are dogs. They don't let you do nothing but what they want" (406).

Yet if Bigger knows these facts of his own oppression, his response is an attempt to erase this reality, to deny its status as fact and to retreat to a position where its factuality cannot reach him. Rankling at his own circumscribed existence, Bigger withdraws from it, from the world that rebukes him, from those other blacks as sorry and powerless as he, finally from his own consciousness of the real itself. Indeed, because of what he knows of this reality, Bigger pursues a studied rejection of it: He shut [his family's] voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fulness how they lived, he would be swept outside of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough. (9)

What is most remarkable in this passage is the portrait of an existence that is its own self-conscious negation. Bigger, who knows only too well the limits placed on his existence, assiduously obliterates such knowledge from his mind, denying both the suffering of those closest to him and his own frustration. Thus if Bigger is proffered as a character of acute insight into the realities of American racism, he is one also in deliberate flight from these realities.

Indeed, Bigger only lives by a process of erasing his own life. Anxious always "to do something to evade looking so squarely at this problem" (18), he strives towards a denial of it that is its ostensible eradication. Thus the desire, indeed the phrase, predominant in Bigger's tale is that of "blotting it out." Squirming awkwardly in the face of Mr. Dalton's questioning, Bigger aches "to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel this" (53). Caught in the Daltons' car by the friendly overtures of Mary Dalton and her Communist boyfriend, Jan Erlone, he yearns "to seize some heavy object and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out—with himself and them in it" (80). Faced with the claustrophobic existence of his family, he longs not only for a curtain behind which to hide, but also "to wave his hand and blot them out", erasing them as he would those whites who befuddle and terrify him (112). Bigger's persistent desire is for the wholesale erasure of a reality he cannot bear to acknowledge, for the obliteration not only of the whites who oppress, but of those blacks with whom he suffers, of, indeed, his own existence itself. And this desire has, in Wright's novel, its readily available outlet. If Bigger yearns for something that will enable him to forget his own circumstances, this longing is met in *Native Son* by popular media catering precisely to the wish for fantasy rather than realism. As Ross Pudaloff notes, Bigger's world is one "dominated by movies, magazines, newspapers and detective stories" (90), and it is indeed toward these media that Bigger hungrily turns. What they offer him is precisely that for which he longs, an erasure of world that is also an erasure of self. Thus leaving his family's fiat, restless and dissatisfied even with his imminent job interview at the Dalton home, Bigger aches "to see a movie; his senses hungered for it. In a movie he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open" (13). The appeal here is twofold: movies are desired both because they offer dreams rather than that knowledge of reality which only torments him and because they are the kind of dreams requiring no dreamer, because they permit that erasure of self Bigger so desires. Such movies, and with them the pulp fiction of detective magazines, the sensational headlines of the Chicago dailies, and the lyrics of the latest dance tune, provide Bigger with a dream, a diversion, itself powerful enough to suppress the facts of his life. This indeed, as Bigger himself articulates it, is the very heart of their desirability: "He longed for a stimulus powerful enough to focus his attention and drain off his energies. He wanted to run. Or listen to some swing music. Or laugh or joke. Or read a *Real Detective Story Magazine*. Or go to a movie" (31).

But if Bigger longs for such stimuli as an erasure of self and world, what these media in fact present him with is an alternative world, a vision of an existence beyond his experience but not, thanks to these conventional sources, his ken. What Bigger finds, and indeed loves, in the movie-house and pulp magazine is a portrait Of life defined not, as is his own, by

limitations, poverty, and impotence, but rather by possibility, wealth, and power. Bigger's immersion in popular culture thus emerges here not only as a denial of the realities of his own oppression, his own experience, but also as an identification with and endorsement of the wealth and power of those who oppress him. Happily watching the matinee newsreels, Bigger sees a world of white American luxury, a world of "the daughters of the rich taking sun baths in the sands of Florida," a sight that, the commentator informs him, "represents over four billion dollars of America's wealth" (34). Next to this vision, both his own experience and the feature film's portrait of "naked black men and women whirling in wild dances" (36) recede into insignificance. Bigger's mind is instead occupied with an awe-filled longing for that other world, that "real" world of Hollywood fantasies. Consciousness of self and world, as indeed of the black "savages" of B-movies, is here "replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing" (36). Not only Trader Horn's African scene, but his own experience as a black American are effectively occluded by media-fostered dreams of a white world, a "realer" because desired reality of opulence and power. But for Wright as realist, this erasure of self and world represents only Bigger's schooling in submission, an endorsement of the power others hold over him. In *Native Son* to accept the dream, to eschew realism, is only to perpetuate the realities of oppression. In Bigger's eyes, then, those well-dressed whites of his movie-house fantasies are "smart people; they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it" (36-37). The wealth and power of white America become here, in Bigger's attempts to blot out his reality, his own standards of value. In his mass media evasion, Bigger ends up not only retreating from his world, his people, indeed himself, but identifying himself with those powerful whites who, as he knows, will not let him do anything. Scorning poor whites as "stupid" for their inability to get hold of millions (37), Bigger spends his free time "playing white," assuming the roles of J. P. Morgan, the President, and white generals, speaking lines "heard...in the movies" (19). Having found his proper objects of respect and value in the wealthy whites he himself knows to own the earth, Bigger seeks a final erasure of himself in the dream of being these whites, of dispensing with their wealth, of making their decisions, of, indeed, dealing in their fashion with "the niggers...raising sand all over the country" (20). Thus if, as Wright himself describes him, Bigger is a man "trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter [comes] to him through newspapers, magazines, radios, movies" ("How Bigger" 513), he is one also who makes his answer by assenting to the values of those who oppress him, by, indeed, contradicting and denying the reality he suffers.

For the Marxist Wright of 1940, this assent, of course, is no strange phenomenon. As he himself, paraphrasing Lenin, wrote in 1938, "oppressed minorities often reflect the techniques of the

bourgeoisie more brilliantly than some sections of the bourgeoisie themselves. The psychological importance of this becomes meaningful when it is recalled that oppressed minorities...strive to assimilate the virtues of the bourgeoisie in the assumption that by doing so they can lift themselves into a higher social sphere" (Richard Wright Reader 38). While we shall soon see how Bigger himself, after his accidental killing of Mary Dalton, makes this assumption, what is most important in this identification is how it feeds both Bigger's own sense of terror and powerlessness in the face of white America and his alienation from all those--his fellow blacks, the poor whites, "Reds" like Jan and Boris Max--with whom he might struggle not to evade but to change the world. Certainly Bigger's identification with the wealth and power of the oppressor leads to a contempt for those whites who will not play this role.

Of the Communists who will become first his scapegoats and then his defenders, Bigger has only the vaguest, most caricatured of notions, one gleaned from that mass media dream-world with which he blots out his experience: "He remembered seeing many cartoons of Communists in newspapers and always they had flaming torches in their hands and wore beards and were trying to commit murder or set things on fire. People who acted that way were crazy" (*Native Son* 74). Yet if Bigger has learned through newspaper stereotypes that the "Reds" are crazy, what most repels him is their manifest lack of identification with that world he himself holds dear. As Bigger sees it, the problem with the "Reds," as with the stupid poor whites, is precisely their exclusion from the world of wealth and power: "He didn't want to meet any Communists. They didn't have any money" (73).

If Bigger's scorn thus reveals a contempt for the common, for those who share in some sense that world of dispossession and disempowerment which is his own, this contempt is all the more acute and alienating in Bigger's relations with other African Americans. For at the heart of Bigger's admiration for the white world captured in matinee newsreels is, as we have seen, a hatred for, the desire to erase, his own poverty and powerlessness. Bigger retreats behind a curtain in his dealings with other blacks because, identifying with wealth and power, he can see in others like himself only contemptible weakness, indeed only a reflection of that position he occupies and loathes. Bigger's dealings with his family, "friends," and lover, then, are all governed by feelings of shame and self-hatred, feelings bound up in his education in, and identification with, the values of wealth and power learned in newspapers and movie houses. Toward the family for whom he announces his contempt at the very opening of the novel Bigger can feel only a scornful pity and shame. Even as they weep and plead for him as he awaits trial, Bigger can only recoil in disgust at what he sees as the revelation of that weakness he wants to erase. They are for him no solace, but rather only the badge of his shameful impotence, something therefore to be

obliterated, denied: "Bigger wanted to whirl and blot them from sight.... He felt that all of the white people in the room were measuring every inch of his weakness. He identified himself with his family and felt their naked shame" (341).

If Bigger here "identifies" with his family, it is only in terms of ascribing to them that shame and loathing he feels, a shame and a loathing that stem rather from his identification with the scorn he sees in the eyes of white onlookers. This dynamic of loathing and withdrawing from those who suffer as he does governs all of Bigger's relations with other African Americans, such that his dealings with them become rehearsals of rejection. Bigger does not "think enough of" the gang with whom he pulls his petty heists to care what they think of him, or ever to attempt to explain himself to them (47). Likewise, toward his "girl," Bessie, he feels, as he admits to Communist lawyer Boris Max, neither love nor hate; she is, in his own words, "just my girl. I don't reckon I was ever in love with nobody.... You have to have a girl, so I had Bessie" (408). And, indeed, precisely insofar as this compulsory "girl" assumes a human significance, a black face and a black life like his own, she is to be denied: "he felt that there were two Bessies: one a body that he had just had and wanted badly again, the other was in Bessie's face; it asked questions...He wished he could clench his fist and swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face and leave the other helpless and yielding before him" (159).⁽ⁿ³⁾ With family, friends and lover, Bigger can only re-enact that erasure of self he pursues throughout the novel, an eradication of a reality that is for him, looking on it through an admiration for and identification with a white American dream, not only unbearable but contemptible. What is to be sought instead is an identification with the oppressor in such dreams, an identification that may permit Bigger's assertion of difference from the weak and indeed from himself, but that marks the death of the very possibility of solidarity with the oppressed: "There were rare moments when a feeling and longing for solidarity with other black people would take hold of him.... [B]ut that dream would fade when he looked at the other black people near him. Even though black like him, he felt there was too much difference between him and them to allow for a common binding and a common life" (129).

Yet if Bigger's rejection of the reality he knows thus significantly sounds the death knell for any possibility of unity with those like himself, his admiration for the affluent whites of Hollywood film leads him to actual assaults on other blacks and, indeed, to that barely conscious act, the killing of Mary Dalton, which is his own undoing. For if Bigger is awe-struck in the face of those wealthy white figures in his movie-house dreams, it is awe holding terror as well as admiration, a terror which leads him to an actual and violent blotting out of black victims--and ultimately of himself. The white world with which he seeks to erase his own experience figures in Bigger's imagination no longer as a social system or an aggregate of individuals, but

as a powerful, indeed fearsome, natural force; it is for him both the paradise of power and wealth and "that looming mountain of white hate," something both inhuman and terrifying in that very power he covets in it (333). Moreover, although Bigger himself sees this fearsomeness as somehow different from his imagining of this world in the pre-fabricated dreams of American cinema, his schooling there in an identification with the powerful white force that hates is itself also an education in terror before this force. While Bigger, when confronted with Mary Dalton in the flesh rather than in her celluloid projections, muses "in amazement how different the girl had seemed in the movie. On the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it pleased" (62), the lesson he leaves the theatre having learned is one of fear rather than of empowerment. Identifying with the white power and affluence on the screen, Bigger becomes increasingly anxious about his gang's imminent robbery of a white man and leaves the theatre "with a mounting feeling of fear" (38). The mythical world with which he attempts to blot out himself and those like him becomes, in this very attempt, "a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet" (129). It is as such a mythic force that this world becomes the motive behind the violence Bigger enacts on those closest to himself. For having learned the lesson not only of an admirable and validated white pre-eminence, but also of the fearsome character of this pre-eminence, Bigger's first concern is to derail that "violation of ultimate taboo"--his gang's plan to rob Blum's Deli (14). What this derailment significantly involves is violence against other blacks, those "friends" with whom he commits his petty crimes. As cohort Gus appears at the appointed time, making the robbery an imminent reality, Bigger, gripped by terror, not only assaults him, but pulls a knife on him and makes him, on his knees and helpless, lick it (41-44). This whole performance, the beating and humiliation of another African American, is both the result of Bigger's own helpless fear before the endorsed white power of his dreams and itself a blotting out or coveting up of this fear, both for their and his own benefit: "His confused emotions made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun. But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended on how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness" (47).

Bigger's violence issues not only from his own persistent need to erase what he knows to be the case, but also from that denied fear which is itself the product of this attempt. Moreover, as with his early drawing of that curtain which separates him from his family, the result here is not only a bleeding and humbled Gus, but a Bigger Thomas once more cut off from those closest to, and most like, himself: "he knew that what had happened today put an end to his being with them in any more jobs" (47).

III

If Bigger's negation of self and world, tangled as it is with a love for and fear of the white world of fantasy, only alienates him from those who share his reality, this separation, figured as violence, is most extreme in the case of his girlfriend, Bessie. Bigger, as noted, is already effectively alienated from Bessie, viewing her not as person, but only as a potential source of oblivion and gratification. Insofar as she might be anything more, insofar as she might take on any human reality or substance, she is herself to be denied in the most violent of fantasies. Indeed if, as I am arguing here, Wright's *Native Son* presents an argument as to the murderous and oppressive consequences of living the ethics of blotting out, it is in the case of Bessie, who is in fact blotted out by Bigger, that this argument is most forcefully made.

Yet in order to understand this fulfillment of Bigger's desire to sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face, we must turn first to that earlier blotting out, the death of Mary Dalton. What is central in this fateful "murder," and indeed that cold-blooded killing of Bessie which follows, is again a fear and a violence born of the lie.

The Bigger who loves the Hollywood idiom of white power knows only too well the myths by which such figures enact their real power over him and his fellow black Americans. As revealed in that reflection on his own vulnerability to the charge of rape noted above, Bigger knows both the myths white America maintains about itself and those by which it defines his reality. The logic of the lynch mob, the white stereotype of the black rapist, are hardly foreign to his consciousness. As he tells Max, all he knows of Mary Dalton is that "they kill us for women like her" (405), and do so with a rhetoric of the rape and the black rapist: "They say black men do that. So it don't matter if I did or if I didn't" (404).

Here racist myth, with good reason, figures both as a determinant of his reality and as part of his own dreaming identification with the white world that produces this oppressive reality. Earlier, admiring and affirming that white power and luxury captured in newsreel images of lounging, billion-dollar debutantes, Bigger in this very endorsement jokes that if friend Jack were indeed part of this fantasy world, "[he]d be hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas" (34). Yet if this myth of the black rapist, a myth that bears strange if real and bloody fruit, is thus part of the fantasy Bigger himself pursues as the erasure of self and experience, its issue once more is a deadly terror. For if Mary Dalton dies unviolated, she dies because of the myth of the black violator and the fear it inspires in Wright's desperate dreamer. Indeed, the scene of Mary's death is scripted by this myth, which, for Bigger, as much as for the whites with whom he identifies, is accepted as truth. Having carried the drunk Mary to her room, Bigger is caught in her bedroom as the blind Mrs. Dalton enters. Knowing all too well the lethal power of a fantasy that would label him criminal and rapist here, Bigger is

seized by "a hysterical terror" (97), a terror itself part of his immersion in a fiction whose true effects he knows by heart: "He felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage" (95). Gripped by the fear this fantasy produces, seemingly bound by the role it would assign him, Bigger, in a desperate attempt not to be discovered, silences Mary with her pillow, inadvertently smothering her (100). Here the very terror produced by his understanding of the racist myths of his coveted white world pushes Bigger toward a final blotting out, and towards his assumption of that very role, that of the black criminal, such myths would assign him. And, significantly, Bigger himself assents to the logic of these myths, assumes that identity they insist upon: "He was black and he had been in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her. That was what everybody would say anyhow" (119).

