

Classic Views of American Life: Pulitzer-Prize-Winning Fiction

CLASSIC VIEWS OF AMERICAN LIFE: PULITZER- PRIZE-WINNING FICTION 1

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Overview

Established in 1917, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction is awarded annually for the most distinguished book-length work by an American author, preferably dealing with American life. During its eight decades, the award selections have sometimes elicited controversy, as the changing concerns of the Advisory Board have led it to honor works of widely different types and, some would say, quality. The best Pulitzer fiction has nevertheless reached beyond the whims of popular taste to provide revealing and meaningful perspectives on ourselves and our culture.

The six Pulitzer novels in this series represent different historical periods, geographic regions, and ethnocultural contexts. As conceptions of America in particular times and places, they also offer American perspectives on several essential and recurring human questions: How are perceptions of self-related to a sense of place and community? How have these perceptions changed as times have changed? What happens when people lose their sense of place or identity? What characteristics, individually and communally, enable us to weather change and grow?

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (Pulitzer Prize, 1940), sometimes referred to as the twentieth-century Uncle Tom's Cabin, crystallized public opinion against the intolerable conditions of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl in the early 1930s. Its depiction of the Joad family sums up for many the despair of the Great Depression. Beyond its significance as a social document, however, the novel also affirms the sanctity of life and the possibility of survival and dignity in even the lowest circumstances.

A. B. Guthrie's realistic novel *The Way West* (Pulitzer Prize, 1950) describes a quintessentially American experience, the passage of a wagon train from Missouri to Oregon in 1846. Guthrie dramatizes both the individual trials involved in completing the westward trek and the cooperative effort that was so central to the success of the

venture. His use of landscape, sky, and space evokes the spiritual qualities of the Western movement as well, thus encapsulating a version of the Western myth.

In *House Made of Dawn* (Pulitzer Prize, 1969), N. Scott Momaday explores the themes of community and displacement in America from a Native American perspective. Momaday employs a fragmented, stream-of-consciousness style and multiple narrative voices to mirror the confusion of Abel, a young Jemez Pueblo. Returning to his reservation after service in World War II, Abel discovers that he no longer "belongs" to any culture, white or tribal. The difficulties he experiences as he tries to reclaim his heritage and return to the ancient Pueblo ways underscore the sometimes-alienating effects of assimilation.

In Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* (Pulitzer Prize, 1973), Laurel, a young professional woman, returns to Mississippi to be with her father during surgery and, a few weeks later, to preside over his funeral. The return to her childhood home evokes powerful memories of the family's past. These memories, combined with her need to cope with her immediate grief, lead Laurel to confront and reinterpret her parents' marriage, her father's unwise second marriage, and her own grief for a husband lost many years before. In the process of reexamining the key relationships and places in her past, Laurel arrives at a new understanding of the value of the past.

In Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (Pulitzer Prize, 1992), the stark tale of a family's disintegration emerges through a painstakingly detailed portrait of Midwestern farm life. The story is a deliberate recasting of Shakespeare's King Lear, though with a different view of patriarchal control and responsibility. Smiley's immediate and vivid picture of life in rural Iowa makes the book as much about farming in America as about family relationships, and ties with the land exert an a similar--and equally problematic--pull on the characters' lives.

Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (Pulitzer Prize, 1983) traces thirty years in the life of Celie, a poor southern black woman victimized physically and psychologically by her stepfather and her husband. Celie survives her hostile environment and eventually achieves self-esteem through the redemptive friendship and love of her husband's mistress, blues singer Shug Avery. As in most of Walker's fiction, the themes of racism and sexism predominate, though the impact of the black woman's experience reaches across racial and sexual lines to universality.

Suggested Further Readings

For further exploration of Pulitzer-Prize-winning fiction, look for these titles at your local library or bookseller. WCH cannot provide these titles for addition or substitution in the above series.

James Agee. *A Death in the Family*

Robert Olen Butler, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

Shirley Ann Grau, *The Keepers of the House*

William Kennedy, *Ironweed*

Oliver LaFarge, *Laughing Boy*

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Alison Lurie, *Foreign Affairs*

Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove*

James Alan McPherson, *Elbow Room*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*

Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose*

Anne Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*

Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*

Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

Background information on the Pulitzer Prizes

Stuckey, William Joseph. *The Pulitzer Prize Novels: A Critical Backward Look*. (1966) Provides an interesting look at the checkered history of the award process and Pulitzer fiction.

General Commentary on the Series

Carol Deering in Riverton e-mailed me to ask about the basis on which we chose the books in the Pulitzer series. Here's her message:

"Last night one of the people at the discussion asked why these particular Pulitzer-winner books were chosen for the series. She wasn't accusatory; she just wondered. I know they are one from each decade, and 3 women and 3 men authors. Any other criteria I can pass along?"

Since the other two members of the committee for that series, Norleen Healy and Wayne Deahl, are on the list, I thought I might give them a chance to respond to her question, too. The selection process occurred 2 1/2 years ago, so we may need to jog each other's memories to remember the details.

Carol is right that we tried to choose books from different decades and books by both men and women. We also tried to achieve some balance among the writers in terms of ethnic backgrounds, regions of the country, and perspectives on "the American experience." Usually, in our series, committees settle on the final six choices for a series based not only on the above criteria but on clear thematic links or interrelatedness. That was a particularly difficult connection to make with the Pulitzer books because they are, for the most part, related to each other primarily by their excellence as "fiction dealing with American life." Each book in this series therefore relates to some of the others in more specific thematic ways, but arguably, at least, they are interrelated primarily by the

main Pulitzer criteria of being important examinations/portrayals of American life.

Certain other criteria did play a part in our deliberations, as I remember them, some of them essentially practical:

Availability in paperback?

We cannot use titles out of print in paperback.

Set in the United States?

In spite of the Pulitzer "rules," the committee sometimes chooses works set elsewhere--e.g., *The Good Earth*, *The Stone Diaries*, *The Shipping News*, *Foreign Affairs*. The series focus eliminated these choices.

Length and Difficulty?

Committees try to choose books whose combined length and difficulty are such that the average reader's schedule can accommodate reading them, without gloss, in 2-4 weeks. Under this criteria, I believe we eliminated *Lonesome Dove*, *Angle of Repose*, and *All the King's Men*, and *Beloved* (all obviously very good books).

Novels?

The committee decided to exclude short story collections (e.g., *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*, *Elbow Room*, and the collected stories of Katherine Anne Porter, Jean Stafford, and James Cheever), based on the comments of some previous discussion groups who found discussion too diffuse when there were multiple texts to consider.

The committee also considered, to some extent, the historical vagaries of the Pulitzer process in making its choices. For example, in the early days of the Prize, the annual prizes went to works that best conveyed a "wholesome view of American life." Thus, one presumes, *The Great Gatsby* was overlooked in 1925 and the prize awarded to Ferber's *So Big*. And, even when the word "wholesome" was dropped from the description, the committee was sometimes slow to recognize "important" writers and ended up awarding the Pulitzer to clearly lesser works of important writers, a prime example being Faulkner who received the prize for *The Reivers* and *A Fable*, not for *Absalom Absalom*, *Light in August*, or *The Sound and the Fury*. If you're interested in learning more about the history of the Pulitzer prize in fiction, you might check out the Stuckey book listed on our website. It's a fascinating critical overview of the process up to the 80s.

That's what I can remember of the bases of committee's deliberations. Maybe Norleen or Wayne will want to add some further thoughts.

Judy
WCH

... I was part of the Pulitzer group and would be glad to talk about it with anyone. Also, I did a discussion of the series with the Wheatland folks (they're quick readers) already and have some thoughts if anyone is interested.

Wayne Deahl

I'm curious how the Wheatland folks reacted to the Pulitzer series as a whole--especially to Momaday since (as you know) we thought long and hard about whether to include it because of its probable difficulty. I just read a comment this morning from Michael McIrvine who's not yet on the list but is leading that series in Cheyenne and Pine Bluffs. He thought the book might have been a bit difficult for a couple of the group members and kept them away, but said those who attended loved it and they had a wonderful discussion.

Anyway, it'd be good to know what your group's overall impressions were--others will probably be curious, too, since they may be considering the series for next year.

Judy
WCH

The series was very favorably received, with the exception of House Made of Dawn. The dream sequences, the complete cultural experience that is generally outside the experience of most of our discussers, seemed to be beyond the "willing suspension of disbelief" for many readers. Some of the group turned in their books without reading or finishing the work and did not attend the discussion. That is the bad news, but the good news is that those who did attend seemed to have enjoyed the book and we had a good discussion. I'm not sure if a bit more work on my part in introducing the book the session before discussion would have been helpful, but that may be something other groups will want to do. A bit of preparation for the reading experience may help, and much of that should likely be centered around the style Momaday uses in presentation, since the comments I heard indicated that it was not so much any kind of close-minded attitude as a simple failure to understand where the book was heading and what was happening.

There are some general thoughts, and I should add that one gentleman was impressed that I could find enough to discuss in *The Optimist's Daughter* to keep us engaged for an hour. That may be another book that requires a bit more from the leader to be successful.

Wayne Deahl

We just received Julene Bair's final evaluation of the Pulitzer series. In it, she responded to a couple of the questions I asked about the series a week or so ago, and I thought others might be interested in an excerpt from what she said. In particular, her comments on the Welty book might be helpful to those who have yet to discuss it.

Julene began by saying the Newcastle group liked *The Color Purple* and *A Thousand Acres* best and liked *House Made of Dawn* and *The Optimist's Daughter* least. She added, though, that she thought the Council should retain both titles, though groups need some preparation perhaps

for reading them, especially the former. Her comment on the Welty book was as follows:

"Although it is not challenging on the surface, it can generate a rich discussion. There again, it might be a good idea to send members home with some questions to ponder as they read. Why does Judge McKelva die, for instance? Does he somehow will himself to fade? What relationship does his death have to that of his wife? Is being an optimist a good thing in this book? Why are there so many references to time? Why is Laurel silent throughout so much of the novel? At what point does she begin expressing herself more, and why? Pursuing these questions, the Newcastle group came up with some amazing insights, not only into the characters, but into the way Welty seems to be commenting on the culture of that southern town. The prose is spare, but the mysteries are substantive and intentional, I believe."

Maybe Julene's comment will be helpful to some of you. (If I've misrepresented her thoughts in any way, she can jump in and straighten me out.) She also, by the way, suggested a study guide might be helpful for House Made of Dawn and offered to consider putting one together for us based on her experience teaching the book at UW. (I'll certainly be happy to include the kind of guide she described on our Website where everyone can access it if she finds the time to create it when we approach next year's series.)

One final question--did any of you who've led the family series find *Betsey Brown* to be a book rather like the Welty one as Julene described it? When we put the series together, I think I saw that book as somewhat Welty-esque, and what I meant by that is that it's deceptively simple, even plotless, on the surface, like *Delta Wedding*.

Judy
WCH

I'm forwarding a message to the list from Carol Deering in Riverton. She asks about the basis on which we chose the books in the Pulitzer series. Since the other two members of the committee for that series, Norleen Healy and Wayne Deahl, are on the list, I thought I might give them a chance to respond to her question, too. (The selection process occurred 2 1/2 years ago, so we may need to jog each other's memories to remember the details.)