If this killing reveals the murderous aspect of Bigger's programme of denial, it also marks the fulfillment of his greatest wish, his immersion in that world of white American fantasy he has always admired and feared. Indeed, Bigger himself, in assuming that identity of murderer and rapist which is his in this world, revels in this immersion. It is, for him, the beginning of a new life, the erasure of the old. Now he is, in his own eyes, the self-made and powerful man of Hollywood's American story, and one moreover on the make and on the rise. With this act, he feels, he has made "a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own" (119).⁽ⁿ⁴⁾ By this act, he sees himself as having become that man of action and power he has never been but has dreamed of being, the hero of that American movie narrative of wealth, power, and success with which he has identified in the past. Now in possession of the money roll from Mary's purse, he flatters himself as the man of wealth and power looking forward to his next enterprise: "he was a man who had come in sight of a goal, then had won it, and in winning it had seen just within grasp another goal, higher, greater" (148). That this higher, greater goal is his plan to extort more money from the Daltons, by leading them to believe Mary kidnapped by the Communists, is itself significant. For in having arrived, by way of dreams and the fear they foster, as the man of power and decision, Bigger himself conceives and enacts this new identity as a living of the lie. The great insight won over Mary's body is one of universal delusion, a blindness from which he alone, he feels, is exempt. People, he now "sees," are "blind to what did not fit. They did not want to see what others were doing if that doing did not feed their own desires" (120). The lesson here, for Bigger, is to use this blindness to one's own advantage, to perform the quotidian, all the while pursuing that higher goal of personal satisfaction; the new self-made man of his own Hollywood drama, his task is "to act just like others acted, live like they lived, and while they were not looking, do what you wanted" (120).

Thus made "murderer" by that tangle of fear and fantasy outlined above, Bigger insists that by this act he has transcended fear and understood the reality of

American society. If he feels he may assume the identity of that white American hero with whom he has so long identified, this identification is for him not the acceptance of the lie, but the canny use of it. Yet the results of this manipulation are verily familiar. For through the lie of his ransom note, and indeed the new ethos of the lie just articulated, Bigger brings about only his further alienation from all around him and finally his own destruction by the lies of white racism. The new and improved Bigger, bankroll in hand and new plans on the go, feels now "cut off from [the old gang] forever" and doles out packs of cigarettes to them as a sign of his new power and distinction (125). His family, too, recede from him to join the malleable ranks of the benighted, the secret of his "murder" itself becoming another "natural wall from behind which he could look at them" (119). Finally, Bessie, who will soon suffer the true violence of the lie, also fades further into the distance. If she remains important to him as a sexual diversion, as a way indeed to keep from seeing the truth of his crime, "that terrible image of Mary's head" (150), her voice and very presence are themselves blotted out by Bigger's new, big-money dreams: "Bigger was not listening. The world of sound fell abruptly away from him and a vast picture appeared before his eyes.... why could he not, not send a letter to the Daltons, asking for money?" (155).

If Bigger's living of the dream he has so long cherished represents only a further retreat into isolation, his writing of this letter, his new creation of the lie, becomes the tool by which he can target for violence all those who would seek strength in speaking truly and overcoming such isolation. Having learned from his own media-fed dreaming that the "Reds," like Chicago blacks, are hated and vulnerable, Bigger resolves to make the note appear to be the work of the Communist Party: "Bigger knew the things that white folks hated to hear Negroes ask for; and he knew that these were the things the Reds were always asking for" (225). What here might be the identification of purpose and struggle becomes, rather, for the Bigger who seeks the world offered in media dreams, a tool for profiting by the blood of others who might be allies. Indeed, Bigger's primary target in the construction of his "story" for the Daltons is Mary's boyfriend Jan, the very "Red" who has argued for such an alliance: "Don't you think if we got together we could stop things like that [the murder of Bigger's father]?" (85). Rather than responding to such appeals, Bigger begins instead composing lies that will be headlines out of headlines he himself has read and taken to heart. Thus he is cast here by Wright as parrot rather than creator, the idiom of his ransom note, as of his earlier playing white, borrowed from the mass media with which he has sought to blot out the real: "Get ten thousand in 5 and 10 bills and put it in a shoe box.... That's good. He had read that somewhere" (203). With this letter, itself designed by the news of the dailies, Bigger starts making this news, making, as the reporters at the Dalton home note, great copy. But what this copy means is not only the reiteration of lies about, and persecution of, a

political organization whose demands are his own, but the promulgation of those lies and myths by which his people are oppressed. As one of the reporters exclaims, "What a story! Don't you see it? These Negroes want to be left alone and these Reds are forcing 'em to live with 'em, see? Every wire in the country'll carry it!" (246). If, then, Bigger has become the powerful man admired on the movie screen, he has done so not only by a further retreat from those who would fight against oppression, but also by himself becoming the reproduction of the lies that serve oppression.

Bigger's insistent rehearsal of mass media ideals, as one achieved only by the maintenance of lies that oppress, becomes all the more lethal when his own lie is dashed. When Mary's remains are found, Bigger becomes even greater copy, and a copy, now not of the caricatured "Reds" of Sunday-paper cartoons, but of that myth of the black criminal and rapist that was indeed the source of his "self-creation." While scarcely free of the fear that made this crime when he dreamed of himself as the hero of newspaper copy (see, e.g., 176; 207), Bigger, discovered, is now wholly returned to that terror and to the myths inspiring it. Watching the discovery of Mary's remains, Bigger feels the fantasy of the self-made man quickly dissolve: "There was just the old feeling, the feeling he had had all his life: he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they would accuse him. It was the old feeling, hard and constant again now" (253). Bigger's living of the lie has thus only surrendered him all the more forcefully to its identification of him as the accused, and has further made of him the stuff of racist myth and headlines, myth and headlines that drive him to terrified flight and target both Chicago blacks and "Reds" for violence and persecution. If he is now, as "AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME" (281), the stuff of headlines as the black rapist of racist myth, he is also the occasion, as such copy, for massive assaults on the black community he has scorned and on the Communists whose appeals for solidarity he himself has targeted. These headlines have themselves effected other news, as blacks throughout the South Side are terrorized by police and vigilantes: "Police reported that many windows in the Negro sections were smashed.... Reports were current that several Negro men were beaten in various North and West Side neighborhoods" (282). If blacks are beaten and harassed, so too are Bigger's cartoon "Reds," as the Communist headquarters are raided and hundreds of members arrested (297).

Thus Bigger's own programme of blotting it all out ends in the violent triumph of the lies of those rich whites he sought to become. It ends indeed not only in violence against those whom he has scorned but also in the erasure, the mortal blotting out, of himself and others. For Bigger himself is, before his final erasure, already erased by the racist stereotype of his own newspaper copy. No longer the terrified man who killed in fear of this stereotype and its consequences, he is now, for the media he has cherished, "a beast

untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization" whose "central crime...is rape!" (323; 481). Yet if Bigger is thus blotted out by the myth of the black rapist, this is an erasure Bigger himself helps to effect, and not only by that nurtured fear which led to Mary's death. For while, as Bigger knows, "when they killed him it would be for Mary's death" (351), the unraped and accidental victim of his own terror, Bigger, in living out his newspaper dreams of success, has made himself in fact the murderer and rapist this myth holds him to be, a murderer and rapist who, like this myth itself, victimizes African Americans. While Bigger dreams his headline dreams of extortion and personal advancement, he is already plotting to make his desired erasure of Bessie complete. For the Bigger who fancies himself a man on the rise, Bessie is a useful, but disposable tool, one to be rubbed out when she becomes a liability. And here, too, her lethal liability is figured in terms of fear, Bigger's own fear of discovery: "He was afraid that he would have to kill her before it was all over. She would not go with him and he could not leave her behind" (207). Once this discovery is made, once Bigger has become the rapist of myth, Bessie's fate is sealed. No longer a stepping stone for his advancement but an object for his fear, she is now to be used one last time and irrevocably blotted out. Thus Bigger, seizing here that sexual diversion she has always represented to him, rapes her in an act that fulfills his desire for her erasure.

While she protests and resists, her voice comes to a Bigger still living only the fantasy "from out of a deep, far-away silence and he paid her no heed" (270). This violent silencing, however, is for him insufficient; her irritating intrusions on his fantasy, her very human reality, must be obliterated finally in murder (274). If, then, the Bigger who lives only by eliding his own reality and living the dreams generated by those who oppress him becomes himself the violent oppressor, he does so by his transformation into the very figure these whites hold him to be. And this transformation is fatal not only for Bessie, but, ultimately, for Bigger himself. For if by this brutal act he becomes the rapist and murderer as whom he has always dreaded being accused, he also thereby provides the myths that will kill him with the proof of their validity and justice. At the coroner's hearing, which will produce the charges of rape and murder for which he will be condemned to death, Bessie figures not as victim, but as damning testimony, proof that he is, now in reality and not just in racist myths, the black rapist everyone expects him to be. Here Bessie's raped and mutilated body is actually presented as evidence against him, evidence of his being, as indeed he has become, the stereotype of white fantasies. What's more, as Bigger knows, this evidence, his own violent transformation into myth by his own urge to deny the real, is already his death sentence: "They were bringing Bessie's body in now to make white men and women feel that nothing short of a quick blotting out of his life would make the city safe again. They were using his having killed Bessie to kill him for his having killed Mary, to cast him in a light that would sanction any action

taken to destroy him" (383). Thus Bigger's own desire for the dream leads, by way of his transformation into myth, to his own final erasure, his own fatal blotting out. And as Bigger himself understands, this final erasure and alienation are things he himself has helped to bring about: "There was no one to whom he had anything to say, for he had never given himself whole-heartily to anyone or anything, except murder.... Of the old gang, only Jack had been his friend, and he had never been so close to Jack as he would have liked. And Bessie was dead; he had killed her" (489).

IV

If Wright thus demonstrates the denial of the real to entail the oppression of the group denied, his novel also posits as the empowering and indeed life-saving alternative to this cycle of killing a solidarity and struggle born not of denial, but of a discourse of disclosure, of indeed a realism attuned to the contradictions of conventional myth. Central here are Bigger's encounters with those very Communists he himself has set up for persecution. While the arguments of Jan Erlone and lawyer Boris Max are dismissed by such critics as Dan McCall as "the forensic slag, the endless cliches, and awkward set of speeches" (367)(n5), they figure in the text itself as Bigger's only experience of communication with, rather than erasure of, the other. Jan and Max are virtually the only characters in the novel ever to question Bigger about anything other than his crimes, and to do so as a means not of accusation but of understanding and common struggle.

If Jan argues, as we have seen, for a common fight against oppression, he does this by way of a desire to discover, understand, and communicate the real. Like Mary, he wants "to see.... to know these people" (79), and to do so through a language at odds with Bigger's own silencing fantasies. Yet perhaps most important here is Bigger's extended, pre-trial interview with Boris Max. Max, who holds that disclosure is itself the medium of struggle--"Not if we fight. Not if I tell them how you've had to live" (427)--uses the fact, the real, as his weapon both in court and in his assaults on Bigger's own cocoon of withdrawal. His language, one that draws forth Bigger's thoughts and experiences, also ties these to a larger world of persecution and resistance, disclosing a world of common interest at odds with Bigger's own contempt for that which is like his own suffering: "They [the powerful whites] hate trade unions. They hate folks who try to organize. They hate Jan" (402). Although such potential for identification with those like himself, an identification and a struggle to be born out of a discourse rather than a denial of the real, comes too late to change Bigger's fate, the recognition of such potential serves for Bigger himself as an epiphany resonant of Wright's own in *Black Boy*. It is Bigger himself who insists upon the significance of this interview, of the brand of communication it represents, and he does so by seeing it as a form of empowerment, an empowerment that stems from acknowledging and

working with, rather than mentally and physically blotting out, others like himself: "Mr. Max, I sort of saw other people, too" (496). Bigger has "spoken to Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life, not even to himself" (417), and what this very act has revealed to him is the appeal and power of communication with the reality of other human beings; he sees now that "in [this] touch, response of recognition, there would be union, identity; there would be a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him" (420).

If Bigger's own case is hopeless, he nonetheless dies a rather different figure, one now filled with the hope such recognition inspires. Thus his last words are an uncharacteristic appeal to another he has once scorned and scapegoated: "Tell Tell Mister Tell Jan hello" (502; ellipses in text). In all of this, I would argue, we see Wright executing through his realism a subtle and detailed dissection of the costs of racism in both physical and psychic terms, one that mobilizes realist narrative as a means to critique both the violence of racist oppression and the disabling power of racist discourse. The realist mode in *Native Son* enables an oppositional political analysis that flies in the face of recent theses, in Wright criticism and elsewhere, as to the inherent conservatism of realist conventions.

Indeed, the text itself highlights the importance of the realist mode to its own emancipatory concerns by arguing, via the tale of Bigger Thomas, for realism, for referential and documentary language, as the prime weapon against an oppression that is seen to thrive on elision and misrepresentation. Despite Tanner's assertion that *Native Son* assumes its radical stature by its undermining the "conservatism" of its own apparent realism (132), it is a language of realism the novel itself champions as the means by which we may fight both conservatism and oppression. Words that attend to and express the facts of lived experience are here not only Wright's medium for his own analysis of racial and class oppression in America, but the message of this medium itself, and the strategies of the classic realist text are here deployed not, as Belsey would have it, to do, but to expose and undermine the work of ideology. Wright's work thus points to the descriptive poverty of such recent formulations of the politics of realism, not only as regards his own corpus, but potentially a whole tradition of realist political fiction, as well. Perhaps now, in the age "post" Belsey's post-Saussurean thoughts, it is time to begin reassessing not only Wright's political concerns and achievements as realist, but the oppositional as well as reactionary potential of literary realism more generally.

Notes (n1) Indeed, the durability of this critical truism attests, I would argue, to the on-going importance of post-structuralist premises to the critical practice of the academy of the 1990s. While Belsey herself derives her critique from the works of such French thinkers as Barthes and Althusser (see, especially

chapters 2 and 3 of *Critical Practice*), this assault on the drive to representation that is realism is common to most contemporary French thought. If Barthes, in "The Reality Effect," attacks the ideological force of "the referential illusion" (148), more recent work by such thinkers as Jean-Francois Lyotard would seem merely to extend such an assessment. For Lyotard, literary realists must always be "apologists for what exists" (6), and he discerns in the desire for realism a palpable political evil: "we hear [in calls for realist work] murmurings of the desire to reinstitute terror and fulfill the phantasm of taking possession of reality" (16). Though less explicitly concerned with realism as a literary mode, Jacques Derrida, in his own attacks on a logocentric desire for the referent that is "nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism" (3), would seem implicitly to concur with such dismissals, and indeed himself charges literature tout court with having "almost always and almost everywhere, according to some fashions and across very diverse ages, lent itself to this transcendent reading, in that search for the signified" (160). If such anti-realist, poststructuralist premises no longer require Belsey's brand of polemical introduction, they are nonetheless still assumed and operative in much contemporary scholarship, and stand, as I hope the present work will demonstrate, in need of their own critical re-assessment.

(n2) Examples of the mini-explosion in Wright studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s include not only such biographical works as Constance Webb's *Richard Wright: A Biography* and Michel Fabre's more comprehensive *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, but also a wide array of works of criticism and introduction, treating, often in eponymous fashion, the re-emergence of Wright as a writer of critical, as well as political, interest. Of these latter, see, for example, Robert Bone's *Richard Wright*, Dan McCall's *The Example of Richard Wright*, Milton and Patricia Rickels's *Richard Wright*, Keneth Kinnamon's impressive study, *The Emergence of Richard Wright*, and collections of criticism edited by Richard Abcairn and (collaboratively) David Ray and Robert M. Farnsworth under the respective titles of *Richard Wright's Native Son: A Critical Handbook* and *Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives*.

(n3) Indeed it is such passages as these, with their violent expression of Bigger's desire to erase his world and the other blacks who populate it, that have led many critics to attack Wright's fiction for its apparent misogyny. Since, at least, Michele Wallace's 1978 identification of Wright as the founding father of the cult of "Black Macho," Wright scholars have targetted what they see as his fiction's attempt "to appropriate (and thus dehumanize) women by reducing them to objects of male status conflict" (France 414). Such criticisms are echoed by Caesar Blake, who sees the women of *Native Son* as functioning only as targets of male violence (195), Nagueyatti Warren, who argues Wright labels all his women either "bitches" or "whores" (60), and Houston Baker, who reads Wright as the champion of an

ascendant and essentially misogynist modernity (222). Indeed one-time friend and biographer Margaret Walker even makes the claim that in Wright's "subconscious mind all black women were whores, bitches or cunts and deserved to be treated as such" (163). Such critics, however, would seem to equate Wright with his protagonist, and fail to note how Wright casts Bigger's violence against women as both the product of that studied anti-realism Wright is attacking and indeed as the very source of Bigger's own ultimate destruction.

(n4) Critics of the novel have been quick to agree with Bigger's own assessment on this score, and have thus missed a central component of Wright's argument for the oppositional politics of realism. Robert Bone, Milton and Patricia Rickels, Charles De Arman, Robert Butler, and Valerie Smith all agree with Bigger in viewing Mary's slaying as a liberating act, one by which Bigger frees himself from his fear and takes on, for the first time, the task of defining himself. Such readings, which I would argue have helped foster those of Wright as misogynist, ignore the ways in which the novel reveals Bigger's crimes to be the result of a fear itself the product of his acting out others' definitions of himself and the world. While Bigger, living a fantasy of new-found power, claims this "murder" as a liberating act, such claims are undercut the novel. In this very passage, in which Bigger first exults in his crime, the text itself questions the extent to which this act is Bigger's at all: "Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself it had been an accident" (Native Son 119). Once his crime is discovered, moreover, even Bigger's own belief as to his transcendence of fear and powerlessness are dashed: "his whole body was wrapped in a sheet of fear It was the old feeling, hard and constant again now" (253).

(n5) Houston A. Baker also bemoans what he sees as Wright's lamentable "lack of immunity to the lure of a peculiarly materialist historiography" (222), yet I agree rather with Barbara Foley in her assertion that even Max's lengthy speeches serve, in a novel that deals with the deadly consequences of the denial of experience by popular myth, to "question the very self-evidence of 'experience'" (198) and to force the reader to confront actual social conditions rather than the easy stereotype (191).

(n6) While the persistence of the caricature of literary realism I am contesting here reveals the extent to which poststructuralist thinking and assumptions remain very much operative in literary criticism of the 1990s, recent work has been arguing for myriad alternative theoretical paths to bring literary study "beyond" poststructuralism. See in particular collections edited by Nancy Easterlin and Barbara Riebling--After Poststructuralism: Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory--and Wendell V. Harris--Beyond Poststructuralism: The Speculations of Theory and the Experience of Reading. Although these volumes devote relatively little space to the ways in which poststructuralist readings often entail a blindness to

the oppositional politics of literary texts, Riebling's own essay, "Remodeling Truth, Power and Society" (Easterlin and Riebling 177-201), provides a cogent critique of the ways in which the subversion-containment model adopted by New Historicist Renaissance scholars from Foucault involves a view of political history as effectively static and immune to meaningful critique or transformation. As I hope the present essay demonstrates, however, there remains much work to be done in this "post" age on how literary texts themselves, as well as literary theories, can enact an oppositional politics.

Works Cited

- Abcaim, Richard, ed. *Richard Wright's Native Son: A Critical Handbook*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1970.
- Baker, Houston A., Jr. "On Knowing Our Place." *Gates and Appiah* 200-25.
- Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon, 1955.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Reality Effect." *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986. 141-48.
- Belsey, Catherine. *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen, 1980.
- Blake, Caesar. "On Richard Wright's Native Son." *Rough Justice: Essays on Crime and Literature*. Ed. M. Friedland. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991. 187-99.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Bigger Thomas*. New York: Chelsea, 1990.
- Bone, Robert. *Richard Wright*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1969.
- Butler, Robert J. Introduction. *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*. Ed. Robert J. Butler. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995. xxv-xxxix.
- . *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero*. Boston: Twayne, 1991.
- Clarke, Graham. "Beyond Realism: Recent Black Fiction and the Language of 'The Real Thing'." *Black American Literature Forum* 16.1 (1982): 43-48.
- Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Dell, 1970.
- de Arman, Charles. "Bigger Thomas: The Symbolic Negro and the Discrete Human Entity." *Bloom* 83-89.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. And Intro. Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.

Easterlin, Nancy, and Barbara Riebling, eds. *After Poststructuralism: Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory*. Foreword Frederick Crews. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993.

Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1972.

Fabre, Michel. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. Trans.

Isabel Barzun. New York: William Morrow, 1973.

Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989.

Foley, Barbara. "The Politics of Poetics: Ideology and Narrative Form in An American Tragedy and Native Son." *Gates and Appiah* 188-99.

France, Alan. "Misogyny and Appropriation in Wright's Native Son."

Modern Fiction Studies 34.3 (1988): 413-23.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993.

Harris, Wendell V., ed. *Beyond Poststructuralism: The Speculations of Theory and the Experience of Reading*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996.

Howe, Irving. "Black Boys and Native Sons." *Abcaim* 135-43.

Kinnamon, Keneth. *The Emergence of Richard Wright*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1972.

Locke, Alain. n. t. *Gates and Appiah* 19-25.

Lytard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985*. Trans. Don Barry,

et al. *Afterword Wlad Godzich*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992.

McCall, Dan. *The Example of Richard Wright*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969.

----- "Wright's American Hunger." *Gates and Appiah* 359-68.

Pudaloff, Russ. "Native Son and Mass Culture." *Bloom* 90-102.

Ray, David, and Robert M. Farnsworth, eds. *Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1973.

Redden, Dorothy S. "Richard Wright and Native Son: Not Guilty." *Bloom* 73-82.

Reilly, John M. "Giving Bigger a Voice: The Politics of Narrative in Native Son." *New Essays on Native Son*. Ed. Keneth Kinnamon. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. 35-62.

-----, ed. and intro. *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception*. n. p. Burt Franklin, 1978.

Rickels, Milton, and Patricia Rickels. *Richard Wright*. Austin: Steck Vaughn, 1970.

Smith, Valerie. "Alienation and Creativity in the Fiction of Richard Wright." *Gates and Appiah* 433-47.

Solomon, William. "Politics and Rhetoric in the Novel in the 1930s." *American Literature* 68.4 (1996): 799-818.

Tanner, Laura. "Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language in Richard Wright's Native Son." *Gates and Appiah* 132-48.

Walker, Margaret. *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius*. New York: Warner, 1988.

Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Dial, 1979.

Warren, Nagueyatti. "Black Girls and Native Sons: Female Images in Selected Works by Richard Wright." *Richard Wright: Myths and*

Realities. Ed. C. James Trotman. New York: Garland, 1988 59-77.

Webb, Constance. *Richard Wright: A Biography*. New York: Putnam, 1968.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

----- "How 'Bigger' Was Born." *Native Son*. Intro. Arnold Rampersad. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. 503-40.

----- *Native Son*. Intro. Arnold Rampersad. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