Text of message: "Last night one of the people at the discussion asked why these particular Pulitzer-winner books were chosen for the series. She wasn't accusatory, she just wondered. I know they are one from each decade, and 3 women and 3 men authors. Any other criteria I can pass along?"

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The committee also considered, to some extent, the historical vagaries of the Pulitzer process in making its choices. For example, in the early days of the Prize, the annual prizes went to works that best conveyed a "wholesome view of American life." Thus, one presumes, *The Great Gatsby* was overlooked in 1925 and the prize awarded to Ferber's *So Big*. And, even when the word "wholesome" was dropped from the description, the committee was sometimes slow to recognize "important" writers and ended up awarding the Pulitzer to clearly lesser works of important writers, a prime example being Faulkner who received the prize for *The Reivers* and *A Fable*, not for *Absalom Absalom*, *Light in August*, or *The Sound and the Fury*. If you're interested in learning more about the history of the Pulitzer prize in fiction, you might check out the Stuckey book listed on our website. It's a fascinating critical overview of the process up to the 80s.

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Judy
WCH<

I'm currently facilitating the Pulitzer Prize series in Laramie and appreciate Judy's explanation and others' input on the series development. I just wanted to add that for our first discussion, I prepared a handout of all fiction Pulitzer winners and a quote from the prize selection criteria (regarding Judy's point about a nominated novel's presentation of American life). Readers recognized many of the titles on the list and found it interesting to compare *House Made of Dawn* to other winners and to explore how it responded to prize selection criteria. Unlike thematic series (family, the West, etc.), this one lends itself to some factual information that can help readers put the novels in context.

Diane LeBlanc
Albany County Library
Laramie

I can add very little to what Judy suggests about the Pulitzer series in her insightful response. I might only add that the impetus for creating the series was to respond to a vague need for a "great" books series, and the Pulitzer winners seemed to be a logical choice to meet that criterion. As Judy suggested, finding books that were familiar enough to be "great" books in the common sense, as well as a unified group, proved to be problematic.

We even considered the possibility of other literary forms (plays, etc.) as possible choices but decided on the list as it stands as being the most accessible selections, without being too long ("*The Grapes of Wrath*" being the exception and precluding another longer choice), having some sense of a thematic unity around views of American life, and representing a cross-section of cultural possibilities. And to be completely frank, the final selections were sometimes made as representing an era and being books all of us had read, were familiar with, or could recommend to those of us who were not familiar with the works.

Judy did a wonderful job of explaining the process and the justifications for the series. It was certainly interesting, and it occurs to me that the question of why was part of our discussion of this series in Wheatland. Maybe that is a good starting point for the series. I hope you and your readers will enjoy it.

Wayne Deahl
wdeahl@ewc1.ewc.whec.n.edu
Eastern Wyoming College

"Classic Views of American Life" is a strong series that raises many important issues in the humanities. Most significant among the issues raised during our discussions were the relationships between individuals and cultures, family, personal responsibility to self and society, power relationships among women and men, and relationship of human beings to the land. These themes overlapped

among the selected novels. Issues of culture and family also drew threads from previous series discussions, particularly Family Photographs.

. . . [A challenge] for me was to "sell" Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* to members who had participated in Family Photographs and loathed *Ordinary Love & Good Will*. My personal enthusiasm for the novel was not enough, so I was prepared for a smaller group and a specific focus on *A Thousand Acres*. Imagine my dismay when some readers refused to read the novel but attended the discussion to relive their contempt for her novellas. The discussion suffered distractions toward general, somewhat uninformed opinions about issues such as incest and environmental destruction. Nevertheless, those who had read the novel kept us more specifically focused on the issues as raised by Smiley. It wasn't a significant problem, but it did cause me to wonder about repetition of authors among the series. . . .

Diane LeBlanc

As Diane points out, some groups have had rather negative reactions to the Smiley novellas. What seems to happen most often in these cases is that some readers so dislike *Ordinary Love* that they refuse to read *Good Will*. In the groups that responded more positively to the novellas, however, the discussion has frequently focused more on *Good Will* than *Ordinary Love*, I suspect partly because there's more "plot" there and it's clearer what is happening.

I've talked with two or three of the scholars whose groups had difficulty with *Ordinary Love*, and we're wondering whether those leading the Family Photographs series in the future might have better luck with the novellas if they suggested readers reverse the order in which they read the two stories. It's maybe worth trying.

Judy Powers

A question came up right at the start: how are the Pulitzer Prize books chosen? I called the Pulitzer Prize office and asked for the names of all the nominees for 1969, but no one ever sent me anything. I did extensive searching on the Web, interlibrary loaned various books on the prize, copied pages on the prize from the World Almanac, etc. to no avail. I think the public just isn't meant to know the contenders.

Carol Deering

Afton is a funny, funky place. Part classic Wyoming hard-scrabble town, part retiree enclave, part conservative farming community, it always strikes me as an unlikely spot for literary interest. But we have quite decent attendance at book discussion meetings in Afton, and the participants are, if anything, more eager to devour unfamiliar and difficult texts than in most small towns. We

had a lot of fun with the Pulitzer series this year, and folks seemed to be looking forward excitedly to next year's series, whatever it turns out to be.

We had a lot of fun with the Pulitzer series this year. My approach was to spend about thirty minutes at the outset of the first meeting talking about what the Pulitzer Prize is, and laying the groundwork for repeated discussions of canonicity as the series progressed. I laid out the basic questions: What is the worldwide history of literary prizes in general? How and why do they get started? Are they "real," or simply commercial public-relations devices? How do books get picked, and who picks them? Do current events affect selections? How do trends in publishing, academics and politics affect selections? Looking at a list of winners (such as Pulitzer Prize novels), in what ways is it a depiction of our culture, our history? In what ways is it not? Is a literary canon of any sort a self-portrait, an idealized image, or an attempt at prophecy?

I went on like this for a while and then noticed everyone's eyes were getting a little glassy. They were vaguely interested in what I was talking about, but what they really wanted to do was discuss our first book (which was *The Optimist's Daughter*). I abandoned the theoretical business (returning to it in later instances only in much truncated fashion), and we went on to enjoy some good book discussions. In other words, my advice to myself or others doing this series would be as follows: Don't try to make this into an academic exercise, even though this series, more than most, tempts a leader to lean that direction. To me, this series is as much about the above questions as it is about the books themselves. But that belief needs to be finessed better than I handled it. On the other hand, I prepared a mini-lecture for the discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath* covering such things as Depression-era politics, the history of the labor movement, migrant policy and practice in the contemporary West, and the historical evidence for and against Steinbeck's particular depiction. The group seemed to love all that stuff. Then again, they floundered and lost patience when I described some of the radical literary interpretations which have been applied to *Grapes* over the years.

My general assessment: I'm looking forward to leading this series again elsewhere, because it's downright fun. People enjoy wrestling these books (with the exception of *The Optimist's Daughter*, which everyone hated, at least in Afton).

When I lead it again:

* I'll tone down the theory at the beginning of the series and slip in parcels of it periodically.

* I may make up a set of overlying questions to consider (like those above) and hand them out at the beginning for people to be thinking about all season long, if they wish to do so.

* As a way of getting at the deeper issues of prize-giving and list-making, I'll probably ask a fundamental and predictable question of every book, something like, "If you

were making up a list of, say, fifty great American novels, would you include this book? Why or why not?"

* I'll probably make up a prize and we'll vote at the end for the "best of the prize-winning books" we've read.

In other words, I'll look for ways to make this series more playful, since it seems from the get-go a trifle heavy and serious.

I was prepared for people to have more difficulty with *House Made of Dawn* than they did. That was actually one of our best discussions.

The program organizer arranged for us all to go over to her house to watch the film of *The Color Purple* before we discussed the book. It made for an extremely long evening, of course. But it was a great exercise, especially because the movie emphasizes certain aspects of the novel, and it's good to compare interpretations. A lot of the books we read in various series have had fine films made of them - I recommend doing a film/book evening once a season (at most) if you can fit it into the schedule.

Peter Anderson

I think the Pulitzer series provides a great opportunity - perhaps the best among the WCH book discussion programs - for discussion of truly "American literature," whatever that means. The ambiguity I allude to is, I think, the point. We always have good discussions of these books when we talk about them, pro or con, as emblems of American culture. The fact that they were at some point selected by an august body to represent "American life" opens the door to criticism of the many ways we might define that culture. That, to me, is a crucial piece of what we're all about.

When we try to make these books behave like literary artifacts, the discussions dry up (at least in the discussion setting). But they flourish when we talk about them as mirrors of their readers. Thus, if I were asked for an opinion, I'd recommend discussion leaders steer this series toward big, broad, general themes, not inward toward the specifics of the novels themselves. Also, I recommend using this series to talk specifically about the experiential difference between reading fiction and non-fiction, and why we often gain more from reading cultural fiction than journalistic reports.

Peter Anderson

The Jackson group enjoyed the Pulitzer Prize series, by and large. Most of the selections were well-received by a majority of the participants. A few surprises emerged. For instance, when I've led this series in the past, many readers disliked "The Optimist's Daughter," and found it difficult to discuss. The Jackson group, however, liked that novel the best of the bunch.

I heard no complaints about the construction of the series, or about the book selections in general. The indications were that folks appreciated the wide range of novels presented because they allowed us to develop discussion about the different sorts of forces driving selection of prize winners.

We spent a lot of time on that subject, by the way. I suggested two principal modes for examining the Pulitzer phenomena. First, we could try to trace the shared qualities inherent in the various novels as a way of divining the "American-ness" of the literature stream. Second, we could take a look at the country -- characteristics and events -- surrounding each of the selected novels to try to determine if there seemed to be external, cultural forces at work in the Pulitzer environment. Needless to say, we arrived at no particular conclusions taking either of these tacks, but the exercise seemed invaluable.

Because the Pulitzer Prize, by its existence and prominence, creates a de facto American literature sub-canon, I wanted our discussions to dwell for occasionally on the subject of canonicity, and they did repeatedly. We talked about the mechanisms and forces by which some books rise to the top of cultural recognition and become prominent books in America's so-called national literature. We talked about the cynical business aspects of the publishing industry and how executives may be increasingly shaping the future of American literature by force. We debated the value of national-scope awards (the Pulitzer, Pen-Faulkner and National Book Awards in the U.S., the Booker Prize in England, the Prix Goncourt in France and so forth) and the effects, short and long-term, of such prizes on national literatures and the perceptions of national literatures outside the respective countries. We talked about reading lists and how they shape individual ideas of what makes good literature, such as the notable counter-arguments that flared up last year to the Modern Library board's listing of the "Best 100 Books of the Century." We talked about our own personal lists of best books.

Peter Anderson

The series was successful with the exception of *House Made of Dawn*. Few people attended this discussion and those who came to later discussions explained they found the book difficult and confusing. From this I learned that I should have presented some themes explored in the book and explained the way in which the book is structured before participants read the book.

The liveliest exchanges arose when the group discussed *The Way West* and *A Thousand Acres*. I believe this was so because the group could connect and bring personal experiences to the discussions of this book. The group had more difficulty connecting to the characters in *The Optimist's Daughter*. I enjoyed the diversity of comments and watching the group come to new conclusions about books as the discussion evolved each evening.

Overall there was a committed group of participants who and arrived with interesting and insightful comments. One

of my challenges was to assure the group that not liking a book is okay and even when they did not like a book they should still come to the discussion. I found it interesting that they were hesitant to dislike a book; they seemed to feel that disliking a book would make me feel badly or be an inappropriate comment on the choices of the WCH.

Norleen Healy

Grapes of Wrath

Eight of us met at the Niobrara County Library last night for another pleasant discussion. The topic was *Grapes of Wrath*, and after some introductory material about Steinbeck and some brief critical perspectives the discussion began. First, there was a difference of opinion as to liking or disliking the book. We discussed why that may have been the case, moved on to whether fiction is "real." In other words, does the suffering of the Joad family represent actual experiences of the Depression and the "Okies." Also discussed was the history of events leading up to and during the time period, land and what it means, drought (one participant brought a recent editorial from the *Star-Tribune* about this issue), food preservation, survival, the sense of us and them, farming methods, and the diaspora of families. Obviously, this was a wide-ranging but very pleasant discussion. Several of the usual participants had other obligations, but those of us left had a fine evening. This was a good group of readers.

Wayne G. Deahl

I began the book discussion on *The Grapes of Wrath* with a map of Rt. 66, the travel route for those seeking a better life. Then, we began discussing the similarities and differences between *The Way West*, which we had discussed in our first session. The group determined that both groups were looking for a better life, that everyone became a big family along the route, that they had left everything behind, and that they all suffered through good and bad times.

The differences were much more striking: in TWW, people seemed to have a choice about moving; in TGOW, they did not--they moved out of necessity, out of desperation and survival. While those who arrived in Oregon felt a sense of acceptance, those in TGOW felt constant harassment. The group thought that they were all going to the Promised Land, but those in TGOW did not find what they were seeking.

The group brought up the current drought situation, and we talked a bit about the politics the Dust Bowl Hoover and FDR. They asked about the chapters that interrupt the Joad family narrative. I explained that those were there to show the general situation of on-half of the nation; the Joad family just made it more real because they became characters for whom one cares and identifies. Very much like we see in TWW with the Evans' family. The group determined that like Becky in TWW, Ma was

the rock of the family in TGOW while Tom just felt like a "turtle on his back."

They also made other connections: Casey, the non-preacher, who is really a preacher, with Weatherby in TWW. They determined that they are both givers, in some Jesus figures who give and expect nothing in repay rather like Dick Summers who leads and helps and rather like Tom Joad. What they decided was that these people become a family who do not know each other but who support each other, who help each other, who minister to the needs of others. They determined that the book is about all of us.

I then asked what made this a Pulitzer prize book. They decided that some of that must have to do with perception of self in place and community, that these 2 books explore what happens when people lose their sense of self and community, that what determines us comes out when we need to survive, to leave our name on a place, like Brownie on Independence Rock; to have no place, like Tom Joad. They decided, however, that from great confusion and despair, there is still hope, for from possible death comes life--Rose of Sharon feeding the dying man saves a life.

Linda Ross, Gillette

I'm not going to send this to the discussion board because I covered pretty much the same topics as I did when we did this book in Story in August. (Besides, I can't find my notes from this time!)

The group loved the book, for the most part, and discussed it enthusiastically. They did wonder if all the books were going to be "this depressing"!

We talked about the rest of this series – themes we'd be answering and what the criteria for selecting these particular books was. They wanted to know about the Pulitzer prize criteria too.

I left them with some points in comparison to this novel to consider when they read the next one. (*The Way West*)

Norleen Healy

I don't usually begin with a "lecture" but this time I did share some information about Steinbeck, as well as the social and environmental upheaval of the time. I had brought in a book of Dorothea Lange photographs, *American Exodus*, which we looked at. The book was published the same year as *Grapes of Wrath* and depicts scenes that might have been right out of the novel. I also shared who Carol and Tom were and why the book was dedicated to them.

Our discussion began by comparing the novel to *The Way West*, the last book we read. That quickly led us into *The Grapes of Wrath* itself. I had prepared a list of questions to guide the discussion but instead of following it, I just let

the discussion flow out of readers' comments and questions. Turned out that we covered most of the questions on my list eventually. We discussed the main characters, the strength of the women, the fact that the men were made helpless because they were denied work and the ability to support their families. One woman had grown up in Oklahoma in the 1930's and shared some of her family's experiences in the Dust Bowl days. The religious symbolism interested everyone and once I pointed out a couple of possible symbolic interpretations, the group thought of many more. One that I thought was particularly insightful was that Ma Joad trying to feed the hungry children as well as her own family was a metaphor for the Californians, overwhelmed by the needy migrant workers. Although everyone's sympathy couldn't help but be with the Joads and the migrants' plight, we also could see why the Californians reacted to them so violently. Someone compared their reaction to that of local communities when The Rainbow People decided to make have their summer encampment nearby.

They were interested in the religious overtones in the novel and someone who had recently read *East of Eden* pointed out that novel's reliance on Biblical allusions as well. I read the passage from "Song of Solomon" about the Rose of Sharon (thanks Peter Anderson for mentioning that in your report) and of course we speculated on Jim Casey as a Christ symbol, Tom as disciple, the exodus to the promised land, etc.

The novel's relevance today was another topic that interested the group. They noted the similarities with migrant workers today. The theme of big agribusiness vs. the small farmer/rancher also struck a chord of recognition and invited comparison to *A Thousand Acres*. They felt that big business vs. the little guy is also a current problem.

I shared with them some of the critic's objections to the novel, the furor after it was published, and the campaign to suppress it. To the question of what Stienbeck was trying to do with the novel, I read his comment in a letter that:

"I've done my damnest to rip a reader's nerves to rags, I don't want him satisfied... I tried to write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written...Throughout I've tried to make the reader participate in the actuality, what he takes from it will be scaled entirely on his own depth or hollowness. There are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself."

Stienbeck's goes on to explain the "layers." The quotes can be found in Robert DeMott's introduction to the Penguin 1992 edition of the book.

The reason we didn't discuss why the novel won a Pulitzer, was, I think, that it was so obvious. This was a satisfying discussion to conclude a satisfying series and primed everyone to talk about what series they want to read next year.

Marcia Hensley, Jan. 2004

I prepared for this session as for an all-out lecture. I wanted to run through the history of the subject matter and the controversy surrounding the book in some detail. I probably over-prepared. The group discussed the book deeply and wasn't all that interested in my history and criticism.

Some of the points the members found most fascinating:

- Socialism in the U.S. and how it has flared and receded over the decades.
- The reality of the migrant worker situation, both at the time of the novel and now, with emphasis on migrant worker conditions in our immediate region.
- John Steinbeck's biography--why he got interested in the Okies.
- The history of old Route 66.

The novel has a long tradition of critical inquiry into its Christian imagery and symbolism, everything from the Noah's ark aspect of the Joad's truck to the Pieta-like image of Rose of Sharon feeding the starving man in the barn at the end. When I pointed this out, I got a lot of blank stares. Some people were startled and perplexed that they didn't recognize it in the book when they read it. The Christian stuff isn't terribly perspicuous, but it's definitely there. I understand more than two hundred obvious and not-so-obvious references to the Bible have been found in the text. What Steinbeck was trying to do remains a matter of debate, of course. The problem is trying to have a discussion of it in Afton, Wyoming, where a lot of people believe if you're going to talk about the Bible, you should talk about the Bible, and not disguise it in a communist novel.

An interesting evening, all way around.

Peter Anderson

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* begs attention first as a cultural artifact and second as a literary text. Our group spent about 30 minutes discussing context. Warren French's *A Companion to the Grapes of Wrath* has a useful chapter, "What Did John Steinbeck Know about the 'Okies'?" that describes Steinbeck's 1937 travel and residence with migrants. Also, it presents the text of his 1938 brochure about migrants, *Their Blood is Strong*. As I read random passages from its section on the people, it was clear to readers that the interim editorial chapters in the novel originated in this earlier document. I circulated photos (*Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath*) of Thomas Collins (To TOM who lived it") at Weedpatch Camp, as well as photos of draft pages of the novel and of Educational Bulletin No. 1 distributed to California migrant workers for self-protection. Such information and background provided necessary context for discussing the Joads's degrees of power and powerlessness in the face of law, religion, and salvation.

Young Tom Joad's violence raises the question of whether or not his actions are justified. The group agreed that the

murder of Herb Turnbull and the later clubbing of a deputy were acts of self-preservation. They were justified given the social circumstances in which Tom was operating.

Tragically, however, Tom's strong sense of self-preservation most likely will prevent him from becoming the next Jim Casey. Although he tells Ma (Chapter 28) that "I'll be ever'where," predicting a future as a hero of a Woody Guthrie ballad, he lacks the vision and self-restraint to become a hero for the greater good. Readers felt little hope that he would wander back to the family or that he would lead migrants to the revolution hinted at in the novel. Tom's frustration with the law characterizes the inability of later displaced peoples to find justice through the law. We discussed, for example, the Black American who turned to a local sheriff for protection only to learn eventually that the sheriff was an elder in the KKK. Or, today, women are still denied protection from abusive spouses because the preservation of power that often leads to abuse is the same power practiced by a male law enforcement team.

Our discussion of religion began with the unpredictable ending and worked back through the novel. Long after their dreams of Eden have surrendered to hunger and fatigue, and with almost allegorical simplicity, Ma moves the family from the flood stricken camp to higher ground. Readers did not find it too incredible that Rose of Sharon would give of herself to the hungry man when, throughout the novel, she is self-interested. She becomes the purely symbolic character of her namesake who, because of biological capability, can "save" the people in ways that Jim Casey never could have. It's helpful to share with readers quotes from Song of Solomon 2, which begins, "I am the Rose of Sharon, and lily of the valleys" and promises, "The winter is past, the rain is over and gone" and that their vines will soon put forth "the tender grape." The Joads have become a chosen people whose fate at the end of the novel is irrelevant given that they have learned the ultimate about human survival; their fate then depends on the larger society learning the same lesson of community, giving, and hope.

Diane LeBlanc

All participants were receptive to the book, despite its angry political stance. They didn't feel preached to, but accepted Steinbeck's analysis, abhorring with him the injustices these people suffered at the hands of a mechanistically capitalist economy. I invited readers to probe the utopian alternative presented by the unlikely perfection of the government camp. Further analysis led us to speculate that it was Steinbeck's mythic descriptions of the land and the times (in the chapters alternating with the personal story of the Joads) that made the book seem large enough to "earn" its political message.

One participant offered a particularly keen observation of the role of women in this migration: that the woman's "place" is the hearth, while the man's is the land around it. The hearth proved to be portable while the land was not, thus the ascendancy of Ma Joad. We also looked to Steinbeck's influences--especially Briffault's *The Mothers*,

in which, according to a source I read, earlier matriarchies did not actually put women in charge, but constituted "a radically different relationship between people based on cooperation rather than power. . . .All familial feeling, all group-sympathy, the essential foundation, therefore, of a social organization, is the direct product of prolonged maternal care, and does not exist apart from it." Patriarchy and the notion of independence are related to private ownership. When this falls apart, leadership reverts to females. The Joads could no longer rely on frontier individualism, they had to learn to work together.

Julene Bair

Dennis Coelho (Cheyenne, Burns, Pine Bluffs groups) sent me a couple comments in response to the ones posted yesterday. He says I can share them with everyone, so I'm posting them to the list (J):

#1

Is this typical of the sort of analysis being done in other groups? Boy, do I feel out of touch! I remember nothing mythic about labor camps out in California when I was a kid, nor was there anything mythic about how the government tried to maintain some sort of cleanliness and humanity in those places. I remember the kids that came to our school from some of the camps and how my mother made sure that they stopped by our house on the way to school so she could feed them something. What struck me about reading "Grapes" was the brutal reality of it. The students in my little high school in southern Idaho had no trouble seeing their neighbors in Steinbeck's narrative.