----- *Richard Wright Reader*. Ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

~~~~~

By Damon Marcel DeCoste, Concordia University

## Fools Crow

---

The discussion of the book and the history of Plains Indians and their interactions with whites led to an extended discussion of contemporary reservation life and values. Stereotypes abounded, both positive and negative, and some argued that the "handouts" to American Indians should be stopped: just pick a date, and after that they're on their own...get a job, etc. Perhaps as it should, the discussion took note of my historical factual information, but the dynamic kept moving back to present resentments. The local histories in eastern Wyoming seem unable to move away from or past old animosities and distrust.

Bob A Brown, 4-15-04

---

Everyone loved the book but the general consensus was that perhaps the book did not make as "big a difference" as the other books in the series.

I gave background on the Siksika, Kainahas, and Pikuni and the historical context of the novel; the Marias River Massacre and the small pox epidemics. (I attended a conference on Susan Badger Doyle's work on the Bozeman Trail from which I learned that Canadians refer to the Siksika as the Blackfeet, whereas U.S. scholars and writers refer to the Kihanas (Blood) and Pikuni (Piegans) as Blackfoot.)

We discussed the role of myth, the patterns of timelessness, story telling and dreams within Native American culture. This led to an interesting discussion of "reality" and the difficulty Euro-American's have when trying to understand and grasp Native American interpretations of, and relationships to, the world around them and the ways in which Native American's derive their sense of purpose and identity from the natural world. All agreed this book was an excellent way to "enter the Blackfoot" world.

During our discussion of Owl Child and Fool's Crow a group member took us into an interesting discussion of how one can be an individual without being a renegade; what paths people choose to get ahead or support community values. We also discussed the ending of the book. Some members found it abrupt and unrealistic.. I presented Welch's comments that he wanted to present a new hero, that of Fools Crow - a man who cannot change the future, but does not despair. Fools Crow brings back the spiritual tools of cultural survival. Welch brings forth the importance of the story teller which is crucial to cultural and psychic survival as stories confer meaning and identity in the Indian world. He is a story teller himself and through the hero Fools Crow brings forth the stories. This led us into a discussion of what stories we tell and why, and the role of story telling in connecting generations.

Katie Curtiss 02-03

---

In discussing the book members talked of experiences they could relate to this story even though they were

culturally separate. (This group relates more easily to Caucasian/American Native experience than to Caucasian/African American or Caucasian/Hispanic). They tried to relate the relationship of the soldiers and Indians to our soldiers and Iraqi soldiers and citizens. They also talked about whether reservations should have been developed for Indians and what might have been a better way to handle the western expansion onto their land, which led to discussion of reparation payments to Indians for past wrongs of U.S. govt.

Richard Kalber 02-03

---

[e-mail to WCH] When I went through the books proposed for next year, I came across the above title which I knew nothing about. So I got a copy and I just finished it, and while I enjoyed it and thought it to be well done, I am not sure it rises to the level of a work that changed society, or became a commonplace of the language. Can you tell me who recommended the book, and why they thought it had done such things? Thanks.

Dennis Coelho

---

Judy,

Please do feel free to tell Dennis that I recommended Fools Crow. It might also be useful for Dennis to know other members of the selection committee if those people don't mind being known. I don't know how we truly gauge which books changed society. I know that many of the books we discussed in our group seemed to have had massive impact in certain spheres and among certain groups and none at all in other spheres. I think our book list ended up being more modest than Dennis's question implies. For example, we pulled back mostly from other languages and other parts of the world.

Writers who had large influences in other parts of the world were not included as we ended up focusing on the United States. As to Fools Crow, I believe the book is the strongest one I've read on the period in which American Indian people recognized that the way of life they had created was doomed by the coming of Europeans. In Fools Crow the psychological tension of this suffuses the work in a way I've not felt in other novels. That's a large part of why I put the title forward. The book seems to me also strong in its evocative power--its presentation of daily life in other culture and period is very compelling to me, especially since that culture and period is our most American one. In that way the novel keeps before us questions we still haven't addressed in society and so it's not only important for the role it has played in literary history (brief, since the book was published in the early 1980's) but for the way it uses historical material in asking us to attend to contemporary problems in white/Indian relations.

I don't mean to defend the choice as I believe in such a book list the choices are largely arbitrary. They have to do with what has touched people personally, what they know

about. There is great room for discussion about what books might be included in a series such as the "Made a Difference" one. Our committee debated from a rather large pool of titles. We could have selected many different ones and they would be equally as important as those we ended up with. If I'd made the selection alone, the list would look different than what we ended up with. Yet, I admire the current list and am pleased with the way it reflected the feelings and backgrounds of many different readers. I don't know if this is very helpful to Dennis. Maybe it would be good for him as a book group leader to bring to people's attention other titles which he thinks are covering some of the same territory as Fools Crow but which, for him as a reader, might be more compelling or useful. Let me know if I can give any further information on the book.

David [Romtvedt]

---

. . . Thanks for forwarding [David's] comments. It gives me something to think about. It is an interesting situation. I agree with some of what he says about the arbitrary nature of selection, but that is not to say that criteria are impossible. I'll get back to you. Thanks!!

Dennis Coelho

---

A lively discussion of Fools Crow began with information on Welch. One participant had read Winter in the Blood and highly recommended it. The Crowheart group meets in their all volunteer library and the group decided that they would purchase several of Welch's books for patrons. Since we live in the midst of the Wind River Indian Reservation and members of our group have Native American relatives, this book was well received and elicited much discussion. We discussed the role of the visions/mythic tales. Some found them an impediment to the story, but after discussion found them to be meaningful. The details of clan life from food and hide preparation to hunting and on to family relationships and problems pulled our group from the novel to the present and back to the novel again. We discussed gender roles and compared those roles to contemporary reservation life. Far from being a problem, the group suggested that the language contributed to the reality of the story.

Barbara Gose

---

All seemed to enjoy Fools Crow. We discussed Welch's other books and his upbringing and education in Montana. Readers felt White Man's Dog/Fools Crow was an earnest, well-drawn character and appreciated the societal insight he allows us regarding the Lone Eaters. The theme of "survival" came up, and one reader observed how all of the books we've read in the series involve protagonists who are insiders trying desperately to survive. We talked of respective tribes as being different from each other, much like Utahans as a group may be different from Wyomingites as a group, though we're all, say, residents of the West with interfacing values.

-Jon Billman 0203

---

We all loved the book. Our discussion was varied and highly interesting. We talked about how it related to Black Elk Speaks and River Song from other series. The discussion ended with our comment that this book really made a difference in our perspectives. I, and several others in the group, have an enhanced appreciation of the Blackfoot Indians. All of us were charmed at how balanced Welch is as a writer.

Victoria Vincent

---

We had a marvelous discussion of Fools Crow. All found it enjoyable and believable. Discussion centered around culture clash and the even-handed approach Welch uses in presenting the Native American reaction to the encroachment of the white man. We also spent considerable time talking about language, naming, the [Sapir-Whorf ?] Hypothesis, and the general power of the oral tradition in storytelling.

Wayne Deahl

---

Since most of the group are "Westerners" and were brought up on movie westerns with stereotypical Indian scenes, this book brought us all many new perspectives. The several critics' remarks about this book's being the closest to "true" portrayal of Plains Indian culture caused us to open our discussion with the question of "what IS reality?" We talked about the several dreams, the animals' talking, the surreal--to us--occurrences. Some of us believed what Fools Crow believed, probably because of the power of the author's description; others asked "what exactly were they smoking?" :)

Then we shifted to the idea of progress and what it REALLY brings with it. Even in today's society we see that one culture's progress is built on another culture's back--at its expense. That is as true now as it was in the setting of this novel. Add to that the idea that white men had that the Indians were not really "using" the land, so they had a right, indeed, a responsibility, to take it so it could be productive. But, one of our participants pointed out that the Indians themselves were not great stewards of the land either, for they "hunted" buffalo (before the advent of the horse) by stampeding them over cliffs, sometimes by lighting range fires. We like to think that white men are the epitome of greed, but as this novel shows, greed is a HUMAN trait as illustrated in Indians' acquisition of as many horses as possible, and, of course, the white's acquisition of ALL the land.

Most of us hadn't heard of Fools Crow, but we all felt it was a valuable novel in this series.

Jill Foltz

---

Interestingly, most of the discussion was about the issues of white America breaking treaties and what this must have been (and is) like for the Native Americans and the implications, past and present, of this form of arrogance. I had prepared quite a bit of historical material on the Plains Indians, 1860-1890, and read some short bio material on James Welch. I found some fascinating material regarding Welch's personal history, as well as Plains Indian Wars, in Welch's *Killing Custer* (1994) and recommend this books to others.

Bob Brown

---

When we began our discussion of *Fools Crow*, people wanted to talk about the ways in which James Welch reveals the uniqueness of his ancestors through his novel. We talked about the importance of dreams, sacrifice, and nature to the Pikunis. We talked about the ways in which the Pikuni culture differs from our own. I think readers expect to find differences between Native American and white American cultures in books about Indians. What our group members were surprised by are the ways in which the characters in James Welch's novel tend to be like us. Their community is as complicated as ours. In *Fools Crow*, Fools Crow and his fellow community members must deal with gossipers, violent youth, rebellious teenagers, dissent among their leaders, adultery, and animosity. Though they live closer to nature than their white contemporaries, though they value material items differently than we do, one should not conclude that their people or their communities are or were simpler. The Pikuni experience the same range of human emotions, the same human weaknesses as we do.

Some of our group wanted to talk about what the Native Americans should have done to avoid the depressing future which *Fools Crow* imagined for his people and which James Welch and his readers know to be reality for many Native Americans today. This led to an interesting comparison between today's ranching culture and the Native American culture of the early 1900s. I think ranching communities, especially in the West where ranchers rely on public lands, are under the same tremendous pressure to change. Group members pointed out how different factions of the ranching culture have responded as different factions of *Fools Crow* Pikunis. Some ranchers fight tooth and nail to keep things the same, suing the government for the reintroduction of the wolves and resisting the addition of new species to the endangered list. Others have made friends with environmental groups and are giving conservation easements to groups like the Nature Conservancy. Still others pretend as if nothing is happening. Looking at a modern day dilemma helped us to recognize that the Native American response to imposed change was natural. It also made us aware (and Welch makes this point clearly too) that it wasn't as though the Native Americans were unaware of what was happening to them. It's just that they were facing a sort of lose/lose situation. Sometimes, we decided, the best that you can do is cling to your values and hope for the best.

In talking about this book as one that makes a difference, we agreed that it works in much the same way as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Non-black or non-Indian readers come away from both books with an awareness of how much we have in common. If none of us are black, many of us are women and all of us have suffered isolation, powerlessness, and humility at some time. If none of us are Native American, all of us have worried about the future, resisted change and been forced to accept it for better or worse. And all of us continue to hope. I think it is important to point out that James Welch, through his novel *Fools Crow* is carrying on the Blackfeet storytelling tradition. His novel is one sign that the Indian culture is alive today.

Carol Bell

---

This was the best discussion we've had in this series. Everyone had read the entire book, everyone liked it, and everyone had questions and points they particularly wanted to discuss. I began by asking them what are some of the difficulties of the book for readers. I knew we needed to talk about the spirituality, and, of course, that came up...the visions, the dreams, the raven etc. I found a good interview with James Welch that addressed this in a book *WINGED WORDS* American Indian Writers Speak by Laura Coltelli (U. of Nebraska Press, 1990).

We talked about how the novel makes demands on us non Native Americans because it's written from within the culture and takes us into the culture for the journey without explanation. This group was particularly interested in the historical context and content in the novel. We discussed the expectations that they brought to the novel and how these were affected in the reading. I was pleased that so many were impressed with the importance of community within the culture.

The novel is so rich within itself that we could have gone on for a lot longer than we did in that vein, but we did finally address the broader themes such as cultural misunderstandings, making assumptions based on our own values, cultural change and how people deal with it (a particularly poignant theme in Welch's books), the role of tradition and stories to communities.

Several indicated they wanted to read others of James Welch's novels and we compared notes on other Native American writers and books. This is a good book to include in this series because it does challenge stereotypical thinking and encourages not only sympathy, but respect for the culture.

Norleen Healy

---

Our discussion of James Welch's *Fools Crow* was quite interesting in that readers, who liked the novel very much, seemed reluctant to treat it as a novel. The discussion focused on the history of the Blackfoot Indians, and culture and ritual as presented in the novel. Although I tried gently to direct the conversation toward character or structure,

those elements of fiction that we typically discuss, the group seemed more interested in talking around than about the book. That's not necessarily negative, just different than our usual approach.

Some members of the group have studied or been intimately involved in Indian affairs, while others knew very little about Indian history and culture. I encouraged those who had what they considered to be "obvious" questions to ask them for the sake of exploring the novel. For example, one reader wondered how *Fools Crow* was able to have such meaningful dreams. This led to a significant discussion about the difference between Indian and Western cultures, specifically how Western dualistic thinking separates the rational/non-rational and the conscious/unconscious, privileging the first terms in these dualisms. We discussed the importance of balance and circular logic in the novel as representative of a way of seeing nature, relationships, and divine powers. A lawyer whose work encompasses international treaties contributed information regarding the history and culture of different tribes. I worried that he might be dominating the discussion, but readers seemed interested in his first-hand experience with tribal elders.

My own knowledge of the Blackfeet was weak, so I found two sources to help me answer questions about history vs. fiction in the novel. (As it turns out, Welch's blurring of the two is quite fascinating and provided another topic of discussion. For example, he adds to the myth of Featherwoman, creating not only a blurring of genuine myth and fiction, but also blurring lines of myth and reality in the novel.) I recommend *The Reservation Blackfeet, 1882-1945: A Photographic History of Cultural Survival*, with a foreword by James Welch. It provides history of the Baker Massacre and great photos of the Sun Dance ceremony. The other text that helped me put the myths in context of Blackfeet culture is *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians*, Clark Wissler and D.C. Duvall. (These are available through interlibrary loan from UW's Coe Library.) Since our group seemed most interested in the story behind the story, I suspect other groups might, too.

Diane LeBlanc

---

This was a huge group. There were twenty-four of us in the room, crowded in a big circle, two deep in places. I started the series by asking people when we went around the circle identifying ourselves to name and describe a book that came to mind as having been a book that had "made a difference" in their lives. I wrote down everyone's titles, and although the exercise took a lot of time (almost thirty minutes) it served its purpose, getting everyone thinking about the aspects of a work of imaginative literature that affect them and resonate in their lives. We talked a little about that and I promised we'd come back to it numerous times as the series progresses. The list of books that we generated was so diverse and interesting that I was asked to type it up and share it next meeting.

The discussion of *Fools Crow* was good, although a trifle stumbling. I wanted to emphasize three key aspects of the book: (a) the sense of inherent inevitability (and the way

inevitability plays or doesn't play in all our lives), (b) the notion of the so-called "hero's journey" taken by *Fools Crow* in the narrative (and whether each of us takes a hero's journey), and (c) common threads in Native American literature (respect for the land and tribal elders, a sense of history and tradition, an awareness of the powers of storytelling and a closeness to the spiritual world).

I also prepared nine other issues for discussion: prophecy, stereotypes and anti-stereotypes, individuality, belief systems, a sense of balance, animism, guilt and responsibility, codes of conduct and sources of cultural knowledge and power. Most of these topics got opened up one way or another. The question came up, as I knew it would: Why is this book included in a list of "books that made a difference"? *Fools Crow* doesn't tell us anything we didn't already know about Indians, earlier Native American books are more famous, etc. Participants are assuming that we're taking about ground-breaking books that had an acknowledged political, artistic or social impact.

I'm approaching the issue by asking participants to consider all the ways a work of imaginative literature makes a difference above and beyond best-sellerdom and social impact. I'm asking them to consider these novels in light of their importance in the conscious lives of individuals and within the texture of our history. In a relativistic way, even an "unimportant" book can make a huge difference for a single individual. How does a threshold novel like *Fools Crow* make a difference even when no apparent social change stems from its publication?

Peter Anderson

---

This book had been very well received by other discussion groups, so I was surprised to learn that a number of readers in Dubois were at best lukewarm toward it. They found it difficult to read, abrupt, stumbling and too laden with names and code words. Still, we had fairly strong discussions of Indian life, as we know it, and how we know what we know about it. We talked about stereotyping within our own culture and among cultures.

Additional fruitful topics: cultural definitions of good and evil; personal responsibility and the desire for freedom from it; common ground among cultures; the ambiguity of personhood (for want of a better way to describe it); storytelling.

Peter Anderson

---

Before I forget, there is a source available for *Fools Crow* which you might find interesting. Apparently the book is being discussed (was discussed) this year at the Arizona Book Festival, and the study guide for the book can be found at [http://azbookfest.org/abfl\\_welch.html](http://azbookfest.org/abfl_welch.html). If you are going to do this book, you might find the site interesting.

Wayne Deahl

---

I began by asking them how *Fools Crow* was a traditional narrative: what elements were familiar to them, what themes did they recognize, how did the structure contribute to meaning. We then reversed the question and talked about unfamiliar elements, particularly the descriptive language Welch employs. The participants said that, for the most part, the traditional and nontraditional elements combined for a pleasurable and informative reading experience. After tracing some of the major themes, we then talked about the question of the other. Does Welch portray the natives accurately? Why are some whites admirable and some natives not? How did Welch use history and was accuracy important to him? Comparing the novel to *Native Son*, some said that *Fools Crow* attempted to show the narrative situation in all its complexity without, like the previous novel, hammering the reader over the head with its theme of injustice. Finally, we discussed the dream-like end, and how surprising it was that, with all the elements closing in around him (the whites, small pox, etc.), *Fools Crow* was still able to have a vision of the future. We wondered if the novel was also about 1986. None of us could strongly answer how this novel made a difference, but we all enjoyed it quite a bit.

Cliff Marks (Encampment/Riverside group)

---

We looked at the "epic style" of the book: heroic figure, embodies national ideals, performs great deeds, depicts an era, divine intervention, and concerned with eternal human problems. Most in the group felt that what is real in a scientific sense is irrelevant. We discussed the deeper meaning of "myth." Myth brings meaning. *Fools Crow's* myth gives him meaning for life: courage, sense of being one with life, lack of arrogance, and dependence on other creatures for information. We were impressed by James Welch's ability in Chapter 25 to change the style of writing so that the reader is temporarily drawn into the white person's consciousness. The rest of the book had a style that drew us into Native American consciousness. We thought the swiftness of the cultural changes the Native Americans were subjected to was very different from cultural changes in our society no matter how swift our changes may be.

Bob Eldan

---