#2

Woody Guthrie reduced the book to a many-versed song version that distilled the essence of the story.

"Tom Joad got out of the old McCallister pen,
It was there that he got his parole.
After serving five years on a man-killing charge,
Tom Joad come a-walkin' down the road,
Tom Joad came a-walkin' down the road.

The truck pulled away in a cloud of dust,
And Tommy turned his face towards home.
He met Preacher Casey and they had a little drink,
And learned that his family they was gone,
He learned that his family they was gone."

One of the very best things Guthrie ever did.

He said he did it because most of the folks the book was about would never be able to read it so he put it altogether in a five minute song.

Dennis Coelho

Steinbeck's book was my personal favorite of the series. (I think many people--but not all--preferred *The Way West*).

We discussed the way Ma passes her strength on to Rose of Sharon, to keep the family going. A woman's role goes on. The (older) men's role died off: farming before the industrial era. We also discussed the value of anger, which is what saves the characters. Apparently, Steinbeck saw the ending as optimistic, though many readers here did not. He meant a sense of empowerment, of survival. Barbara showed the ending of the black & white video owned by CWC Library. I added a bit of interesting information: IITYWYBAD was mentioned in the book as a sign above taverns, and I researched its meaning: "If I Tell You, Will You Buy me A Drink!"

Carol Deering

The Pinedale group responded positively to this novel, even though, as might be expected, many had read it years before, in some cases several times. An interesting line of discussion compared "The Grapes of Wrath" to "The Way West," which we had discussed at the previous session. The difference between westward journeys depicted in the two novels made for good discussion fodder regarding motives for going west.

We discussed the history of migrant farm labor - both what it used to be and how it remains. Responding to questions from participants, I outlined the political economy of the times (after W.W.I), the physical environment of extended drought coupled with disastrous farming theories and practices in vogue then, and the social atmosphere of the era, specifically the rise of organized labor. Some pieces of Steinbeck's story (concerning California's handling of the situation) aren't true - I covered these. I also touched on the history of the book itself.

A lot of the discussion centered on the trip taken by the Joad family, especially the territories through which they travel, familiar to many participants. A few of our group members recalled the Depression and life on farms at that time. I think a good discussion of this book draws as much as possible on personal stories, and I try to draw it out as much as possible.

We talked a little about the so-called "intercalary" chapters, the short pieces of bridging narrative between plot chapters. Reactions to those were mixed, with most readers finding them odd.

Finally, I brought out the free-floating religious symbolism which permeates this novel and we talked for a while about why Steinbeck might have incorporated it into the narrative.

Peter Anderson (Pinedale group)

Our small group was even smaller this time. According to the librarian, two of the ladies brought the book back early claiming, as one said, "I've been through this depression once, I don't need to go through it again!" For those of us there though, the discussion was quite good. A few of us had read the book many years ago, and we talked about

how our responses to a book change depending on who we are and where we are in our lives when we read it. They were interested in the biographical details about Steinbeck, especially how he got involved with "Okies" and we of course discussed the social and historical background of the novel. Some group members shared their own memories of the period and related them to parts of the novel. I asked each person to talk about a theme they saw in the novel and by the time we got around even this small group, they had addressed the most significant themes in the book -i.e., agrarianism over capitalism, the psychic hold land gets on a person, the economic and moral decline, the "religion" the novel espouses as opposed to traditional religion, the power of group action, the humanity, and so on. We talked about the ending of the novel and how it was affirmative even though things don't look good for the Joads. One person pointed out that the only one that might make it was Al and perhaps because he, of all of them, was a man who related to machines. All agreed that they were glad to have read or reread this novel.

Norleen Healy (Clearmont group)

Most participants thought the book was very readable and even engaging, but as always some found it relentless, even tiring. It's sorrowful, downward spiral seemed terribly despairing to a few readers.

A couple readers took issue with the (to them) seemingly black and white depiction of rich landowners (bad) and poor workers (good), but other participants seemed able to read a lot of layers into each of the many cultural classifications in the novel. In general, there was a lot of empathy for (a) the characters and (b) the novel as a work depicting a specific time and place. I think the general impression was that it was sort of dated, although two or three readers read a timeless quality into the book, and were eager to share that with the group.

I found the following interesting: In times past (meaning last year), discussion groups seemed eager to tackle the issue of communism versus capitalism, and the wavering future of communist ideas given the state of world politics. But this group didn't seem to find that subject especially attractive, and I wonder if current events have somehow rendered our previous intellectual stage-sets somewhat obsolete. In other words, I wonder if there's a different, urgent feeling about what's at stake for a humanities discussion because of the sudden, recent change in priorities? Just aimlessly speculating.

Below are some comments I gave the group prior to the first session of the Pulitzer series which other discussion leaders may find interesting (or perhaps amusing).

Here are three general inquiries to consider over the course of the Pulitzer series:

- What are the implications when we make a list of "great books" or "best books" or "most important

books?" How silly is it to try? What do we gain, and lose, by doing so?

- How do the times -- events, moods, feelings, rhetoric -- affect our perceptions of art, and vice versa?
- How do literary perceptions of self, represented differently in each of these very different novels, change over time, and vary between regions?

Here are several questions relating to first novel of the series:

- How does "The Grapes of Wrath" mediate the relationship between haves and have-nots in this country, both in the context of its era (1940) and our own?
- How does Steinbeck's writing style, especially his famous "intercalary" chapters -- the short, rangy, poetic discourses dropped in here and there -- work in the telling of this tale?
- Is Steinbeck the reporter and political polemicist too present in this work, not present enough, or just right, in your view? Is the narrative voice the same as the author, in this case? Would you say the author is too much a character in his own novel?
- Can you track your own emotional responses as you make your way through this book? What aspects of the work affect you most?

This novel carries many religious references. What do you make of those? As a retelling of the essential "American journey," what does the work seem to be arguing? As a personal, philosophical work, where does this novel seem to seek or find meaning, value and hope?

Peter Anderson (Pinedale group)

The Rock Springs group discussion on Steinbeck was great. We covered a lot of territory, focused a good deal on Steinbeck's central ideas of how the individual's interests are subordinate to the group's, how the idea "family" includes all who are in need, how women are more built for this communal consciousness than the men. We zeroed in on the three main characters and brought to mind for quick comments nearly all the others in the book. We talked about what makes a "home," and how that differs for men and women.

We threw some good anchors back to "The Way West." We compared the movie (unfavorably) to the book. We enjoyed the authentic setting and characterizations, reading some of our favorite passages. We made some good connections to our life and times--pointing out how I-centeredness seems to have gained the upper hand, how the recent terrorist attacks have caused the resurgence of the "we," how this resurgence might or might not endure...

As far as helpful sources, I found the 50th anniversary retrospective of "The Grapes of Wrath" published in the Volume 59 of Contemporary Literary Criticism series to be a terrific source. It not only had a fine introductory essay, but also offered a compilation of reviews and studies of the book over the past five decades.

Rick Kempa

This book always seems to lend itself to good, free flowing discussion. We even had two people last night (our last meeting) who had never attended a book discussion and came just because we were doing Grapes of Wrath. I began by going around the table and asking for initial responses to any aspect of the book; this invoked so much discussion that it took up a big chunk of our time. However, in the discussion we got around to most of the major themes in the novel. People related the book to their own family stories and personal experiences. Most seemed to feel that the sense of community that is the redeeming force in the novel has continued to erode in the decades since the book was written and that the "machine" has only become more complicated and more alienating. This attitude seemed to be reinforced by our looking back at the other novels in this series in terms of their chronological setting. They took umbrage when I wondered if that is a complaint that every generation has, like "What's the matter with kids today?"

They talked about the movie (which I've never seen) and how it differs, especially in term of subtleties, from the book. They tell me it demands a much more heroic view of Tom than does the novel. And why wouldn't it? Aren't we looking at Henry Fonda?

Norleen Healy

The group loved this book, and we had a rich discussion of it.

We had a lot of fun talking about the Grapes possible connections to the Bible. Casey's initials are J.C. (like Jesus Christ). Is he a Christ-like figure? Can Tom be viewed as his disciple? We compared the Joads' journey to the Biblical Exodus. In what ways might the migrating "Okies" be seen as chosen people? We also compared Casey's religion to the religions of Ma, Gramma Joad, Tom, the fervent believer at the camp. We talked about the conflict between the agrarian way of life and the industrial world.

It was great to read The Way West and Grapes of Wrath back-to-back. The books both about westward journeys; the travelers all expect Eden at the end. Steinbeck and Guthrie both demonstrate how the trip makes men of their heroes (Tom Joad and Lije Evans). We compared the theme of evolution in the novels, what we felt was a shared view between Steinb. and Guth. that people must adapt or fail/die.

Carol Bell

This was the final book of our series and it was nice to end on a "masterpiece" as one participant put it. Several of the participants had not read this book though they had seen the film or read other works from the author. The group was very excited about Steinbeck's development of his characters and places. One member expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the tragedies contained in the work because the characters were just so "real." We discussed Steinbeck's social and economic commentaries on the United States in the 1930s and how these relate to America today. The group was especially interested in the evolution of gender relations especially the character of Ma Joad. We also explored the various relationships that the author developed such as siblings, child-parent, individual-society, etc. In addition, the tensions between corporate and public interests (e.g., the cottons farms vs the government camp) also generated a lot of discussion. We concluded by discussing how many Americans have personal or secondhand knowledge of the experiences that Steinbeck explores in the book, but that younger Americans may lack the context from which to appreciate the book and its impact. This led to a number of personal anecdotes about the period as well as stories from those who had traveled that part of the country. All in all, this was a great book to close the series with, and the members clearly appreciated a "worthy" Pulitzer winning book (several of the other books in the series some of the participants had difficulty seeing why they qualified as "winners").

Erich Frankland, Casper

House Made of Dawn

Seven readers gathered to discuss *House Made of Dawn*. The temporary Lander library sent over some treats from their open house and we thank them! I talked more than I usually do; I felt the book needed explaining and maybe "selling." Several people had not finished it, but planned to after our discussion. I talked about Momaday's winning the Pulitzer and the fact that this helped other Native American writers. I used a lot of information from literary criticism, explaining that these ideas might help us to understand the book better, but that we should feel free to draw our own conclusions. One review suggested that Momaday did not expect the white reader to fully understand the Native American oral tradition/stories/symbols in the book. This idea helped us to move on and talk about BOTH the events and stories that we could understand and those we could not. Readers felt compassion for all the characters, each lost and seeking the path in his or her own way. This is not true of old Francisco, of course. We spent most of our time on why the other urban Indians were threatened by Abel and how, in the end, Ben was able to lead him toward home and renewal. One reader, in particular, focused on the Biblical Cain and Abel story and used this to understand the book. This was a book we were glad we read, but, even more, we were glad that we had a means to talk about it.