We talked about the many pressures faced by the Native Americans, the ruling class versus the underclass, and the underclass reaction to stress. We discussed the Native Americans' sense of community and how that was lost when they lost their centers. We looked at how people changed, the every-present spirituality in the Native Americans' lives, and the Native Americans' quandary about what to do. We discussed why the book was included and decided it was included as a representation of Native American literature.

Maggie Garner

---

I began the discussion with biographical background on Welch and information about his other books. We have both and poet and a writer of fiction and nonfiction in our group and so I emphasized Welch's writing start with poetry and his first fiction efforts. We then discussed the book. Nearly everyone had finished it and everyone was glad to have read it. They loved the writing, and felt that the fact that Welch is a poet is evident. We spent time on the created language in the book, which everyone appreciated and felt was appropriate. There was much debate and disagreement over the ending; was it weak, abrupt, or simply the only way in which the book could have ended? We compared *Fools Crow* to the other young male characters. Time was spent on *Fools Crow's* "message;" and concluded that he wanted his people seen, not as victims, but as survivors. In this, there is a message beyond the Blackfeet of the 1870s and beyond Native Americans in general. A number of participants were fascinated by Welch's development of the tribal culture and the everyday life of the Blackfeet. We also spent time on the place of women in the culture. Several participants were familiar with our Wind Riverton Indian Reservation and pulled that culture into the discussion. We concluded that *Fools Crow* had a profound impact on our way of seeing Native Americans. The lights went out before we could generalize about the significance of the series as a whole. People were sad that they had no book to take home with them. Book Discussion is over for this year!

Barbara Gose

## **Silent Spring**

---

For me, this was the best discussion yet of *Silent Spring* (it has bombed elsewhere). The group considered Carson's information and its historical significance, then moved on to contemporary local, national and international issues re use of herbicides and pesticides. All were aware of some current uses, especially of pesticides, and both the benefits ("I would never live where there was no spraying to control mosquitoes.") as well as the lack of long term effects. The ranchers in the group, when considering the possible spread of brucellosis from Yellowstone bison, were emphatic in favoring destruction of all potential threats to cattle; the same people were thoughtful and concerned about more distant problems, such as the sub Saharan malaria deaths every year.

Bob A Brown, 2-12-04

---

Bruce Watson, "Sounding the Alarm" [Forty years ago, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* forever changed our view of the environment.] *Smithsonian*. Sept. 2002. 115-117.

Judy found this article that gives an overview of the impact Carson's book has had in the last 40 years and tells some of her life and work. It might be interesting to use with

members of book groups reading *Silent Spring*. If you are unable to obtain a copy, we'll keep this in the office to make copies from.

*Silent Spring* led to a spirited discussion in Kemmerer. This is the strongest example of a "Book That Made A Difference" in the literal sense--this is spelled out by Al Gore's introduction. The group agreed that indeed, *SS* was a catalyst for change and that is spawned the environmental movement. People have very galvanized opinions about this book and I think you'll find that a discussion of it leads itself. It's perhaps most interesting to discuss what has transpired in the years since the book's publication in 1962. [www.rachelcarson.org](http://www.rachelcarson.org) is a most helpful resource.

Jon Billman

---

*Silent Spring* led to a spirited discussion; it is the strongest example of a "Book That Made A Difference" in the literal sense--spelled out by Al Gore's introduction. The group agreed that *SS* was a catalyst for change and that it spawned the environmental movement. People have very galvanized opinions about this book and I think you'll find that a discussion of it leads itself. It's perhaps most interesting to discuss what has transpired in the years since the book's publication in 1962. <http://www.rachelcarson.org> is a most helpful resource.

Jon Billman (Kemmerer) 0203

---

A great discussion. We talked about the milieu in which the book was published, what the author accomplished, and then why things have gotten worse. This last yielded much lively debate about everything from the profit motive to capitalist "morality" to human nature relative to technological change. Although the participants were initially wary about discussing the book (dry, factual, dated), they were all enthusiastic by the end of the discussion.

Michael McIrvin

---

Perhaps, more than any other, there is an immediate and realizable difference in our world as a result of the publication of *Silent Spring*. In the realm of random thoughts: a conservative and traditional agricultural state like Wyoming is a wonderful place to discuss this book. Current issues like feedlots and the Preble's Meadow Mouse are directly related to the question of ecosystem and how manmade change affects that ecosystem, mining and reclamation are issues with which the audience is likely familiar, James Watt is a wonderful anachronism in the way we think of nature, etc.

Our discussion was wide-ranging, but focused on the broad issue of the relationship between man and nature. One might want to find material on the Western equine encephalitis outbreak in New York, as DDT has been

proposed for short term use there. Newsweek had a brief article in the medicine section 2-3 weeks ago.

Wayne Deahl

---

Hi, everyone--I'm posting a comment and question from Bob Brown (Lusk group). His question relates to a problem we've occasionally seen in the past with specific books---- i.e., people not reading books and/or coming to discuss (attack?) them, anyway. This problem appears to crop up fairly often with books in the Books That Made a Difference series this year. Those of you who have ideas or strategies to share on this topic, please do.

Here's Bob's comment (and resource suggestion) first:

"The group response was discouraging, as several had not finished the book. Attempts to relate the book's themes to contemporary environmental and women's issues had little response. Questions regarding local pesticide and herbicide usage and policies brought some response (Lusk sprays malathion, without permission; Niobrara County Weed & Pest uses some of the same chemicals that Carson calls into question; etc.), but no one seemed able to initiate any ideas/thoughts. One participant attacked every environmental issue as nonsense, admitted halfway through that she hadn't opened the book ("I knew I wouldn't like it."), and continued to shut down the few efforts participants made to dialogue.

I highly recommend an article in the November 8, 1999 U.S. News and World Report, "The Stuff in the Backyard Shed." (p. 64ff) This came out the day of our meeting, but other discussion leaders might pass it out in advance, with the books, as it's an interesting article regarding current issues of Dow Chemical profits vs. human health--the same issue that Carson discusses at length."

15 people attended this meeting, in case you're wondering how large this group was. Here's Bob's question: "How might I confront participants' failure to read the material without being confrontational and possibly alienating their future participation."

How do others of you handle that problem? I'll think about it myself, too, and respond eventually.

Thanks.

Judy

---

Note: This commentary is also posted in the general discussion archives, along with several responses to Bob Brown's question about generating discussion under these circumstances.

Some found the style of *Silent Spring* interesting for a few chapters, then felt Carson's "story" fell into an all-too-predictable pattern, which made reading tedious. Some wished that it hadn't read so much like a scientific report, while others found fault with emotion-laden language,

which they felt was inappropriate for a scholarly report. One reader reported having a great appreciation for Carson's scholarship and message, but had just finished reading three Harry Potter books prior to reading *Silent Spring*, and the none-too-pretty reality portrayed made her yearn to escape once again to fantasy. The group's initial observations took our discussion on three paths: the changes Americans have experienced in public policy, in general attitudes, and in individual and corporate behaviors since the book's release; the author's consideration of her audience and her purpose, and the subsequent impact on style and structure; and possible reasons why a reader at the turn of the century will respond differently than the mid-century reader.

Group members agreed that *Silent Spring* has had an incredible impact on the way we see ourselves in relation to our environment; they believed this one writing shook our general belief that our lives--and ALL life--could be made better "through chemistry" and technology. It was noted that this change resulted in not only new legislation to "clean up" the environment, but in a variety of educational programs and changes in individual citizen behaviors. Every group member had at least one story illustrating how the book's ideas had affected a community or an individual. Most group members noted that the book had great power, as the changes in attitude toward the environment and raised consciousness regarding environmental issues seems to merely be a part of the fabric of American life, something we cannot imagine as being absent from our lives. That it had such a wide-ranging impact in such a relatively brief amount of time is one reason why the group agreed this book "definitely made a difference."

Despite this recognition, group members did not really enjoy the book. Following a discussion of the book's style and the author's intent, the group decided that Carson's rhetorical choices were such in order to ensure her message would be accepted by BOTH the scientific community and the general public. The group concluded that what seems repetitive and redundant to us is yet further evidence of the book's impact--the effects have been so far-reaching, the book's content is "old news"! Group members generally agreed with one member's comment that the book has more "historical significance" than "literary significance." However, all agreed that of all the books read thus far, and possibly of ALL the books we'll read in this series, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* has had the GREATEST impact on how we see ourselves AND on our behavior.

Ebba Stedillie

---

Most all had read this book years ago. That made for a weird discussion, frankly. One participant commented that although she'd never read the book, she felt like she had, so mainstream were the arguments presented. Readers commented on how love and science can intermingle, which I thought was a fascinating departure, and we spent a fair amount of time exploring that. One young woman sat silent for a while and then said she wished the book had

made a bigger impact on her than it did. In other words, she's heard it all so much that she's sick of it. She grew up in this mindset. She's tired of it. That set off a great discussion of generational differences and the evolution of environmental thinking, etc.

Broadly speaking, older participants think there has been a fundamental change toward environmental thinking in this country in the last, say, fifty years. Younger participants (and in the Jackson group we're blessed to have a variety of ages and even some male participants) thought otherwise. They tended to be more cynical. We ended the discussion talking about what difference an individual can make, and what good efforts can do, and the effectiveness of speaking out, crying in the wilderness, so to speak.

Peter Anderson

---

Our final discussion in Dubois got off to a fine start with an energetic debate about why some books have staying power and others don't. Three suggestions came out of the discussion: Books that represent life accurately will last; books that depict a segment of history especially well will last; books that get beyond superficialities and touch deep emotions will last.

A minor debate circled around the question raised by a participant concerning whether *Silent Spring* would have been more effective as a novel. We talked about the respective strengths and utilities of fiction and non-fiction. We also spent a lot of time discussing the turning of the generations, how flower children are back, but most young people today are more interested in making money than idealism (their comments, not mine). It was pointed out that while *Silent Spring* didn't invent environmentalism in the broad sense, it did instigate what we think of as environmental activism.

Interestingly, we spent a fair bit of time talking about holistic medicine and its comparison to ecology studies.

Peter Anderson

---

The group was impressed, but most of the discussion was about the issues, not the book. Much of the discussion was chatty and anecdotal, but we also focused on human attempts to control nature, Piaget's notions of accommodation and assimilation as they may have to do with our relationship with nature, hubris, humans as a species on earth, the complicity of all of us and our moral responsibility in that complicity. We focused on local issues as well [??], Malathion spraying for mosquitoes, inoculating elk, "managing" wildlife. Lively discussion, but not sure where others were.

Some present opined that the books in this series are too "heavy."

Stephen Lottridge

---

We ended the "Books that Made a Difference" series with a lively discussion of *Silent Spring*. Readers marveled at the readability of the book, commenting that they had learned a great deal while enjoying Carson's style and language. But, we asked, how much difference did it really make?

We approached that question a bit backwards, starting with the contemporary use, restrictions, and safety of current pesticides. Several readers brought relevant newspaper articles, saying that they might not otherwise have thought so much about the article had they not been reading the book. After assessing the current situation, including Laramie's use of malathion against mosquitoes, we backtracked to action following the book's publication. *Silent Spring Revisited* (1987) is a useful resource for providing the history of response to the book and changes that did or did not occur through 1987. We all expressed frustration and nothing short of fear that more has not changed, that we consume residues even on organic tomatoes, and that the scope of the problem is so vast that the individual can at times feel helpless. (This sounds as though it might have been a depressing discussion, but it wasn't; everyone was quite energetic in considering solutions to the problem.)

So we came back to the question: Did *Silent Spring* make a difference? The following topics came up as we revisited the question. 1) The book challenged the post-War celebration of science as capable of nothing less than life-affirming progress. 2) It questioned the relationship between industry and nature in a fundamental way. 3) Compared to *A Thousand Acres*, a contemporary fictionalized condemnation of pesticide use and human ignorance, Carson's non-fiction might have made more of a difference to more people because it is labeled "science." Nonetheless, its poetic approach to the subject (e.g., the description of the lacewing on page 250) and Carson's passion for the subject combine to create a timeless readable book that, through those characteristics, may continue to move people as long as it is read. 4) Like Deb Donahue's book, *Silent Spring* was judged before it was even published in its entirety. We considered the gender factor in both cases, what it meant then and what it means now for women to enter political and scientific debates with strong patriarchal institutions. 5) Finally, Carson's argument for biological control of pests contained its own caveat that it, too, could be a disaster if used to destroy rather than to maintain ecological balance.

This book in particular led us to question whether or not books can make a calculable difference. Some argued that the general cultural attitude toward reading does not encourage critical thought and response; it values escapism. Others argued that it can help us to shape our individual lives in ways that we believe will better society. Overall the group felt skeptical that a book could actually make an immediate, quantifiable difference. Interesting, isn't it? Throughout the series I never thought to ask the group to define what it means to make a difference.

Diane LeBlanc (Laramie)

---

I don't think anyone has mentioned this resource before. It comes from Carolyn Young (Laramie group), who is using it in connection with a course she's teaching at UW.

AND NO BIRDS SING: *Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*, ed. by Craig Waddell, with a foreword by Paul Brooks. Southern Illinois Press published it. I have only the foreword in hand and can tell you Paul Brooks was a friend and editor (Houghton Mifflin) of Rachel Carson. His introduction to her and her writing of the book is pretty interesting. There's also a picture of Carson, which readers might be interested in.

Judy Powers

---

[The following brief comment from Norma Christensen (Worland group) reflects on one of the topics we discussed at some length during the Casper scholars' meeting--the difficulty of finding ways to deal with strongly opinionated group members, especially when those speakers seem to reflect a kind of community consensus. J.]

The discussion wasn't as "lively" as with some books. Nonfiction like this one is a relatively new area for most of these participants. I chose not to confront one of the strongly pro-agriculture persons who operates on the theory of what is best economically is the way to go. No one else challenged that viewpoint either. Although I'm feeling somewhat virtuous for not leading the discussion down that path, I am well aware that we skirted some major issues in the book. The agriculture community versus the public health community is still out there. The book invited us to look at those issues. There was no question about why this book made a difference.

The group was favorably impressed with the book and appreciated its significance. Group members participated well and contributed their own stories about pesticides. For example, one woman said the Medicine Bow school sent DDT home with students in 1959 and said the students couldn't return to school unless their hair was shampooed with DDT (for lice). She refused to use it.

We talked about the book's ideas from different angles--economical, political, medical--discussing the use of pesticides in Third World countries and on imported food. A major discussion point was the theme of people trying to control nature, often out of greediness.

We also talked about people having a false sense that the U.S. government would protect them. All in all, we had a very productive discussion. Participants could see why the book was included in the series--it changed history, planted seeds of activism, and is still significant today.

Maggie Garner (Medicine Bow group)

---

The book evoked a sustained discussion about environmental issues and humanity's relationship with nature. Some members found the reading to be boring: they've heard it before and didn't need to hear it again, so they stopped reading. Others commented about how well the book was written. I'd assigned them to come up with discussion questions, and these stimulated good discussion. One participant wondered about the progress we've made (or lack thereof). Another inquired into what goes on in Third World countries. Although already 14 years old, I read some quotations from *Silent Spring REVISITED* which answered many of the follow-up questions the group had. Although we occasionally disintegrated into lambasting our errant ways, we ended on a hopeful note as we cited some of the success stories regarding our environmental efforts.

Cliff Marks

---

It was pointed out that Rachel Carson's research was up to date and current for the time. However, all of us asked the question what is the situation today? We invited Jack States, retired Biology professor from the University of Northern Arizona and environmental specialist, to join the discussion. The short answer: There has been much progress over the past 40 years but we have a long way to go. Some of the discussion was anecdotal such as fogging for mosquitoes over Aunt Betsy's vegetable garden. We all felt that so far this book best fits our series: Books that have made a difference. It was pointed out that the person working in this area today who could be called the Rachel Carson of today is Edward Wilson (cf. *Biophilia*). We considered what environmental progress might be made under the new Bush administration. Our group varied from "not hopeful" to "I don't know because I have not seen any signs." Some considered the book repetitious. In general we all thought the book to be good literature. Rachel was skillful in writing a book that could appeal to both the scientific community and the general audience.

Bob Eldan

---

Those who attended really appreciated the book, did not find the text too scientific except for a chapter or so, and liked the style of writing. Everyone agreed as others have that *Silent Spring* really did make a difference, but more needs to be done. The lively discussion began with comments from an interview I did with Dick Raeburn, our local weed and pest manager, which was very informative. He gave us colorful cards of the many noxious weeds, pamphlets, and labels from various pesticides and herbicides produced by Dow Agra Science, among which were smaller examples of these products. He indicated that diazinon and dursbran would be phased out over the next three years. The EPA sets acceptable levels. We looked at the biography of Rachel Carson and the comments of her critics. There is a wealth of information about her. *WALDEN* and Gore's book were shown and mentioned. Members of the group brought clippings from recent newspapers concerning various problems (there seem to be some daily) from Newcastle's old landfill, to the

threat of Wheatland's hog factories to the Ogallala aquifer, to Paul Erlich's piece in the October 2000 *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN* on overpopulation and its effects. We had a wide-ranging discussion from leash laws allowing deer to move to town to the fog over Australia that comes from Southeast Asia to the rolling blackouts in California.

Another book discussed was one Carson wrote to help children to sense the wonder of nature (*THE SENSE OF WONDER*, with photographs of places Carson had worked by Charles Pratt and others.) We had a great discussion that went on even longer than usual.

Betty Shurley

---

This was the official "Books That Made A Difference" Star Valley Christmas pot-luck book discussion. I brought my infamous Girardelli double chocolate muffins and wore my Santa hat because discussing DDT, dead eagles, and cancer isn't exactly in the Christmas spirit. Though I guess it is a bit Dickensian. To my surprise, the group was unanimous in their appreciation for this book. Star Valley is, of course, rather agricultural and conservative, but you can buy organic vegetables at the Thriftway and several in the group enjoy organic gardening. We discussed the subjectivity of the book and its impact on the better-living-by-chemicals set. All agreed that this is the most easily-discussed "book that made a difference" thus far and that it should be the "most influential book of the last 50 years."

Jon Billman

---

I presented (maybe too much) background on Carson as I had read Lear's biography this summer. It's excellent. Also the PBS "American Experience" program on Carson is very good and useful. Some people wanted to see it, so I asked our library to put it on reserve. Our major focus was on whether this book has really made a difference. For good or bad, the answer to that seems to be if you think it has made enough of a difference, then you agree it has. Our "no spray" participants believe not much has changed. Yet most agree to the following: government's attitude has changed, especially at lower levels, waterways are less polluted, but very toxic chemicals still exist, and homeowners are the worst users. Lavinia Dobler, at 92+, brought articles and views to share. We have two men who participate regularly, and one commented on the difference this book made in his life. Another older woman's daughter reviewed *Silent Spring* in 7th grade and went to work for fish and wildlife!