Barbara Gose

The discussion with 6 people was as confusing as the people thought the book was! As a group, they found the book incomprehensible, and they didn't like it. One person said that if she had checked the book out of the library, she would have returned it after reading 20 pages. We did talk about discrimination; 2 of the people had taught on an Indian reservation, so we talked about Indian culture and customs and alcohol. How do we deal with discrimination? How do we cope with different cultures and language difficulties? How does this fit the book? How come this is a Pulitzer prize winner? I had no answers; I just had as many questions as they. But as a group, they really abhorred the book.

Linda Ross, Gillette

Only 12 showed for this difficult book: several returned the book unread, and two who came hadn't finished, so only half our crowd finished, and no one but me liked it. I found I had to read it twice; once to figure out who was speaking, and a second time to get the meaning and metaphor. We felt the author was unnecessarily obtuse in declining to tell us who was speaking during each vignette until pages had gone by. By the end of the evening, after I talked about myths and symbolism, we all had a chance to discuss the characters and their situations, and read some evocative passages aloud, a few decided to hold onto their books and reread.

I reported that a movie had been made in 1972, but never found a distributor but may be available from the Smithsonian.

http://www.nativenetworks.si.edu/Eng/orange/house_made_of_dawn.htm

"This film adaptation of N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is a story of loss and redemption. A young man, played by actor/poet Larry Littlebird, must cope with his life in two distinct but conflicting worlds of the 1970's—the reservation in the Southwest and the gritty urban environment. Richardson Morse's quiet, insightful film ultimately celebrates the natural and the enduring.

With support from the American Film Institute, the National Museum of the American Indian created this new 35mm print of *House Made of Dawn*, as part of its efforts to preserve films that embody important moments in the history of the Native American image on film so they may continue to inspire and educate audiences for years to come."

The Smithsonian makes prints available for research. Since our group has a habit of gathering for a potluck to view films made of our books, I was asked to contact the SI to see if we qualify to borrow it.

In the future, I suggest *House made of Dawn* not be the first book of a series, so that the leader can prepare the group to read it through twice.

Claire Gabriel Dunne, Basin, Wyoming 2007

I began the discussion by reminding us as to the themes of the series, mentioning that one of the themes we are exploring is communities in transition and then briefly reviewing the strengths of our recently visited wagon train in the Way West. Next I suggested we think about how difficult we found the book under discussion and how that might inform us as to the difficulty Indians have in entering the "western" world and its traditions.

After a brief introduction to Momaday's life I read several quotes from Momaday on the power of language and what he was trying to convey in this book. I briefly covered Termination, Relocation and AIM. Then we plunged into the book - I asked them to get on Abel's wagon train and frames of reference (or lack of) as he moved through communities and transitions. I shaped the discussion around discussing the four parts of the book, in sequence, the characters and their stories. As we went through the book I pointed out the circles within the book and the way flashbacks influenced the structure. We also discussed the Indian legends and symbols in the book.

No one disliked the book, (well maybe one) but admitted they were often confused while reading the book. We were fortunate to have amongst us a teacher from Little Big Horn College and a woman who has taught on the Cheyenne Reservation. Two members of the group were at the Billings Airport recently when a young Crow warrior returned from Iraq. They spoke of the powerful ceremony, drumming and community which greeted him. We also had a great discussion of reservations and their place in today's world in terms of communities in transition and the difficulty of walking in two worlds. Finally all mentioned the beauty of language and landscape in House Made of Dawn.

Katie Curtiss
Sheridan

Our discussion about House Made of Dawn circled through many issues, just as the novel's tale circled through many perspectives of the external and internal landscapes. Our discussion started with maps of New Mexico and the Jemez Pueblo, west of Santa Fe and metropolitan Los Angeles. We talked about the importance of place in this novel that shows us the New Mexico open mesas in contrast with the constrained spaces in Los Angeles. We also talked about the information from the 1992, PBS Home Video "Momaday: Voice of the West." We focused on points Momaday made in the film about his novel's description of human dilemma and his struggle of having "one foot in (the) Kiowa" world and "one foot is (the) white" world. We focused on Momaday's quote in the film: "I want my writing to disturb people."

Some participants talked about their personal experiences in relation to issues found in the novel. One participant told us that she taught on a reservation for one

year, and she is "still perplexed." We also talked about the Kiowa culture, a horse culture. Additionally, we talked about participants' experiences with the 1950s, relocation programs to urban settings to assimilate Native Americans into "American" culture. Participants also recommended current films with similar issues: Rabbit Proof Fence and Whale Rider.

Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain was referenced as well as his poetry and art forms. His writing style was our next focus with many participants declaring that House Made of Dawn is a masterpiece in revealing Native American issues, using story language, and providing visual images. The symbolism of dark and light permeated our discussion as well as the novels use of colors, eagles, and horses to convey meaning. We concluded that the message at the end of the novel is one of hope. Abel is starting to run again.

Some participants still needed to "figure out" Abel and his killing of the albino, which opened up more discussion. Other participants read additional information and explanations from their Perennial Classics publication of the novel. Then we read out loud excerpts about the trial from the novel. We further discussed the various characters, symbolism, and our additional questions.

We agreed with one participant's conclusion that House Made of Dawn has "hundreds of issues" and that this novel is universal. We ended our lively discussion with the notes I had written in the back of my novel: this novel has much that needs to be explained but cannot be reasoned, only felt.

Sharon Taylor, January 2004

My fears of this title evaporated with the dawn in the Eppson Center for Senior's discussion. I had alerted the group to the non-linear narrative, etc., and no one seemed put off by it. In fact many readers really enjoyed the structure, and especially loved the language. We started off "untangling" the plot and describing the events in an order that made sense to the dominant white culture. We talked about why Momaday made the rhetorical choices he did, and how they reinforced the narrative, and what our perceptions are of how the majority culture manages minority cultures, both physically and metaphysically. I shared information about Indian relocation policies that were coming of age in the timeframe of the story. We encountered an irony: We felt sorrow that Abel's culture had been ripped apart and that's what caused his troubles; however, many in the group believed newcomers to this country should assimilate and learn English quickly, placing their own cultures at risk. It is problematic that what we identified as horrific treatment of native Americans by whites was in some ways not much different than what we were recommending new immigrants endure, an irony worth investigating in future sessions.

Julianne Couch 02-03

I'm leading discussions for the first time this year both in Newcastle and in Laramie. I agree with David that it's best to avoid the role of teacher but also with Judy that some books do require at the very least, preparatory remarks. My Newcastle group, for instance, would have had a much more positive reaction to *House Made of Dawn*, by N. Scott Momaday, if I had prepared them for the sometimes confusing, changing and intimate points of view. And since we all tend to forget what was said at a previous meeting, it might be handy to have at least some notes, if not some questions, when we sit down to read the more difficult novels. Questions are probably the best choice, since they put the scholar in the role we all prefer -- that of facilitator rather than pontificator. I for one will consider using this method in the future, but I will use it selectively, in relation to the more difficult books.

Julene Bair

I understand *House Made of Dawn* has been a difficult read for several groups this year. It reminds me of the problems some groups had with *Ceremony* in the "Being Indian" series--in fact, I think the committee discussed that issue when it chose the book. Undoubtedly, those who lead the Pulitzer Series next year will learn from this year's experiences, Julene. That seemed to happen with the earlier series.

Judy
WCH

I ran across a site devoted to Native American authors. I didn't spend much time there, and I didn't see much in the way of criticism, but it does have biographical information, and you can get authors listed by tribe. It looked to me like an impressive number of authors were listed, and it might be useful for folks dealing with Native American authors. The address is:

<http://www.ipl.org/ref/native/>

Rob (Afton)

I was prepared for people to have a terrible time with this book, and I was pleasantly incorrect. Everyone finished it (with one exception and she simply ran out of time), and everyone seemed to understand the general structure of the book.

I did a demonstration of the story line on a chalkboard, showing the circular pattern of the plot and the concentric circles of meaning and relationships between myth and tradition and various plot elements. The group seemed to appreciate that, though admittedly it's a dense book encompassing way more than a person can get into in an hour and a half. A lick and a promise.

Participants brought up the nature of language, and the focus on the "word" to which Momaday devotes so much time. The major complaint about the book seemed to be

that readers felt it was too abstract and symbolic; they didn't feel connected to the characters personally. The whole thing left them feeling fascinated but a little cold. Intimidated, perhaps, but not fatally frustrated.

Peter Anderson

[Diane's group started with this novel, which is a difficult one for readers at any stage of the series, but particularly at the beginning. J.]

"Our discussion of Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* began with readers' responses to the novel. Responses ranged from a love of the lyrical quality of the novel to exasperated confusion. Given that everyone had finished the novel despite its complexity, we were able to piece together moments of clarity to create an overall sense of "who," "what," "when," and "where."

Most significantly, this clarifying raised a discussion of the circular movement of the novel, structure which one critic said is better read for patterns than plot. This review then enabled us to move on to "why," emphasizing issues of identity quest, religion in a secular world, and Indian involvement in American wars.

Abel's identity quest shaped our discussion of his character. His relationships with Angela and Milly raised the question of whether or not he was capable of knowing and caring for anyone, even himself. According to Marion Willard Hylton, the ancient Indian belief that secrets are divulged during sexual intercourse may have influenced Abel's and Angela's apparent exchange of identities as suggested in the lone couplet: "Angela put her white hands to his body/Abel put his hands to her white body." He came home from the war alienated from but attempting to reclaim his place in the natural world. Angela arrived ill at ease in nature and at odds with her physical self. After their brief affair, Angela grows to welcome thunder and pregnancy and find a place in nature; Abel almost dies in L. A. trying to assimilate into urban dominant culture. In connection, we explored his relationships to Francisco, Ben, and the "white man" to consider how his identity quest was not exclusively the result of alienation from white culture. Abel's conflict with the "white man" during a village festival showed internal conflict within the tribal world, suggesting that his alienation was not exclusively a symptom of Indian/white conflict.

Our discussion of religion in the secular world focused on Part II, the Priest of the Sun's sermon on the Word. Exploring his voice shifts, we concluded that although Tosomah appears to be an outsider to white culture, contrasting Indian fluid notions of the Word with static gospel accounts, he is a trickster figure whose mask enables him to survive. His alienation is not debilitating as is Abel's.

Encouraged by the history buff and the anthropologist in the group, I provided information from Laura Coltelli's 1990 interview with Momaday in which he discusses Indian alienation from self and world resulting from their involvement in American wars, specifically W.W.II. We

considered whether the novel was a social statement about Indian rights and culture or an artistic statement about human integrity to outlast evil. The group had various responses, which made for an interesting exchange of perspectives."

Diane Leblanc

This book puzzled many of the participants, though it was probably my second favorite. (I'd read it back when it was new and enjoyed it, and so I was all set to enjoy it again.) It has so many layers and so much that can be taken poetically. We certainly discussed Abel's alienation and inability to communicate, and his road to redemption. We discussed oral tradition and dawn runners. We considered whether Abel really cared about his traditions until his grandfather died. Everyone gave of themselves to him, but he didn't grow.

I guess the Benevides home was modeled on Momaday's own home in his late teens. I tried to explain why I thought the book was so well received when it came out (1969)--it was the antiwar, Viet Nam period, and here was a character back from World War II, all messed up. (Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, as late as 1977, hit the same chord). Maybe reading it for the first time in the 90s doesn't have the same urgent appeal? But I don't like it any less. . . .