Barbara Gose

## **Catch-22**

---

Upton discussion of *Catch 22*

To my amazement, the group's consensus was that Yosarian was a coward. As other scholars (and I) have

commented before, irony and the absurd are difficult dynamics for some of the groups. Many found the book difficult (boring) to get through, and most had never read it before. My efforts to use the book as a means of reflecting on the 60's and 70's met with some success, and we were able to segue into a consideration of whether our current war time culture is different in any significant way from WWII or Vietnam. Most in the group thought there were major differences, though reflection on the values related to patriotism as a concept that might stem from more fundamental issues in our culture was deflected by the group's wanting to hear about the military experiences of the other man in the group and me; here the group seemed to appreciate the absurd.

Bob A Brown, October 9, 2003

---

Catch 22 is an interesting novel in that folks who came to the discussion prepared to slam the book went away with a new appreciation for it. "I didn't think it was funny" people found themselves giggling over passages. We discussed Heller's life, war and politics in America in the 1950's, including McCarthyism and the seemingly absurd "Loyalty Oath." An absentee member was on a bomber crew in WWII and he sent word to the group that Heller got it right.

Jon Billman 02-03

---

Though the group was small because of people being out of town, it was one of the best discussions we've had. About half of the time was spent on the series itself, *Books That Made A Difference*. We discussed banned books and how they came to be banned, the age of America around the Vietnam era and the Beat Generation. All brought up by various parts of the book. Two had not read the whole book as they could not get past the language and some scenes. Everyone enjoyed discussing the book more than reading it. That proves the need and benefit of a book discussion group like WCH sponsors.

Richard Kalber, Big Piney, 02-03

---

A wonderful discussion of *Catch 22*. I began with some background on Heller and his comments on the book - it was not meant to be an anti World War II book, rather one that reflected the 1950's, Cold War, military-industrial complex and McCarthyism. Everyone loved the book. Two people had marked all the "Catch 22" references so we had fun going through them.

We reviewed all the books discussed to date (all but *Fools Crow*) and commented on how each book made a difference and why. Most agreed that *Silent Spring* made the most direct difference and was the most difficult to plough through. They also agreed that *Native Son* was an eye opener but the last part of the book a little to "preachy".

At the previous meeting I gave all of them a list of characters with a brief comment on each of the characters. They agreed that helped as they read. I also suggested they jot down, as they read, page numbers which referred to incidents and characters. That helped them pull everything together, as they read. They liked having "a road map" to the book. Everyone enjoyed the Chapter, at the end of the book, wherein Yoassarian wanders through Rome. They found the language in the book rich in its descriptions and several read passages which struck them as wonderfully poetic.

All agreed that *Catch 22* was not easy - but a rollicking good ride. We went through the characters - hero and anti hero. Everyone loved Yossarian. We discussed the portrayal of women. I mentioned that Heller, in an interview, commented that he did not mean to portray women badly, just portray 18 year olds during war. Even though women were not portrayed in the best light they were not offended by the language or the ways in which women were portrayed.

Katie Curtiss 0203

---

I suspect the low turnout (6 participants) for this session was in reaction to *Catch-22*, as even those in attendance expressed reluctance in early discussion, and many finally admitted suffering moments of anger at Heller's treatment of the military establishment. However, after we discussed elements of absurdism and put the novel in an historical context, the group slowly began to realize where Heller was coming from and grudgingly granted credibility to his presentation. I think, by the end of the discussion, that there was even agreement that the dark humor, surrealistic qualities, and absurdist ideas were well done, even if the perceived intent was not appreciated. Actually, this was a fine and pleasant discussion.

Wayne Deahl

---

A good, lively, discussion which centered mostly on the war-novel aspects of *Catch-22*. I would have liked the conversation to turn more on Heller's critique of 1950's American culture, but the discussion we had was great anyway.

The question was raised several times: What makes this a "book that made a difference?" I anticipate that all discussion leaders doing this series will encounter this over and over. Participants expect a secret impact underlying our choice of each book, meaning profound social or political influence.

I began the discussion by talking about the different ways in which works of imaginative literature affect people, trying to segue into why the selected books can be linked together (or not) as "making a difference." I expect the notion of making a difference to be re-visited numerous times over the series.

In general, people liked *Catch-22*. I guessed that a few of the group would be averse to its episodes of vulgarity, and that was true only in limited ways. Most understood the novel in its larger effects and intents. Overall, a good, relaxed, old-home sort of first meeting.

Peter Anderson

---

Though almost everyone [19 in attendance] complained about having to read this book (and only five of us finished it), we had an excellent discussion. Actually, this was the best discussion I've participated in in 2 years. We talked about loss of identity that occurs in the military--is that a necessary evil? The Vietnam vet said, "Yes." We talked about the concept of freedom. Does freedom exist? (We couldn't answer!) We talked about how the reader is lulled into thinking of *Catch-22* as a comedy, how our laughter implicates us in the horrors of what has happened when we reach the end. We become a character in the book. LOVED this book! I could go on. . .

Carol Bell

---

The following comment is from Michael McIrvine (Cheyenne group). It echoes the experience of at least some other groups, and I'm passing it on because I think, based on his and others' experiences with the novel, that he may be right in suggesting those still to discuss the book might want to try "setting it up" for readers before they begin reading:

Some of the participants admitted that they did not finish reading the book because they found it either confusing or (in one case) repetitive. Given the relatively low turnout (11 people), I assume others had the same problem (and if I were to do this again, I would give better reading instructions the month before). However, we took this as our point of departure, then covered the thematic content thoroughly. All admitted they liked the book much better after our discussion. To be fair, at least 2 members loved the book from the outset, one claiming to have read it "at least" 8 times in his life. We also discussed how such a book (seemingly prescient in many ways, so certainly misunderstood when it first came out) could possibly have been published in the first place.

J.

---

Our discussion of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* seemed to lack a bit of the spirit of previous discussion for this series. Several readers had difficulty finishing the book because of the structure and repetition; it simply didn't interest them to hear the same anecdote more than once. Others, particularly those for whom war had been a reality, disliked the tone and humor, so we examined when and why the book did or did not make us laugh. Finally, since this book followed *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, some felt that we had covered adequately the issues of bureaucratic idiocy and the dangers of institutions that empower those who master the well-wrought memo.

Exploring how *Catch-22* did or did not make a difference, we discovered that compared to previous books in the series, *Catch-22* had less personal impact on the readers. For example, *Native Son* seems to continue to make a difference to contemporary readers as it enables, even forces, readers to explore their own racial biases in contexts beyond the novel. One reader asked, "Did *Catch-22* make a difference in [attitudes toward] the Gulf War? Or Bosnia? Or any other recent conflict?" Many felt that while the novel may reinforce perceptions that the military defies prevailing notions of what is "normal," that it requires a breakdown of "sane" behaviors in order to operate efficiently, it does little to call readers to change their behaviors. Its power to make a difference may have been strongest in its mockery of McCarthyism, not in leading draftees to resist or go AWOL in Vietnam or subsequent wars.

The novel did lead us to an interesting discussion of the hero in society. Yossarian and Milo were voted most likely to be heroes. Although they may not be admirable, they succeed in journeying through an ideological landscape (Yossarian through the military and Milo through capitalism), exploiting ideology for their gains, and developing some sense of self through the journey. Readers disagreed as to whether or not Yossarian's final decision to flee made him a hero. We concluded by envisioning how being a hero according to one set of rules (society/institution/unit within the institution) may oftentimes be at odds with one's personal ethics and objectives for defining self. We left considering how we can participate in bureaucracies without being shaped by them. If anyone has an answer, let us know.

Diane LeBlanc

---

Nobody liked that the series ended on this book. They found it more or less unimpressive, I think. The first comment of the evening was that the book is anti-government, although this being Jackson Hole people didn't seem too upset by that. Most of the complaints seemed to focus on the fact that the characters are all just plain weird and therefore rather unapproachable.

One participant focused our attention on the book's circular style, the way it brings up a single event again and again, deepening it a little each time. I pointed out that this was one of the first widely-read books to do that effectively. Another participant said dryly, "Women don't fare well in this novel." That started a long debate about the role of women (a) in World War II, and (b) in fiction, all of which was quite interesting.

Additional topics of interest: Insanity; Industry; Organizations; Absurdity (in life and art).

Peter Anderson

---

Only three of the participants had read the book "all the way through," but the others had read enough to be able

to participate in the discussion, and were, in fact, anxious to talk about why they didn't finish it...too repetitive, hard to follow, too "far out", etc. One person said she has thought it was supposed to be funny and she found nothing funny about it.

This gave me an opportunity to discuss the use of the absurd in the novel. Once we started talking about the style and humor, everyone began thinking of examples that really were funny, and the original disclaimer backed down and agreed that from a certain perspective, the novel was "funny!" Since the last book we read was *One Flew Over the Cuckoo Nest*, we were able to continue our discussion of satire and the anti-hero which was helpful because they seemed to really "get it". Of course we could have gone on forever about the things being satirized in the novel. We also talked about what human traits Heller presents as of value and about how the structure of the novel reflects the content.

One of the participants had been a navy bomber during W.W.II and he related the characters and events to his own experiences convincing us all how much truth the novel contains.

I found the Twayne series on the novel helpful in planning the discussion, *Catch-22 Antiheroic Antinovel* by Stephen W. Potts. The group was especially interested in the biographical details of Heller's life, and how the novel reflects so many of his actual experiences. As far as how this novel made a difference, most saw the whole M.A.S.H. relationship and agreed that the novel was a factor there as well as contributing to the culture of irreverence about "sacred" institutions and traditions and dehumanizing bureaucracy. Most didn't see that the novel directly affected them but agreed that was probably so because we're now used to the debunking that it does.

Norleen Healy

---

This discussion opened with comments on the meaning of the phrase "Catch-22." Everyone noted instances when the phrase was used at work, in community groups, and at home--it's clear the phrase and the concept behind it is woven into the fabric of our daily lives, even if many who use it have never heard of the book or seen the film! If nothing else, Heller's book has made a difference in that it has successfully labeled a common human experience in modern society.

The group noted that Heller began writing the book in 1953, finally publishing it in 1961. It was clear to them that Heller's W.W.II military experiences as an Air Force bombardier in combat over Italy influenced the novel. This led to a discussion of national and world events, as well as social and political situations that may have influenced Heller's creation of certain characters and actions in the novel. References were made to the Loyalty Oath Crusade as an echo of the McCarthy era, character statements such as "Act boastfully about that which you are ashamed" as political philosophy, the old man's lecture to Natel on "Italy's doing well" as an argument against the invasion and conquest of another country, and Yossarian's

psychoanalysis as a reflection of the condition of modern man.

The group also discussed the critical comment that *Catch-22* is the "quintessential anti-war novel." Reactions varied. Some felt the novel was a clear attack on the bureaucracy of the military machine, while others felt it was more about the dehumanizing and absurd aspects of modern life. Most agreed the novel had a definite impact on our nation during the late 60s and early 70s when anti-military, anti-war, anti-bureaucracy sentiment was building, as they reported having read the book at that time, or having seen the film. Most indicated a belief the book may have made a difference at the time, as it reflected the frustration and discontent of many.

We spoke a bit about the anti-realistic novel and its counterpart, the theater of the absurd, modern literary types noted for extreme illogic, inconsistency, and nightmarish fantasy, as well as for their abandonment of the expected conventions of realistic fiction such as coherent plot, setting, motivation, cause-effect, and characterization. The group contemplated the possible reasons for Heller's choices, and noted that those traits of the novel which may pose an initial problem for readers are the very same elements which provide much of the novel's fun, once the reader allows herself to accept the absurdity and illogic of Yossarian's world. (Members who had read the book previously admitted this task was much easier the second time around, probably because they knew what to expect. Others who had not finished the book because of the difficulties of its style and structure reported a desire to return to it following the discussion.

Some reported great delight in the novel's absurd comic situations, which led to a series of lively oral reading of "favorite parts." The soldier in white and the exchange of in-take and out-take bottles, Chief White Halfoat's family migrations and their relationship to oil discovery, Milo Minderbinder's convoluted schemes, Orr's "craziness," Major Major's family background and his military "career," and of course, Yossarian's perspective of the confusion, fear, frustration, and absurdity of the entire combat situation were just a few of the characters and situations the group laughed about as they shared what prompted a mental chuckle or an outright guffaw for each of them. This led to a lively discussion of the concept of comedy, absurdism, and the anti-hero. Several noted a relationship between characters and situations in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Catch-22*, noting that we seem to be drawn to a character who is doggedly determined to resist, persisting against all odds in a no-win situation, even if that character is not someone we would wish to know personally. Again, many felt we CAN and do laugh because we recognize the similarities between the characters' situations and our own.

I opened a discussion of the significance of certain character's names by introducing information about "Miles Gloriosus," the stock character of the braggart soldier who is cowardly, parasitic, and subject to victimization by practical jokers. This character type is seen from the time of Greek theater through the Renaissance (as Falstaff in

King Henry IV and Paroles in All's Well That Ends Well) to the present (Patton, Beetle Bailey, M\*A\*S\*H\*).

It was interesting to the group that Milo Minderbinder, who might at first glance seem to be the "fit" of that sock character (based on his name) didn't truly reflect those traits, but that almost all other characters did in some respect or another. The population of Yossarian's upside-down, turned-around world all seemed to reflect particular aspects of that traditional character. Members contemplated how certain character suggested ideas or prompted certain reactions, considering among others, Major Major Major Major, Milo Minderbinder, Schiesskopf, YO-YO, and, of course, Yossarian. We discussed a statement attributed to Joseph Heller: "The only freedom we have is the freedom to say 'no' in relation to Catch-22. This discussion broadened to the comment's application to character actions in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Fools Crow*.

How has this book made a difference? As mentioned above, many believed the novel did reflect social and political frustrations and concerns felt in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Members also noted that reading the novel today can be more than a bit uncomfortable and disconcerting as we recognize that our world has not changed much and may have become even more absurdly bureaucratic. Finally, our discussion closed with the sharing of a December 14, 1999 news item reporting Joseph Heller's death and noting his significant literary works and life events.

Ebba Stedillie

---

Four of the people attending expressed offense at the book and had read very little (e.g., 44 pages). Others had not finished the book. The most offended person said the book was just one repetitious story after another about soldiers getting drunk and being with whores. The language was offensive to participants.

BUT, we did have a discussion, and people saw more worth in the book afterwards. One person said she now wanted to reread it. We talked about how the book represents our civilization, not just the military complex. We talked about memorable scenes, memorable characters, the progression of the book, Snowden's secret, the danger of language, people's willingness to renounce the power to think, and the moral decision that Yossarian makes.

Group members could see that the book made a difference in the 1960s. So far it is difficult to make comparisons with the other books read.

Maggie Garner (Medicine Bow group)

---

Heller was a seer! I opened the discussion with this quote and asked if anyone was reminded of "someone in current events."

"Then there was the educated Texan from Texas who looked like someone in Technicolor and felt, patriotically, that people of means--decent folk--should be given more votes than drifters, whores, criminals, degenerates, atheists, and indecent folk--people without means. . . The Texas turned out to be good-natured, generous and likeable. In three days no one could stand him." (p. 17)

Numbers were down, but I think several didn't finish the nearly 500-page novel. But those who did loved it. We spent a good portion of the time reading favorite passages aloud and laughing. Most want to read more Heller. I suggested they read *GOD KNOWS*.

Jon Billman (Evanston group)

---

We started out the session with a discussion on the series in general. How does a book make a difference? We discussed whether a book is a reflection of the culture, or does the book help create the culture? Or a mixture of both? The answer was yes, all of the above. We asked if any of us could think of any one or more books that have made a difference in our lives.

Most of the participants could not pin point one book. Influence was more eclectic for them. We discussed Joseph Heller's life. It was noted that his personal background for the book was W.W.II but the book had more influence, some thought more applicable, for the Vietnam War. We spent some time talking about the point of the book, i.e. the meaningless and inhumanity of some institutions. We talked about what it means to be a hero, and was Heller saying that there are no war heroes in the mythic sense? No one present had even been in war. Nevertheless, we shared second hand stories. We discussed the superficiality of the characters. Exceptions were the chaplain and Yossarian.

Only six people attended. Some of the regular participants never finished the book. They either found it hard to read or uninteresting. Many thought the discussion was much more interesting than the book. A couple people suggested the book be dropped from the series, in spite of the fact it may have been made a difference in its day.

Bob Eldan (Lander group)

---

The discussion went well. Some thought *Catch-22* was the best book they ever read. Others disliked the novel intensely. There seemed to be an interesting split along gender lines: the great majority of the women didn't like the style, didn't like the jokes, and found the book repetitive and silly. On the other hand, a veteran in the group identified with the novels' authentic recapitulation of war scenarios and also saw parallels between the novel and 1950s historical events. I had them look at the superficial rendering of the characters and why Heller might be interested more in a novel about ideas and history as opposed to a novel about people.

Cliff Marks

---

Each member of the group was asked to write her opinion of CATCH-22 before any discussion took place. These were passed around so someone else read the comment. [see below] The score seems to be five liked and ten disliked the book. However, after the discussion several who had not completed the book expressed a desire to do so, much as other groups have reacted.

Enlarged cartoons that seemed appropriate to the story from Bill Maulden's UP FRONT were displayed along with a first lieutenant's cap (I wore my husband's wings from WW II and Korea.) It was noted about Joseph Heller's life, education, and writing career, that he based CATCH-22 on his experiences as an Army Air Corps bombardier who flew 60 missions over Italy. An article in NEWSWEEK, June 12, 2000, "A Literary Suicide Note," told of Heller's final novel PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST, completed before his death of a heart attack in December 1999.

Criticisms both negative and positive were given. One in particular was by E. L. Doctorow, "They say fiction can't change anything, but it can certainly organize a generation's consciousness." After viewing the opening scenes of the 1970 movie, the discussion turned to experiences of some members' husbands during W.W.II. Barbara Thomas, 88, our Brit as she calls herself, recalled her experiences as a young girl during the blitz in Bristol, England, going to dances with the band playing while the bombs were dropping. She told of American soldiers who pursued her saying they wouldn't send her any more Spam.

Comparisons were drawn in patriotism and traditions during World War II, the Korean Conflict, and Vietnam. One person stated war taught people to hate. Others were reminded of examples of attitudes toward Japanese Americans. We discussed the fact that the chaplain was an Anabaptist and that they reject military service.

A major subject was Yossarian's attitude change toward the end of the book. The people who read the book pointed out the last chapters were the best part, bringing the story in focus. Also, the writing style was a topic as well as Heller's extensive vocabulary and wide use of adjectives and adverbs.

The last scenes of the movie that differs some from the book were shown showing Yossarian running to the beach and oaring away in his lifeboat, which brought laughter. Perhaps that was a good way to end the discussion.

---

Bunny included the short comments of the participants. For those interested in reading on, they show an interesting range of quick responses to the novel--probably fairly typical for this book.

I LOVED this book! It was funny in places (I laughed out loud.) But, mostly I liked it for the deep sense of values exhibited by Yossarian--sometimes taken for a "clown" or a "nut"--wrong! I loved him.

The more I read in the book, the better I liked it. The writing is exceptionally good--conversation is difficult to write. The whole book is a satire--Satires are NOT REALLY funny but evoke laughs or chuckles as one reads. The book goes from amusing to tragic and back again. War is the pits!

I liked this book very much. It seems to me that it would be far more understandable if you were alive and at least partially grown at the time of the second world war. I did think it was funny as well as horrifying and sad.

I really enjoyed this book. This is the second time I've read it (the first time about 20 or 25 years ago). I thought it was very funny then and I still think it's very funny now. The last few chapters are extremely shocking (when he's wandering through Rome) and so sad.

This was not my favorite in this set of books. I like to think of these men as heroes and these characters are not. The last chapters were all right.

I did not like this book! I thought it was very hard to read--there didn't seem to be much of a story to it. To me it was a number of crazy people with not much of a reason for some of them to be there.

The expression of a situation as a catch-22 as an unsolvable problem or situation. Otherwise, I was overwhelmed and felt that it was a waste of my reading time.

I never did get the story idea or what the theme was about. I really didn't think it was funny as a whole. Some of the remarks didn't make sense. I liked this book the least of all the books. Some really had my interest and the books were good as a whole.

This book was well-written and amusing. I like my satire in smaller doses, and the book became boring after awhile. It's a poor [?] for those who were not familiar with the wartime.

I don't know when I've not liked a book as much as I did not like this book.

I enjoyed it more the first time I read it 30+ years ago. Age? Perspective? Or the dulling of the mind has resulted in my inability to get into it this time. Hence, I didn't finish reading it this time.

I don't have much of an opinion as I could not get very interested in the book. I did not finish reading the book. I was going to cheat and watch the movie but I could not find it.

Too repetitious, dull and boring. When I got to the part about the naked prostitute jumping up to hit the guy with her high heel, the graphic explanation made me quit--sorry!

Very irritating-- Plot was sort of plotless, characters inconsistent, humour not humorous.

Betty Shurley

---

Only five of us [i.e., 5 of 14] finished the book. Yet the others were "game," wanting to know why they should read it and reasons why *Catch-22* made a difference. And, we proceeded to a spirited discussion. Comments and topics:

The book greatly influenced the Vietnam generation.

The term "Catch-22" is part of our language.

It (the book) is repetitive, jumps around too much, is confusing.

In contrast, the book is powerful, timeless in its indictment of the military-industrial complex and the excesses of capitalism.

The prostitution bothered several people.

I found myself a "cheerleader" for the book, and I think several will now read the book. Our library borrowed the film for participants. We discussed courage, honor, religion, "following the rules," capitalism, horror and especially the literary references Heller incorporates into the book.

Barbara Gose (Riverton group)

---

I can't resist adding a couple observations to what Barbara says. *Catch-22* is satire--most people would say Absurdist satire (maybe even tragic farce to use one of Ionesco's terms for his own plays). That, in itself, helps explain the structure of the novel--its repetitiousness, illogical jumps, and confusion, at least so I used to say. The plot structure of satire (especially satirical plays and novels) tends to reflect a world that is far from ideal--it's filled with nastiness, craziness, confusion; people can't learn from their mistakes or the mistakes of people around them--they're doomed to repeat idiocies over and over, sanity and innocence are hard to find and often ineffectual or worse, etc. That quality of satirical plotting may not make for pleasant, predictable reading, but it is at least purposeful and thematic--at least as I see it.

Judy (WCH)

## ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***

---

This was another lively and interesting Upton BDP discussion. Both Angelou's "voice" and story captivated this group, and the discussion rambled through the events she describes, comparing her tale briefly with Bigger Thomas and Anne Moody (many were in the group for this book). Several shared personal anecdotes relating to Angelou's growth, though most had no awareness or memory of the forced desegregation and its issues and

problems. Her silence after her rape was puzzling, so I gave information about PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and its many coping reactions.

Bob A Brown, 3-11-04

---

After some biographical, historical, and critical background comments, our discussion began in earnest. The participants were particularly impressed with the open, honest, and frank presentation Angelou offers. We believe her story. The interesting irony is that I was prepared to discuss multiplicity of viewpoint, as one gentleman had returned his book early, expressing his distaste for it by saying he was born "poor white trash and we were taught to never treat anyone, black or white, the way she was treated."

Other discussion directions were consideration of the nature/nurture argument and whether Angelou would have had the same self-confidence if her maternal role models had been reversed. Obviously, we also considered the question of why the book may have been one that made a difference.

Overall, this was a wide-ranging but worthwhile discussion.

Wayne Deahl

---

Just a note from an ex-discussion leader (who hopes to rejoin the good fight sometime in the future). All who are leading discussions over the Angelou book should read Francine Prose's article in the (I believe August - the same issue that had the story on the Matt Shepard murder) issue of Harper's. She thoroughly lambastes "Why the Caged Bird Sings" as being one of the books foisted on young readers and gives some pretty damning examples of why she considers it terribly written. Not my opinion, but one it would be worthwhile reviewing.

Julene Bair

---

I had read part of the article when it came out and your note prompted me to finish it. You know, if you pull back a ways and get past the hyperbole, we could be talking about many of the books in the series, not just Angelou's. Just a thought.

Dennis Coelho

---

Anyone else who's read the article want to respond? I skimmed it when the magazine came and put it aside to read more closely later, which I plan to do while I'm in Evanston for a council program the end of this week. My first reaction was that it depends on how you define "read," what you expect of a "reader." She makes some points that seem reasonable based on her expectations of readers--and an academic context. Reading probably has

other purposes, though--I'm thinking it does for our Book Discussion Program and our Humanities at Work program. That's a lot of "thoughts" for someone who hasn't really read the article!

If I think better of what I've said after I do, I'll let you know. Either way, the piece might spark some interesting discussion, not just about Angelou, but about the books as a whole, as Dennis suggests. I remember that, when the "great 100" lists started coming out in anticipation of the millenium, several reviewers attacked them as full of "middlebrow classics." The committee who created this series talked about that when we chose the six books. One question we thought groups might consider is the role of "middlebrow classics" in both the canon and society at large.

Judy Powers

---

To open the series Books That Made a Difference, I took a suggestion from the list discussion and asked the group what books have made a difference in our lives. No one responded in terms of titles, but we talked about the power of books to move one to act, to think differently and to read more about a given topic. This brief introduction to the series' theme led us directly to, "How has I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings made a difference?"

Readers initially viewed the issue of racism as the most important to the book's impact, particularly when it was published. We discussed Angelou's identity as it was shaped by race and gender. As we discussed these social constructs in more detail, many readers began to feel that the book might have made more a difference for African American women than for African Americans in general because the book exposed many problems experienced and/or perpetuated by Bailey, Uncle Willie, Mr. Freeman, and other male figures in the book. We talked about the inseparability of race, class, and gender, and concluded that the child narrator does not prioritize oppressions; she reconstructs memory and Angelou seems to let her do so without intrusion. Having read the subsequent four volumes of Angelou's autobiography, I suggested that her politicization documented in later volumes enabled her to address more directly issues of race and gender as she developed the language with which to talk about oppression.

Finally, I shared the basic premise of Francine Prose's article bemoaning the absence of "great literature" in high school classrooms and read excerpts of her response to the continued teaching of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. We visited aspects of the book that she finds problematic, such as oversimplification of complex themes and weak prose marred with mixed metaphor. We also addressed her suggestion that adolescents need not necessarily wallow about in coming of age novels. The group recalled books that had made a difference at that age, and among them were several coming of age classics (Catcher in the Rye, A Separate Peace).

The series theme seems to be a guiding force in the discussion, one that I appreciate for the depth it encouraged.

Diane LeBlanc

---

Did you hear (or hear about) Francine Prose's appearance on Talk of the Nation on NPR day before yesterday? She was being interviewed because of the stand she took regarding "bad" teaching of "bad" books in that Harper's article. Milward (sp?) Simpson called in! He complained that in a Humanities Council book discussion series, the "English professor" leader brought Prose's article in and quoted her disparaging criticism of Maya Angelou's book. He believed that Prose had chosen the only bad passage in the book, while she maintained that she picked it at random. Sometimes Wyoming does get to participate in these national debates. It was great fun to listen to.

Julene Bair

---

I wish I had heard the program! Milward is in our group discussion at the Albany County Library, and his comments on the poetic quality of Angelou's writing made a nice transition into discussing Prose's essay. Let me clarify that he wasn't complaining that I brought it in but that Prose chose just a weak passage to attack. The article created great discussion about books that make a difference, so I recommend it in any group doing that series.

We began the discussion by sharing with one another the titles of books that "made a difference" in our own lives. Then we talked about how we are changed by what we read. Again and again, people discussed how they were validated or empowered by a book because they identified with a character. It was easy to get from there to Angelou's book. Though none of the group members are black, we could all identify with Maya's feelings of alienation and powerlessness. We had a good discussion of the ways in which Angelou's characters are empowered by language. The theme of the power of language is a good one to follow through the narrative.

Carol Bell

---

We began the discussion by discussing why this book would be included in the series-- how it "made a difference." Most said that it showed the "black world" from the perspective of a participant and that this world is foreign to us (certainly in Clearmont, Wyoming where NO Blacks have or do live!) Obviously, I wanted the discussion of why this book made a difference to go beyond that and it did as we talked. We discussed what the portrayal of Black women is traditionally in our literature and which character(s), if any, in the book illustrate this. The group approved most of the Grandmother in Stamps, and ironically she is the most traditional (from a white perspective). I had to convince them of the strength and merits of the mother! They did recognize that all the

female characters portrayed are strong and influenced Maya.

We discussed the voice of the narrator and the effective use of "I" meaning, ultimately, "We" and related this to the slave narrative tradition going clear back to Stephen Douglas. Maya has a lot to say about language - both in the narrative and in her subsequent writing and the group picked up on this. We agreed that there is a strong agenda in her writing, and they concurred that the mother voices that agenda. Does such a clear agenda strengthen or weaken the book was a question we considered, with no definitive answer.

The group was curious about "the rest of the story" revealed in the next three of Angelou's autobiographies. I haven't read them all, but thank God I've read enough about them and Maya to be able to tell them something. Be warned if you're doing this book: they'll ask!

The book is so accessible that they really used it well for support in the discussion. We had fun with it. Let's see what happens next time with *Native Son*!

Norleen Healy

---

Participants were frustrated with this book, which actually provided for a lively discussion since their stated concerns were mostly about surface features (the abrupt ending, some sections seem to have no point, some really bad writing in places--especially her metaphors, etc.) and really did not explain their level of unhappiness. We talked about our expectations as readers based on what (Black and female) Maya Angelou is and the title and the title of this series. It turns out we all expected more exposition, more pointed description that contributed to overall themes (Blackness, womanhood, etc.). We concluded that a generous reading would be one that deemed the text subtle and the paradoxes in the text part of the conundrum of being Black in American, and we discussed the possibility that there might be unspoken pressures in publishing that make such a book possible. Some participants still suggested that a better book about these same kinds of experiences could replace this one in the future.

Michael McIrvin

---

In the spirit of continuing the great tradition just described [posting scholar comments], I'd like to post some comments from Wayne Deahl (Torrington group) who begins by saying they had a wonderful discussion on Angelou's book. His comments struck me partly because that group's experience was so different from the Cheyenne group's, which I posted a day or so ago, and they suggest the really wide range of reactions groups in the state can have to a given text.

From Wayne:

Sometimes, I think we get bogged down in technical issues and forget that works may touch others, regardless of the literary quality of those works. And, while I mentioned the controversy surrounding Angelou's work, not a single person found it problematic. As one man suggested, "Remember, this was her first novel and let's not be too harsh." The group, recognizing some of the critical difficulties, nevertheless found the text to be honest, and perhaps that honesty contributes to the technical difficulties in that Angelou is writing in the narrative voice of a young girl who is influenced both by where she lives (the rural, poor South) and her first love, Shakespeare.

Other lengthy and productive discussion involved race relations, social and family relationships, and individual strength of character. As for the question of why this book made a difference, we noted the black, female voice in the time frame, and further noted that in comparison to Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and other black male voices that Angelou shows an individual, rather than a collective, consciousness.

J.

---

I went to this discussion toting my copy of the Harper's article in which Professor Prose pillories Maya Angelou and *Caged Bird* as examples of everything that's wrong with literary education in America today. I intended to spend the second half of the discussion using the critiques expressed in the article as a springboard into the age-old question, "Should we read for form or content?" I saw such a discussion as being a good way to explore the issue of how books make or don't make differences.

The problem with my plan was this: Everyone adored the book. As the evening progressed it became apparent that, virtually without exception, everyone in the group appreciated this book tremendously, had been deeply moved by it and thought it would be a terrific book for students to read in high school. An hour into the discussion, I surreptitiously slipped the Harper's magazine back into my briefcase without having told them about it. There was an atmosphere of lively enjoyment in the room which I decided I just didn't want to spoil. I felt that bringing up the article would have just ruined the book for a lot of participants. Sure, perhaps the discussion would have been a little sharper if I'd shared it with them. But I found I was able to bring up several of the issues contained in the article (use of language, form vs. content, educational agendas) without actually quoting the article, which trashes the book in no uncertain terms. Often, when we really like something, and then an authority figure comes along and tells how bad it is, we end up feeling sort of stupid or ignorant, and disliking ourselves for liking the thing. I preferred to let the pleasure of the discussion roll on.

Peter Anderson

---

A number of people said they loved this book, and many commented on identifying with Angelou's early years and her feelings of being different, unattractive, etc. Members of the group read Angelou's poem "In All Ways A Woman," which I used to begin the discussion and the issues and images in the poem reverberated throughout the discussion of the book. The grandmother (Monema) was universally liked and respected, while the mother (Vivian) drew more mixed responses re the issue of parenting, and especially mothering. The rape of Maya and its psychological effects were discussed, including the effects of the threats made by Freeman (the rapist/abuser): how typical of child abuse (especially sexual abuse) the whole dynamic and interactions seemed to be.

Bob Brown

---

Many enjoyed the book although they reported that certain of the novel's incidents shocked or appalled them. Most indicated they enjoyed the novel's style, finding it much "easier to read" and the novel's ideas more accessible than some of the previous selections. At least one reader found the work's structure frustrating, as she felt too much information was "left out" or "dropped" from the story line. Others were not concerned with this, indicating that they felt the author was speaking directly to them, telling her story in much the same way as one would tell family stories while paging through the family's photos. "Missing" information was not important to them as they experienced the author telling her own personal story. Above all else, the group members found the narrator to be a person they could relate to, empathize with, and, in many respects, admire. Many group members believed that this book has made a difference as it depicts a strongly positive image of an individual personality many African-Americans could relate to, while simultaneously revealing a people and a world who may be unknown yet significantly relevant to the experience of many Americans of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Most group members found Marguerite to be a very strong and resilient person, considering the limitations of her individual situation combined with the social and economic constraints of the time. Much of our discussion focused on the reasons why Marguerite would be such a strong individual, especially when one factors in all of the negative influences on her life. Many believed her grandmother "Momma" had a significant impact, as she provided not only love, but pride in self, structure, purpose, a sense of community, and an example for the young Marguerite. We also noted the influence of other strong women on Marguerite's life and perspective: "Mother," Mrs. Flowers and Grandmother Baxter, all of whom presented Marguerite with a variety of situations, behaviors, and values, but all of whom demonstrated various kinds of strengths. It seems that Marguerite took something from her relationship with all of these women, in order to become the strong, vibrant and creative person she is today. Of course, the group also noted the narrator's relationships with the men in her life--her brother, Bailey; her uncle, her father, and the despised Mr. Freeman--all of whom contributed in various ways to her development. Many noted Bailey's support and devotion to

her (and her devotion to him), commenting on its effect on her self concept and feelings of belonging.

I also noted that this character sees herself as an "outsider" due to her appearance, her "orphan" situation, her race, and her gender. Her story is a powerful one because, despite all the negative influences, she triumphs. One question we addressed was "Why did she triumph?" Some felt it was her sense of being a part of a family (even though the family is the traditional image of "family") that was important. Others saw her sense of belonging to a community, whether she was in Stamps, Arkansas or with her mother and brother in an urban setting, as significant. Another pointed out the significance of one's name and a strong sense of one's identity as yet another important factor. Group members contemplated the significance of all these factors in light of slave trade practices in the United States, as well as the various effects of the Industrial Revolution, the Reconstruction, and the Depression on African-American daily life and culture. When these national and global influences were considered, many noted a change in their perspective regarding the behaviors, beliefs, and values described in Angelou's work.

We discussed the significance of the title "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." Several reflected that the author was a kind of "caged bird," limited by her gender, her race, and her family situation, and that the title may be a comment on her growth as a creative woman and as a human being. Another commented on the book dedication in relation to the title, speculating that the story is intended as a kind of parable for others to continue to "defy the odds and gods" and to tell their stories as well. After some discussion, I shared with the group the following excerpt from a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem "Sympathy" which appears at the beginning of a critical article titled "The Song of a Caged Bird: Maya Angelou's Quest after Self Acceptance" by Sidonie Ann Smith:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,--  
When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
But a pleas, that upward to Heaven he flings--  
I know why the caged bird sings!

(The poem "Sympathy" may be found in its entirety in the Complete Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar.)

The group responded to the excerpt in relation to Angelou's book, commenting on the relationship between her situation, the poem's ideas, and possible themes. The group also responded to ideas in Smith's article, discussing the concept of self acceptance, and how the reader watches Marguerite's gradual transformation from a self-conscious little girl who feels ugly and displaced to a confident woman who accepts her color and her femininity with strength and pride. Many commented on the transformation that occurred due to her betrayal at the hands of Mr. Freeman. She moves from an "unlovable" child to feeling totally accepted, only to fall prey to feelings of being wicked, evil, and worthless. Many commented on