Carol Deering

This was the smallest turnout we've had -- the weather was terrible but also I was told that a couple of people just didn't like the book so didn't finish it and chose not to come. I'm sorry about that because I do find that this book begins to be of more interest and value to a group through the shared discussion. Just because it's less immediately accessible than other novels doesn't mean it isn't a good one to include in the series. It helped me to look at the comments from booktalk ahead of time on this one; I was more prepared for the reticence and some of the problems the group might encounter reading the book. And I admit I felt a need to do more research than usual on this one.

We began by sorting out all the narrative voices and fitting them in to the story. Then we talked about what we see each representing, particularly the Indian characters. This got us into lots of other aspects of the novel. It's interesting and significant to hear how varying people's response to Abel is. It surprises me how totally unsympathetic some are to him, but then that leads to good discussion of other issues --particularly different forms of alienation. Passages people pointed to as notable were generally those about the natural world, especially through Francisco's voice. We compared Francisco's bear hunt with Abel's eagle hunt and what each signifies in terms of the characters and the theme.

The more we discussed, the more we began to see that we "got" more than we realized from the book. We ended our discussion realizing that we could have gone on for a

lot longer than the hour and a half we spent -- always a good sign!

I toted along diagrams I had made years before of the plot structure of "House Made of Dawn" which show its circular design and the quadrants into which teachers often divide it - development up to the murder, the shift to "Big Bluff" Tosamah, his physical destruction and rebirth, Benally's nurturance and his return to Jemez. Taking the story piece by piece, I think, opens it up like an oyster for a lot of readers.

We talked a bit about shifting points of view, and the use of that particular mechanism in fiction - how and why. I raised the question of why this book may have emerged in 1969 in the gaze of the Pulitzer Committee. I think the book represented a painful individual experience of cultural destruction and rebirth, a theme which reflected in a variety of ways the discourse of America at that point. (Others argue that the award was a politically safe nod by the mainstream to Indian writers.)

Peter Anderson

[When Katie sent this commentary to me, she said she was being "philosophical and suggestive" in it and invited me to edit it to include only the important points. I think it's worth passing on in its entirety, however, since it reflects on several important questions about the kinds of books we want to include in series. How do we weigh the value of what appears to be a really good discussion of a difficult book against the fact that four, rather than ten or fifteen people participated in it and benefited from it? Please comment, if you have thoughts on this issue or experiences that illuminate it. J.]

Four people attended this discussion; two had finished the book and two had not. Several people had returned their books to the library before the evening discussion, explaining that they quite simply gave up. I feel partly responsible for this because I did not make it clear in the first meeting that even if you do not like the book, nor finish the book, you should still come to the discussion. One does not have to like a book to participate in a book discussion.

In preparing for this particular discussion I did an enormous amount of work because the book challenged me, as well as challenged me as to just how I should I approach a discussion of the book. It is one of those books you have to do an enormous amount of research in order to understand the book. Do not get me wrong - the more I read about the book the more I loved and was intrigued by the book; hence the problem - modernism and cultural references - so to speak; to understand the book and its context you have to read ABOUT the book. You cannot just read this book and understand it. Additionally it helps to have a background in Native American literature and expressions of culture.

I believe *House Made of Dawn* is a very important book in the series but suggest if I may, that handouts be given before a group reads the book; perhaps a synopsis of

chapters and key points of symbolism. In fact we considered this the night of the discussion. During the evening discussion, as I explained the symbolism, structure and characters within *House Made of Dawn* the quartet who showed up kept saying - oh that make sense; wow now it makes sense. The four participants also, in their guilt as to not finishing the book, or in not understanding the book commented that perhaps they should have done research on the book. I firmly assured them that they should not have to do so; that is why they have a discussion leader. Those comments made me think about some of the comments posted on line, in the discussion series, as to the role of discussion leader as TEACHER or discussion facilitator. With this book you cannot help but go into the teacher mode in order to bring necessary information about cultural context and modernism in order to understand the book. But then it is too late to do that when people throw up their hands and do not read the book or come to the discussion.

As we moved through symbolism and characters the book indeed came alive and made sense to the group. We also moved into an interesting discussion, considering today's current events, as to how we understand other cultures and belief systems. We discussed the ways in which cultures and belief systems are open and closed and how we can understand and access cultural and historical symbols that are so very different and from our own. Additionally we discussed what our responsibilities are, as individuals, in understanding conflicting cultures and views that are presented in envisioning a global community as opposed to a local, cultural community. Where and how do we fit?

Katie Curtiss

We had a very good discussion. One person did a lot of research on the symbolism of the book (esp. the eagle and the snake) and had a lot to offer. Among other things, we discussed how all the characters--not just Abel--were inhabiting in-between worlds, how they were all either struggling to find their place, or had compromised their possibilities in accepting the place they occupied. My best source--one that explores this idea at length--was Bernard Salinger's "'House Made of Dawn': A Positively Ambivalent Bildungsroman" from *Modern Fiction Studies*, Spring 1999. As usual, I also got a good deal from reading other WCH scholars' comments in the archives!

Rick Kempa

People either really liked this book, or they hated it. Many didn't finish it (which is unusual for this group of people). People thought the stream of consciousness narrative very confusing, and some complained that there wasn't a single character with which they could identify. They felt the cultural differences were too great--I think perhaps the characters just aren't fleshed out as well as most of us wanted them to be. We began by going over the order of events. Then we talked about the role of women in the novel, the difference between Native American and

mainstream American treatment of language, the role of nature, and the significance of the Albino. We talked about Abel's search for identity. Why is he so lost? How does he find his way? Where do Native Americans who have left their communities go for guidance? Where does Abel turn? Etc. Etc. Etc. Others commented on the role of family (or lack of it).

Finally, we talked about what makes a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel--does the prize say most about the quality of the novel or about the times? Would the novels we've read win prizes today? Many of us had read *The Color Purple* years ago, and we remembered being really moved by it. When we read it in this series, most of us found it less impressive (though we still enjoyed reading and talking about it). The group felt *A House Made of Dawn* would have been groundbreaking for its time, but that it wouldn't win a prize today. This led to an interesting discussion about what makes novels last, about the difference between a Pulitzer and a Classic. Someone pointed out that novels can be both, but not all Pulitzers will become Classics!

Carol Bell

Casper: Some members expressed the difficulty they had reading the text and that often they were lost. They found it hard to discern who was talking. However, despite their difficulties, the discussion was thought provoking. I began with background information about the author and some literary criticism regarding the text. We focused more on themes and writing style and did not attempt to create a linear story line. Our discussion mimicked how the text was written which I found to be quite interesting. We discussed Abel's identity quest, religion in a secular world, in-between worlds, and Native American involvement in American wars to name a few. We closed the session with a discussion about this text as a "classic" Pulitzer Prize winner.

--Tammy Frankland

The Color Purple

As with last month, we had a pleasant evening and a fine discussion last night at the Niobrara County Library. Not as many were able to attend, but there were still 11 participants and myself available to discuss *The Color Purple*. I provided a bit of biographical background, discussed the epistolary novel a bit, and began to throw out some ideas. Walker's idea of "womanism," the place of color, oppression, texture/text/textile and clothing/sewing (which also includes piecing the letters together to make a whole novel/quilt), relationships, the nature of god, and the women spent some time hashing over the idea of the strength of women. Whether Shug is a kind, loving person or a self-centered user became an important idea. The general consensus seemed to be that the book was liked, although one participant said it was the most depressing book she had read and chose not to re-read it for the discussion. However, that she attended

demonstrated the willingness of this group to struggle with ideas regardless of personal taste. Again, a good discussion.

Wayne G. Deahl

Because of inclement weather--snow, icy roads--I decided not to drive to Gillette, so we did a teleconference. The library had the equipment to do that, and I have a speaker phone, so we just did the discussion over the phone. It went very well.

The group were impressed by the strength of the characters, especially Celie, and they talked much about evolutions of the characters--all of them--finding them sensitive and accurate. We also discussed the history of Africa, about which we decided we knew little, especially about the Africans enslaving their own people by taking them and giving them to go on the ships to America. They determined that the affluent people enslaved them and that the natives could make money by selling their people.

We also talked about abuse; those who are abused become abusive. Celie was abused; therefore, she recommended abuse; she had no emotional connection with her husband who is essentially nameless, just Mr. _____, and she felt she should be subservient to her husband as she had been to her "father," who she finds at the end that he was only her stepfather. They were impressed by Celie's courage and her relationship with Shug, whom they saw as a very strong woman, they were also impressed by Celie's ability to overcome adversity and become her own person.

We talked about her first letters written to God and determined that she had no one else to whom to talk, but when Shug found the letters from Nettie that Mr. _____ (Albert) had hidden for many years, she begins to find her identity and make a position for herself through her "pants" business. When Nettie comes home with Celie's 2 children, she feels complete and rewarded. She feels that she finally has family and the group determined that she was a very strong woman who had survived much.

Overall, it was a successful discussion, even long-distance.

Linda Ross, Gillette

Following a potluck viewing of the 1985 Steven Spielberg movie at my home Sunday night, 19 of us gathered for our last book, wine and refreshments. The book, by Alice Walker, was published in 1982, winning the Pulitzer prize the next year.

Born on February 4, 1944 to a sharecropper and domestic worker in Eatonton, Georgia, Alice Walker was the youngest of eight children. Her parents, Willie Lee and Minnie Lou Grant Walker, filled her with stories about their hardships and those of their families as a black family in the south. As part of a large family, Walker was constantly

physical with her brothers and sisters, playing and fighting in the fields. One accident turned nearly fatal when her one of brothers' BB guns went off in her direction, causing her to lose sight in one eye. Despite her partial loss of eyesight, Walker was a diligent student, finishing her classes with top grades. She graduated as the valedictorian of her class, securing a space at Spelman, the all black women's college in Atlanta. After two years at Spelman, Walker earned a scholarship to be one of the few blacks at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She participated in an exchange program to Uganda before graduation in 1965. She worked for several years in New York before returning to the South. Married in 1967 to a civil rights attorney, theirs was the first legal interracial marriage in Mississippi. In *The Color Purple* Celie's life sets the stage for the civil rights movement, giving context to the years before Martin Luther King Jr.'s march on Washington (where, in 1963, Alice Walker was able to hear his "I have a dream" speech while perched on a tree limb).

Alice Walker's early poems, novels and short stories dealt with themes familiar to readers of her later works: rape, violence, isolation, troubled relationships, multi-generational perspectives, sexism and racism.

When *The Color Purple* came out in 1982, Walker became known to an even wider audience. Her Pulitzer Prize, the first to any African-American, and the movie by Steven Spielberg brought both fame and controversy. She was widely criticized for negative portrayals of men in *The Color Purple*, but maintained the truth of her characters' lives.

One of the novel's many achievements is its use of voice. Celie's and Nettie's letters convey two starkly different varieties of English, providing us a way to consider the historical and social aspects of language. I asked if the dialect was difficult, but all our readers found it understandable. I introduced the term African American Vernacular English (AAVE), formerly known as Black English among socio-linguists and sometimes referred to as Ebonics, and asked what the different ways of speaking revealed about the two sisters. Then we talked about how Ebonics is spoken currently; one of our members thought "Any American should be required to speak English." That comment generated some surprise and questions such as "A certain kind of English? Proper English? Unaccented English? O English with no grammatical errors?"