this self-shattering experience, as her total self-condemnation leads to her refusal to speak, and she returns to the familiar cage of life in Stamps. Mrs. Flowers accepts her, unlocking the cage. It is up to Marguerite to "fly" free, to recognize her own self-worth. This is a gradual process, as depicted in the drive down the mountain with her inebriated father unconscious in the back seat, her life in the wrecked car lot as a "street kid," and finally culminating in her stubborn determination to get the job on the street car. Many felt we all relate to Angelou's book because it illustrates how important it is to take responsibility for one's own life, no matter the circumstances. As such it is certainly a significant work--a book that makes a difference--for not only African-American readers, but any reader.

[Smith's article originally appeared in the Southern Humanities Review 7:4, copyright 1973 by Auburn University, and may be found in a collection of essays titled Maya Angelou: Modern Critical Views, edited by Harold Bloom, a 1999 publication of Chelsea House Publishers. This resource contains excellent scholarly yet highly readable articles on various aspects of Angelou's work. I highly recommend it!]

We concluded our evening's discussion with mention of Angelou's other creative works, and distributed a collection of her poems Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die. Many read and commented on a poem I had marked, "When I Think About Myself," as it seems to reflect many of the emotions and ideas in the novel. However, several other poems attracted attention as well. Group members were very interested in Angelou's poetry, her dance, and her other creative efforts, as they felt they "knew" this woman after reading I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

Ebba Stedillie

---

The group loved this book. They immediately compared it to Native Son, and agreed that this book was much more powerful because it didn't seem to take itself as seriously as a work of so-called art, and because it's true, and because it's told so simply. They commented on the optimistic, cheerful, even downright happy, environment of the narrative.

We spent a lot of time talking about why this book made a difference. I described its widespread use as a teaching instrument in secondary schools over the last thirty years. I pointed out that it was one of the first popular books in our history to feature a powerful, believable, black female at its center. I also pointed out that this book is "acceptable" within a broad spectrum of political and social positions. It doesn't attack.

When we discussed this book in Dubois, I opted not to share the Francine Prose article from Harper's lambasting the book. I did read it to the Jackson group. They were crestfallen, in some cases devastated. We worked back through the article's philosophy and central questions, specifically (I think), "Are there books which might be appropriate for students to read in civics or history class which are unfortunately required reading in English class?"

What defines those books?" We had a pretty good dialogue about reading in general. (I happen to think Francine Prose is basically right, even though she is bitchy and sour).

Participants ripped into Francine Prose along the following lines: High school isn't where one learns to read; high school isn't the place to learn literary structure and discipline; perhaps Francine Prose is just personally hostile (jealous or something) to Maya Angelou; Francine Prose essentially misinterpreted Caged Bird. I recommend using the article; it opens big questions dramatically.

Peter Anderson

---

Having no electricity, we had our discussion in the dark! The atmosphere caused the discussion to be comfortably casual and, perhaps from a sense of camaraderie, everyone contributed well. The first comment (question) was "why did this book make any difference?" that was the lead-in to discuss the intent of the series and the idea that these books made a difference to some people at some points in time. By the end of the discussion, the group decided the book is important to anyone who has grown up.

I asked group members what book has made a difference to them. Responses: The Bobsey Twins, Nancy Drew, the Hardy boys and (thank goodness) Little Women. We had a good discussion of the book--which everyone liked--including discussion of displacement, self-worth, self-awakening, white America, and childhood.

Maggie Garner (Medicine Bow)

---

The book is poetry. The group marveled at the language and care given to Marguerite's character. We discussed how each chapter is a complete short story in itself. Also, how this book isn't a "typical" egocentric autobiography or memoir, that narrative and language work toward a story that is worthy of the form. Much more upbeat discussion than Native Son.

Jon Billman (Evanston)

---

The members present were very enthusiastic in their response to this book. They were almost mesmerized by the quality of the writing! We discussed the authors of other black authors' books--commenting, for example, on the different attitudes of Anne Moody, Richard Wright, and Maya Angelou. The discussion then got to the age-old question of why some kids "make it" and some don't. The indomitable spirit of several of the authors as they faced hardships was the subject of further discussion. Everyone present thoroughly enjoyed the book.

Norma Christensen (Worland group)

---

We had a very lively discussion. The book is autobiographical going through Maya Angelou's early childhood to the age of sixteen. We first summarized the rest of her fascinating life. Having now read the book we asked if we know "why the caged bird sings" and what is the caged. This brought out much discussion on Maya courage living in difficult situations. We also talked about the "cage" as the place of security and safety. Racism is obviously a major theme in the book. This was first looked at historically. That led into application to our current local situation in Lander with Shoshone and Arapaho tribes just to the north of us. Since the series is "books that made a difference" we discussed how this book has made a difference in our lives. Primarily people saw similar struggles in their lives or personal experiences of racism. It was pointed out that the issues of the book may be Black issues, nevertheless they are universal. I was the only male in the group. The participants are going to see if they can find some men so as to have another perspective with future books.

Bob Eldan (Lander group)

---

The discussion began with a larger question about the relationship of fiction to nonfiction and how the genres utilize different narrative styles. Some of the group liked the more formulaic style of a book like *Native Son*, while other identified with Angelou's anecdotal memories as being more true to life. We discussed the major themes of the book, including individual strength, human dignity, and the ability to feel sympathy even for those who hurt us the most. Concurrently, some in the group felt guilty for not liking the book, and I explained that there was absolutely no requirement that they like a book, but just that they engage with it. Hitting upon the theme of the series, "Books that made a difference," we interrogated how this book made a difference, and we had a useful discussion comparing it to Alice Walker's *THE COLOR PURPLE*. I pointed out that *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS* had been banned in few places, and I asked everyone why they thought this was so. We repeatedly, in one form or another, discussed race, and we recognized the flimsy yet necessary need for race self-identification, particularly with regard to minorities. We finished up debating the meaning of America, splitting down the middle between optimism and money. Some felt the book was optimistic, given the fact that the author went on to lead a successful public life, while others felt the book's tragic moments tugging more on their sleeves. Many questions were asked and fielded about Angelou's further autobiographies, and we talked about the irony of her being an extremely private person who nonetheless exposed large chunks of herself to the public.

Cliff Marks

---

Lavinia Dobler opened with her comments about the announcement that Angelou had signed with Hallmark to do cards, etc. We talked about that and I shared Billy Collins' reaction as a poet. I then gave some biographical information on Angelou. A member of the group had read

all the autobiographies of hers that are in the library. I had only read the last, but we talked about the differences in the ones we had read. Members were glad to read her book and wanted to read more. At least two people were a little uncomfortable with her harshness toward whites and her strong feelings about racism. But they agreed that maybe they had just read too much black literature! I reminded them as to both when the book was written and the time in Angelou's life that it was written. Maybe this makes a difference. We talked about the strong women characters and compared the male characters. Toward the end I summarized the points Prose made in the 1999 Harpers article. That brought out many opinions on what we read and how we read. At the end we again talked about books that had made a difference in our lives. *Caged Bird* was one mentioned, especially for native Wyomingites who knew little of the southern Black Depression experience. Another book mentioned was *The Well of Loneliness*.

Barbara Gose

## **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**

---

Upton discussion of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

This was a very animated and thoughtful discussion, as the group considered the destructive cultural influences on Chief Bromden that led to his insanity as a means of withdrawal. Similarly, the group found McMurphy and why he acted as he did to be interesting, as well as the "Big Nurse" and her behavior. They began to develop the process of considering her as metaphor for the power dynamics in our society, and McMurphy as the catalyst for Bromden's development.

As I have found elsewhere, this very dynamic and interesting group had difficulty avoiding the traps of a concrete and dichotomous consideration of the values driving the book's process. Overall, though, this seemed to be a much more interesting and challenging and therefore fun discussion than that for *Catch 22*.

Bob A Brown 11-11-03

---

The discussion began with the group's consensus that they were glad that they read this book and they thought it did indeed make a difference. One person chose not to finish the book because of language but the group present agreed that the book is relevant today in terms of conformity and group (also society) pressure, as well as mental health treatment. We examined the inmates: what does it mean to be insane? The group was curious about lobotomies and I relayed an episode from NPR in which Sherwin Newland (surgeon and author) nearly was subjected to a lobotomy. We discuss the main characters. Bromden, Mac, and Rached, and the changes that occur. I brought up the issue of how women are depicted in the novel and we decided that Rached's role was to demonstrate power, and her sex was secondary. Those

who had seen the movie commented on that form of the novel. I pointed out that the point of view is changed in the film.

Barbara Gose 0203

---

We discussed the marginalized communities in the book which were given voice: the community in mental institutions and that of Indians - how Bromden, the once presumed vanishing Indian was the most fully actualized character with a past, present, and future, and still here and now. We discussed those in society who are never listened to (Bromden and Bigger in *Native Son*).

Discussing the Combine as symbol of the machine of sameness as well as of the mechanization and transition in the new west, led into who the hero was and why, and of western heroes from the Virginian to Shane to McMurphy as well as Bromden, and we discussed whether the novel is tragedy, romance, or comedy.

Many loved Kesey's imagery. We also delved into how the book presents an upside down world in terms of power, race, sanity and insanity, real and imaginary.

I tossed out phrases for discussion: "freedom without form creates destruction," "form without freedom creates horror," and "freedom is found in or between irreconcilable oppositions." We discussed how the characters fit these ideas.

Katie Curtiss

---

We had a broad-based thematic discussion--themes: the Savior/Christ theme and its reflection in "Shane" and "Cool Hand Luke," Manism and American Paranoia in the 50s that the next generation would be effeminate, sanity/insanity and R.D. Laing, Native Americans and the 50s BIA policy of "termination," cultural definitions of insanity, post-war USA, drugs. But, we kept coming back to McMurphy as a Christ figure who has to die to save the others.

Dennis Coelho

---

This book evoked greater enthusiasm than *Native Son*. Discussion themes: personal growth of McMurphy and Bromden, the role of the outsider vs. his/her social setting (community, school, workplace, etc.), the nature of the "insider" community and its treatment of outsiders, the manipulation devices of Nurse Ratched and the medical community. The question of "why this book?" as one that "made a difference" was raised and discussed, with the direction of the individual and his or her choices and actions vs. the collective, dehumanizing forces of society. The possible savior theme was noted but without much response, whereas McMurphy as positive therapist vs. Ratched et al as negative therapists was discussed. The selection of the three black orderlies based on their level of hatred was noted, as an extension of Wright's character

Bigger Thomas and his hatred as a function of the racism in American.

Bob Brown

---

I was worried about this book going in because I had happened to run into a couple of the group members in the week previous and both had commented on how depressing they had found *Cuckoo's Nest*. Additionally, I knew that a lot of people would have seen the movie years ago, and I was worried that many of these folks would eschew reading the book, which sometimes happens. Indeed, people did find it depressing, and we spent a lot of time exploring that very issue at the discussion. But the approach I took was to build a ramp of literary history leading up to the book. I opened the session by describing Ginsberg's famous original reading of "Howl" at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1955. I quoted the first few stanzas of "Howl," which always grabs everyone's attention. I used this to show how Kesey had built on the language, sensations and ideas of his forebears, the Beats, in constructing this work. By exploring how Kesey was a pivotal figure between the Beats and the '60's, we turned what could have been a downer of a discussion into an interesting historical survey. Many personal revelations ensued, a lot of humor included. I think it all worked out pretty well.

Peter Anderson

---

A quick note to all conducting the Books That Made a Difference series that the Viking Critical Edition of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* includes several fine critical essays. One of those, by Joseph J. Waldmeir ("Two Novelists of the Absurd: Heller and Kesey"), compares two of the novels which are in this series. I found it helpful last night in Wheatland, since we had the good fortune to have discussed *Catch-22* last time, and we were discussing *Cuckoo's Nest* as our evening's work. Hope this is helpful.

Wayne Deahl

---

Our discussion of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* began, as all of our meetings for this series have, with the question of how the book has made a difference. Social workers in the group who had worked in institutions from the 1940s until recently validated the authenticity of Kesey's characters and the treatment of patients with horrifying stories of their experiences. One reader, based on her experience, doubted that one nurse could have had as much power as Nurse Ratched but said nurses collectively ran the wards. We concluded that Nurse Ratched is perhaps symbolically an entire staff compiled into one Big Nurse. A lawyer in the group added that until after the book's publication, law schools did not teach courses in mental illness law, and now there are over 800 such courses. Several members of the group commented that they found this discussion fascinating and

educational, exactly the kind of discussion they hoped to get from a book group.

The discussion then wandered a bit into people's experiences with the insane, homeless, and criminals, always coming back to the issue of how individuals labeled deviants are part of the machinery of the Combine. We addressed Kesey's themes of punishment, correction, and power in this context. The social workers volunteered useful information about psychopaths, which led to a good comparative analysis of McMurphy's and Big Nurse's characters. Everyone pretty much agreed that if anyone needed "fixing," Big Nurse did. Also within this context we discussed the theme of masculinity, what it meant to be a "man" in post-War America, and how each character suffered from gender construction.

Other topics of discussion included a comparison of past treatments with current "humane" medication, the parallel of medication in the novel and in the contemporary public school system, and what human dignity is and where we draw boundaries between one's dignity and another's rights. We looked closely at Chief's character, which is particularly of interest to readers who have seen the film adaptation.

Because Chief is "mixed blood" and has experienced both natural/non-technical life and life as part of the Combine (college, Army), his narration as an insider and outsider provides readers with little escape from their own experiences. We also discussed McMurphy's character, focusing on whether he was a self-interested con man or a savior figure. The group's responses were mixed. When making connection with Angelou's and Wright's books, we concluded that all three depict the limited rights of underrepresented groups in the United States. And, they all suggest the price paid by those who try to make change or rise above their position in the Combine. I prefaced *Catch-22* by suggesting that readers look for similar political themes.

Diane LeBlanc

---

This book is proving to be something of a juggernaut for groups doing "Books That Made a Difference." By that I mean, readers latch onto it as a book which seems, at least, pivotal in a historical sense, and they are loving talking about the inner workings of American culture. This happens at least in part because I'm doing handsprings to position the book as a threshold work of social mood documentation from an era when culture was beginning to refract in all different directions.

For others leading discussions of *Cuckoo's Nest*, I have generally good luck spending a little time during the evening outlining the so-called Beat generation and the post-War era it cut against, and I show how Kesey's language, sensibilities and even central ideas grew out of the work of his forebears, while striking a note the Beats themselves had long failed to hear.

In *Dubois*, I brought up the inevitable: What, according to *Cuckoo's Nest*, is the nature of good & evil? What is

authority? What defines the Establishment? Do we have heroes today? What is sanity, and who gets to define it? Who is free and who is oppressed? In general, a lively, rollicking debate.

Peter Anderson

---

We had a wonderful, wide-ranging discussion. Major topics of interest were institutionalization and manipulation of groups within social settings. The group found the idea of mental institutions and abuses therein to be very important. We found clear examples of how this has changed present within our own community—for example, DSI (mainstreaming of the mentally handicapped) and the new Southeast Wyoming Mental Health short-term care facility.

Broader ideas of manipulation and control of people's led to wide-ranging discussion of 1030s Germany, the military, social institutions (the public schools and what is appropriate behavior, the abuse of Ritalin as a controlling agent), and generally what it means to be human. Are we more comfortable as conformists, and if we chose change, does that necessitate sacrifice?

Wayne Deahl

---

[The Clearmont group was ]enthusiastic about the book! A few of them had gotten together and viewed the movie after they read the book so we began by a discussion of whether or not the movie did justice to the book and what the differences between the two were. Of course the main difference is that the book's real protagonist is the Chief who narrates and whose perceptions and growth is so central to the novel. We had an interesting discussion about the power sources in the novel and how they were turned upside down, for example the woman (*Ratched*) and the Blacks had the power, and what it took to undermine the power. (I told them that some critics were offended by Kesey's "negative portrayal" of women and Blacks which also led to good discussion.) We discussed the values in the novel: humor, love, sacrifice, acceptance, etc.

Other topics of discussion centered around the role of the anti-hero in modern literature, how society views and treats those who don't fit the mold (one participant is a long-time elementary school teacher and saw many parallels between the book and the world of education!), and that whole cult of the "Merry Pranksters", what they reflected about society in the 60s and where they are now. They were interested to hear that Kesey hasn't changed much (good article and interview, by the way, in *Esquire*, Sept. 92 on Kesey, then and now). Of course we talked about how the book made a difference and maybe even continues to for people who read it for the first time.

Norleen Healy

---

We had people present who have worked with the mentally ill. We shared stories. It was pointed out how refreshing the so-called insane can sometimes be. The question of "who won" in this book was raised. McMurphy won because he moved from self-concern to concern for his fellow inmates. The other inmates won because they "grew." We compared the book to the movie version. We felt the movie captured the essence of the book even if it did not always follow the book exactly. We read aloud a brief article from CNN describing Electric Shock Treatment as it is used today. One participant had experience with lobotomy patients. We also spent a little time discussing what Ken Kesey did with his life since he wrote this book. All in all, it was a very good discussion.

Bob Eldan

---

We talked about society's desire for people to conform and the fact that no one is really normal. We discussed the unwillingness of people to listen. We looked at McMurty as a Christ figure and McMurty as a Lone Ranger figure--an outcast white with a Native American companion who fight against the horrors of the world.

We talked about the significance of the book in regards to opening people's eyes to the inhumane way in which mental patients were (are)treated and that idea being the reason this book made a difference.

Maggie Garner

---

The Riverton group met last night to discuss Cuckoo's Nest with ten people present. At the outset the group asked me to convey their concern with the small print of the text. One of our elderly readers simply gave up, but she did come for the discussion. I provided background information on Kesey, the Merry Pranksters, and the time period of the novel. My introductory remarks included a discussion of the breadth of appeal of the novel; the fact that it is comic, that it tells a good story, that it presents many themes allowing for various levels of discussion and understanding. I discussed the dedication of the novel, comparisons with the film version, and asked the group their reaction to the book. And they took off. We discussed Bromden and his importance as the teller of the tale and compared him to McMurphy. I asked if the group saw McMurphy as a Christ figure; they thought that idea was a "stretch." We talked about the language of the novel, including the comic aspects, word play, and the "rough" talk (and the fact that it has been banned). Much time was spent on modern mental health treatment with members of the group recounting their personal and work related stories. We debated the extent to which the novel is anti-female and anti-black, and the group believed that Ratched was more a "power" figure than a female figure. In terms of the depiction of blacks, the treatment did bother some, but we decided that the timing of the writing of the novel might have affected this. We saved some time to begin building a list of books that either made a difference in our adult lives, or brought us to reading as

children. This was great fun, with all of us taking notes on books to read.

Barbara Gose