The Color Purple is in the tradition of the slave narrative: stories written by male and female former slaves about their experiences under slavery. I passed around copies of [some slave narratives](#) which had been collected among exslaves in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal project in the Southern United States. We discussed how slave narratives talk about racial oppression and whether other kinds of oppression are also evident in Celie's story.

The Color Purple has often been read as a metaphor for the African American legacy. We asked what symbolism exists in the way Celie is separated from her children, denied an education, and valued only for her

housekeeping and her sexual capabilities? When Adam and Tashi marry, does this negate any of the injustices of European as well as African slave traders? What do characters such as Miss Millie, who tries to dehumanize and exploit the labor of people of color, reflect about the post-Reconstruction world? What turning point does Sofia's act of defiance (despite its brutal consequences) reflect?

I noted that two of Alice Walker's later books create an informal trilogy with *The Color Purple*. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi confronts the emotional and physical damage of female genital mutilation and returns to Africa to inflict vengeance on the elderly woman who performed the procedure on her. *The Temple of My Familiar* features Celie's granddaughter, Fanny, and her search for identity apart from racism and sexism.

Alice Walker created and taught the first class in the country dedicated to African-American Women Writers at Wellesley College. She's credited with introducing the word "womanist" for African American feminism.

Alice Walker continues not only to write, but to be creative in environmental, feminist/womanist causes, and issues of economic justice. She currently lives in Mendocino, northern California, with her dog Marley.

Claire Dunne, Basin

Three of the more resonant themes that came from our discussion of Walker's book were the many faces of oppression and prejudice; the triple trial—both in the context of the book and in our society today-- of being black, a woman, and gay; and the power sources people tap into—especially community and creativity--in order to survive. This latter point invited some good comparisons over to other books in the series. One gentleman who was raised in South Carolina had some pretty sobering—and sometimes chilling—tales to tell of the "caste system" he knew, and how it was enforced. I wish I had brought the movie—it would have been great to watch and discuss some selected portions of it—but I was on the road from Denver and it wasn't possible. My best new source was the 25th anniversary retrospective on the book in the CLC Reference series—about a hundred pages of small print, with many full-length essays exploring various themes in depth.

Richard Kempa

Our discussion about *The Color Purple* started with the participants talking about the issues of the distinctive language style of the letters, the transformation of the characters, lesbianism, incest, black and white racism, and the relationships of Black women and men. One of the participants added to the discussion by reading excerpts from *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering* from Stein to *Sapphire* by Janice Doane and Devon Hodges. Another referenced novel was *Kiss Daddy Good Night*. We also discussed the responses of

white reviewers of *The Color Purple*, who believed the novel's depictions of African men and white men were too harsh. One participant concluded that the novel is a "literary affirmative action."

Another participant compared this novel with our previous novels, *A Thousand Acres* and *House Made of Dawn*, and she concluded that an underlying theme in all three novels is one of oppression. The characters in all of these novels are fighting oppression. Participants offered their own responses and conclusions. They concluded that women authors are more likely than men to deal with issues of oppression.

Participants felt that the father, who was revealed later in the novel as not being the father was an awkward part of the story. On the other hand, when Celie learned this fact, her recovery was possible. Celie is able to talk about her sexual abuse. Also, finding her children was a part that participants appreciated.

The characters, especially, Sophia, were reviewed and analyzed. Participants felt that the novel was a commentary on a variety of family relationships, such as Sophia, Harpo, and Squeak as well as Shug, Albert, and Celie. The characters brought out the "good" in each other. We laughed about Celie's business (Folkpants Unlimited) of making pants rather than quilts. Then we were saddened as we realized that Celie, even at the end, still sees herself as ugly even though she is supposed to be similar to her sister, who was described as beautiful. Her self-image is still tied to the sexual abuse she suffered. Our final conclusion was that the ending of the novel was happy and showed survival. All of the women were transformed. "There is always hope" was one participant's conclusion.

Sharon Taylor, February 2004

We had a good turn-out, though all women, for this novel. They were enthusiastic about the novel in general, claimed to find it a "relief" after the hard work *House Made of Dawn* and *The Optimist's Daughter* required. They were pleased especially with the happy ending and a little indignant when I asked if it might be a bit contrived. They needed very little guidance in getting to key themes in the novel. They talked about the strong women in the novel and how each one had a distinctive kind of courage and determination in spite of the forces against them. All of them either had coping mechanisms from the start or developed them through experience, but none ended up submissive. This group didn't see this as a necessarily "feminist" novel; they thought it had more universal application. One major theme we discussed was how restrictive to individual growth any kind of acceptance of stereotyping can be, whether it be gender roles, societal roles, view of God, etc. Several had passages they wanted to point out as being especially significant. We talked about MY favorite passage (the one about how "it ain't easy doin without god") and how that's such a pervasive theme in modern literature. We talked about use of language and voice. This group is receptive to style and appreciated what Walker does. Considering the novel

itself and the period it was written, they had no problem understanding how/why it received the Pulitzer.

I did give them some background on Alice Walker, her comments on the writing of the novel (which explains her reference to herself in the epilogue as a "medium"), and her subsequent novels and essays.

I've dealt with this novel a lot over the past 20 years or so, so it's interesting to me to hear fresh responses to it. I respect this group of good readers, so they resurrected some appreciation of the novel in me.

Norleen Healy, Dec. 2003

Since our previous discussion was in November, I opened with a brief overview of the three previous books (*The Way West*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *The Optimist's Daughter*), noting the significant ideas on which we tended to focus in each discussion and the common topics we might derive from each of those discussions. "Strong women" was one of those topics, and group members offered their views of the characters they would place in that category (Celie, Shug, Sofia, in particular), as well as their responses to the novel in general. The human will to survive and the various strategies the narrator and other characters used in order to survive, the nature of friendship and of love, what constitutes marriage and a family, and the role of the community in individuals' lives were other topics we discussed.

Members commented on the significance of the color purple, with several suggesting that people such as the character Celie are often the "invisible" people in the world, with much to offer but who are often ignored as in "...I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." This led to reflections on the concepts of God, of religious institutions, of spirituality and of human creativity as illustrated by the characters in the novel. Readers also spoke about the novel's structure and style, with a few finding the novel's "letter" style and the characters' dialects to be negative factors. (We did agree that the novel's style (the letters and the dialect) greatly influences the reader's perspective of both character development and of the action.)

I shared various literary critics' comments and perspectives, as well as a few of Walker's own comments on her childhood, her depression and her writing as a survival strategy, interweaving that information with discussants' comments.

Resources other scholars may find useful:

Helgar, Charles J. "Named and Namelessness: Alice Walker's Patterns of Surnames in *The Color Purple*." *ANQ* Winter 2000, Vol. 13 Issue 1, p. 38.

Smith, Pamela A. "Green Lap, Brown Embrace, Blue Body: The Ecospirituality of Alice Walker." *Cross Currents*, Winter 97/98, Vol. 48 Issue 4, p. 471.

Selzer, Linda. "Race and Domesticity in *The Color Purple*." *African American Review*, Spring95, Vol. 29, Issue 1, P. 67.

Hall, James C. "Towards a Map of Mis(sed) Reading: The Presence of Absence in *The Color Purple*." *African American Review*, Spring92, Vol. 26, p.89.

Sanoff, A.P. "The Craft of Survival: U.S. News and World Report, 6/3/91, Vol. 110 Issue 21, p. 51. (This article has some good comments from Walker herself.)

Ebba Stedillie, Jan. 2003

Lewis, Brian C. "Black English: Its History and Its Role in the Education of Our Children." Rpt. in *Multicultural Education in Middle and Secondary Classrooms: Meeting the Challenge of Diversity and Change* by Joan A. Rasool and A. Cheryl Curtis. Wadsworth 2000, pp. 202-209. (Part of this article deals with the history and development of Black English, with information that can help scholars to respond to readers' questions about the characters' dialect. It also puts forth an argument as to the legitimacy of both the grammar and the vocabulary of Black English, as well as the very real barrier it creates between those who use this non-standard dialect and the majority society, which might also contribute to a discussion about community and "outsiders" and "insiders" as depicted in the novel and as found in the 'real' world.)

People either love or hate this book. It heaps up many topics, political, environmental, religious, sexual, psychological, etc. To take away someone's sense of self is beyond criminal! We talked about how Celie was an "old" child and seems to get younger as the novel progresses. About male and female roles, Black English, the difference in sisters, fighting the system, Africa as Biblical allegory, matriarchal cultures, etc. Someone mentioned that Celie's referring to her husband as Mr.--- was a sign that she was so disconnected from him, she was just his possession. We had a discussion about the color purple: it can mean a bruise (violence transcends race); it can mean royalty; it can refer to the flowers she notices as important. We saw parts of a video interviewing Alice Walker.

Carol Deering

This was the first meeting for this series, so I spent the usual time setting it up. I explained the book selection process, some of the criteria used in choosing the books for this particular series, and gave some history of the Pulitzer awards.

I decided to hold off on the biographical info about Alice Walker until the end of the discussion because I like to read part of her essay "Writing the Color Purple" from her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Some of the major points we discussed were

- The "voice" of the narrator as opposed to that of Alice Walker (I was hoping to forestall the

comments about how offended someone might be about the descriptions of the rape. I was, as it turned out, unsuccessful in forestalling that, but...),

- How Celie is initially limited in the words she has to describe,
- The theme of the emergence of self in the novel - what forces restrict the development of the self and what forces liberate this development,
- How sex role stereotypes restrict both the men and the women in the novel and how shedding those enriched the characters' lives,
- The parallel and intersecting function of the African narrative,
- How cultures define God and the effects of this.

We also talked about how Walker has been accused herself of stereotyping and looked at her characters to argue or defend that accusation. Someone suggested that the story was a product of the setting and that people aren't that isolated anymore what with TV so prevalent etc. Good discussion on this. Sometimes I think I'm a little tired of this book, but it does provoke good discussion of some significant issues in the Humanities.

Norleen Healy (Clearmont)

Participants mostly liked this book, and among its attributes the aspect they appreciated most was its warm depiction of sisterhood among women. The group felt that concept cuts across time and culture, and that Walker did an admirable job of capturing it. I hoped to relate this book more deeply to the series theme of Pulitzer Prize books and their characteristics. I elected to pursue the way literary styles become part of the culture, specifically, in this case, the way Oprah Winfrey, who starred in the film adaptation of "The Color Purple," knows Alice Walker and her works well and has championed a number of similar writers and books since, has helped shape a modern minicanon of American literature. Only marginally successful there.

Peter Anderson

We had a great discussion of *The Color Purple* due in part because the individuals in the group had such varied responses to it. Some people loved it; others found it very mediocre.

I found a very critical discussion of the novel by Trudier Harris in Vol. 46 of *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, and we began with a discussion of his points. He talks about the "clash between Celie's conception and her writing abilities." Could/would a woman with her background write? No census! He also suggests the letters from Africa didn't contribute much to the novel. Participants disagreed, feeling that Nettie's letters add to the complexity of the race issue in the book. There is much sexism among the African blacks and some racism, too.

Many of us were struck by a falseness in the novel's ending--the way everything turns out so happily for everyone. Even the wife-swapping causes no harm and improves the lives of all.

Carol Bell (Cody group)

Although we had a fairly small group this session (the week before Christmas it's always hard to muster much attendance), we had a lively discussion. This was true even though several of the readers hadn't finished the book. Most participants, as is usually the case, found it perplexing and strange.

I usually try to bring out several purely literary points with regard to this book, since it is one of the more technically intriguing of the novels we read in the Pulitzer series, and is therefore a good book for discussing how interested in technical matters the Pulitzer committee has or hasn't been over the decades.

We focused on point of view for a while, and the group brought out the multitude of angles from which this story is told (I like to begin this discussion by pointing out how the author shows the opening run in panoramic mode and the closing run in fine, close-up detail, like film shots). We talked about stream-of-consciousness as a writing style and what it is intended to achieve (and also how well-grounded Momaday is in literary history). We talked about reliability of the various narrators. We talked about folk-tales and sermons and the many other ways of transmitting information presented by the book.

Here are five categories of discussion topics that I usually try to invoke regarding "House Made of Dawn:"

1) Language. What do each of the speakers in this novel (including the omniscient narrator) say about language, about its use and abuse, about the origins of self within the power structures of language?

2) Religion. How does this novel commingle various forms of spirituality, such as Christianity, Indian spiritual beliefs, peyote ceremonies and so forth?

3) Narrative. Why is the point of view used in the telling of this story so deliberately complicated and even obfuscating?

4) Memory. Why is so much of this story composed of recollection? What does it seem to be telling us about the nature of individual and cultural memories, and what it means to lose those memories?

5) Violence. This book is filled with surreal violence, and asks the reader questions about the perception of violence, the nature of violence, the differences between fictional and real-life violence and so on.

5) Alienation and estrangement. The novel is in many ways about a number of people undergoing the experience of becoming estranged from everything they formerly believed in, and what that experience does to

individuals. Considering cultural changes afoot in 1968 (the year the book appeared), how might this theme have influenced the Pulitzer committee in its selection of this book?

Peter Anderson

Participants dug into the novel's flowering of spirituality, which is usually the most fruitful line of discussion with this book. We also spent some time talking about Oprah's book club (this book, partly because of Oprah Winfrey's involvement in the movie version, being an early representative of the genre which has come to be thought of as typical of her selections), and what the effect of that cultural phenomenon has had on American reading habits and tastes.

Here are some questions I use to get into this book:

1) What is a so-called "woman's novel?" Is there such a thing as female fiction? Is there an identifiable tradition of women's writing in our overall literary output? Can you tell, without knowing, if you're reading fiction written by a woman or a man (or any other generic division)? Do you have differing expectations, and if so why?

2) What is a "slave narrative?" This novel has often been described as a modern rendition of the tradition of slave narrative typified by Frederick Douglass and Harriett Jacobs. In what ways does or doesn't this novel reiterate the slave narrative qualities of plea-and-demand for political and social change?

3) What does it mean to live in a "shared community?" To what degree is the community that you live in shared by all its inhabitants?

4) Why is "The Color Purple" written in epistolary form? What is the history of the epistolary novel, and what strengths (or weaknesses) as a fictional form does it present the story-teller. In this case, does it seem to work? What changes take place in Celie over the course of this story? Did any changes take place in you as you read about her?

5) What's the difference between religion and spirituality?

6) What elements are necessary for an individual's life to begin to take on depth, color, vibrancy, power, "purple-ness"? What causes those elements to be missing from some, or many, lives? To what degree is a colorless life the fault of the individual and to what degree is such a lack caused by culture and history?

Peter Anderson

The group liked the book a lot. Many of them had read it before and all but one had seen the movie. Through the discussion we got around to the usual points:

- Walker's conception of sex role stereotyping -- how it restricts both female and male and impedes development
- Parallel and intersecting developments of Celie and Mr._____.
- Celie's change -- what brings it about? what is it? what empowers her?
- Celie's voice vs. that of Alice Walker and the form of the novel
- The Eleanor Jane and Miss Sophie episode - what is that telling us?
- Concepts of God
- Feminism - is this novel slanted that way? Are there stereotypes?
- The function of the African narrative

I asked them if they found any weaknesses in the novel, but they were pretty reluctant to pursue that. I pushed it a bit because I sure think there are some things that can be looked at here, but they still resisted. They were relieved that the ending was so "happy" and everything tied up so well -- they said after reading some of the other books in this series, a "happy" ending came as a big relief!

We did get into an interesting discussion about the incest - they compared Albert to Larry in *A Thousand Acres* and talked generally about this social ill. I asked them if they found the book relevant to their world. They did, and we explored the ways. We also talked about what the culture was in the early 1980's which would have contributed to the Pulitzer Prize award for the novel.

Norleen Healy

I began the evening sharing Iverem's "An Interview with Alice Walker." Then we examined why this novel won the Pulitzer. Most participants categorized this novel as a classic rather than just a prizewinner. They felt the novel spoke to all people regardless of race. We also discussed the portrayal of black men and the dynamic nature of all of the characters. None of the characters escape change. For some, Celie's letters to God showed how spirituality and religion are related but not necessarily synonymous. One member astutely pointed out that the houses in Africa were round as was Shug's bed and the home she designed. The connections to missionary work and African traditions were themes we briefly explored at the close of the session.

Tammy Frankland, Casper

The Optimist's Daughter

Seven readers gathered to discuss Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*. We began chatting before starting time and it was obvious that I would need to convince them that this slim book was worthy of reading and worthy of a Pulitzer Prize. I began by passing around pictures from both *One Writer's Beginnings* and Suzanne Marrs biography of Welty. This biography is wonderful; I was able to find it in the Dubois library. I highly recommend it,

if for no other reason than it makes clear that Welty was no recluse. She traveled constantly, spoke widely, and had two serious love interests during her life. Since *The Optimist's Daughter* is highly autobiographical, I pointed out the parallels between the novel and *One Writer's Beginnings*. Then I asked the group what they thought the point of the novel was, whose story it was, and what we learned from that story. From there we progressed to a discussion of the marriages portrayed in the novel: Becky and Clinton, Fay and Clinton, and Phil and Laurel. Small town southern life, funerals, old south versus new south, symbolism in the birds in the book, the importance of mountains and water, the past and memory were among other topics we covered. I remember reading that Welty did not want working manuscripts of this novel made available to researchers for a specified period of time. The Lander group wanted to know the reasons. Not sure about this, I emailed Suzanne Marrs, who is a professor at Millsapps College and teaches a course on Welty. As we passed out new books and collected this one, one woman commented that this discussion would have really helped her in reading the book. I commented that she should read it again. Am I alone in thinking that this book needs to be read more than once to truly appreciate it? No one had read Welty before and I was glad that this group had been introduced to her writing. In the end we agreed that this novel presents a vivid portrait of small time southern life and class differences in that region. No less important, it teaches us about how we can process events of the past and incorporate them into memory.

Barbara Gose

This book was better liked than *House Made of Dawn* and drew us into discussions of class and place in the South of the Forties. I talked about its success on several levels, that a good book will read as a good story, yet will have resonant symbols if you look for them. When one member said she couldn't see why Laurel let the chimney swift stay in the house all night, locked out of the woman's room, I offered, "If something doesn't seem quite normal on the surface, consider that it could be a symbol." That led us into discussion of freedom: from the past, from family heirlooms, from the very personal letters between her parents.

Both of Laurel's parents has trouble with their eyes, which spring boarded us into speculations about how well they could see each other in this small family of three, and also with the addition of a second wife. We agreed Welty's descriptions of the mother's home in West Virginia were superb, with references to a waterfall (a cataract, pun on clouded vision perhaps).

The group commented how different the characters were-- though all from the South--coming from Texas, Mississippi, and West Virginia. The book talks about place (geography) and also about place (social class).

Claire Gabriel Dunne, Basin, Wyoming February 2007

I first gave some background to the book and Ms. Welty. The group generally liked the book. As the discussion move along they grew to appreciate the book even more. Many members of the group thought Fay was a little overdone and too much of a caricature. Some felt nothing much happened in the book; but that thought quickly disappeared during our great discussion. I also presented a quote from Welty that "a good novel of any year can initiate us into our own experience". I returned to this quote during the discussion of the various characters in terms of how history and memory trapped or freed them into their own experiences. I also presented the quote again at the end of the discussion and we shared experiences of memory and change, and the ways this book initiated us into our own experience.

Some of the themes we discussed included community in transition - the Judge's generation and his daughter's generation. In this vein we also delved into the community's claim to the Judge and the ways in which both Fay and Laura claimed him. We talked about the New v Old South as presented by the Judge and his circle of friends and family, versus Fay and her crew. We compared how the two families solved problems and their "sense" of history. The group was very active during the discussion of Becky, Laura and the Judge; family histories and memory. Finally we discussed the title and who was, or was not an optimist.

Katie Curtiss, Sheridan

This was a lively discussion. The participants all enjoyed the book. We began by talking about the Judge -- what made him an "optimist." From there, the discussion flowed to the Judge's response to Becky's illness, then on to Fay, and finally to Laurel.

Many of the insights that the participants had were similar to those of other groups, so I won't repeat them here. But a couple of comments were especially intriguing. We discussed why the Judge had married Fay. In the ensuing conversation about her, the one of the men in the group said, "I've known Fays in my life," and the other man nodded in agreement, going on to describe her shallow appeal as "a wink and a wiggle." One person compared her with Scarlett O'Hara, empty-headed but hardened by experience. The group finally agreed that Fay was most like a Pomeranian -- high maintenance, vain, and yippy.

About the Judge's death: he simply gave up life under the incessant pressure from Fay, having realized that he had made a grave mistake in that marriage.

Laurel was herself an optimist, having learned from her parents' lives and mistakes. After she grieves for all three deaths, she is ready to move on. She is able to leave her parents' letters and the breadboard behind because she has the memories to sustain her. One woman commented that she would like to have Laurel as a friend.

The group briefly considered a sequel to the book, in which the Chisom family moves into the McKelva home and takes over.

The discussion concluded with a consideration of cultural differences among American regions. Was it a southern characteristic to be so concerned with appearances, asked one woman, who grew up in the Midwest. There followed a round of stories from all the participants on the issue.

Barbara A Bogart

About 15 folks met for a vigorous discussion of Welty's book. Our discussions of each of the characters almost always pointed us into our own lives: to look at how we remake private histories (the way everyone does at the Judge's services), how we deal with sickness, debility, and death; how we each have to work through Laurel's struggle of coming to terms with one's past—its people, places and things; how we treat outsiders (it took a little work, but we managed to see Fay in a sympathetic light). I was struck by how one of the elderly women in the group—normally pretty quiet—was quite animated in her love for this book. "I recognize it; it's about things that happen to us," she said. (In fact, she asked her daughter, who is also in the group, for a collection of Welty stories for Christmas, and that is exactly what she got!)

Richard Kempa, 4-7-04

Our discussion about *The Optimist's Daughter* started with the participants commenting on the similarities in Eudora Welty's life with the themes in this Pulitzer Prize novel. Participants saw similarities in their own lives of dealing with the death of a parent and responses found after funerals, a time when issues may be settled. We also contrasted the scene after the funeral with some participants' experience at wakes that were more positive.

Our conversation continued about Eudora Welty's artistic and literary accomplishments. We looked at her photographs of graveyards, Country Churchyards and talked about *One Writer's Beginnings*. Participants said that they planned to check out this book. We were impressed with Eudora Welty's skill in portraying one week in *The Optimist's Daughter*. The time frame was a "well orchestrated tragedy." Others disagreed with calling it a tragedy because there is hope in the end. We also talked about Eudora Welty's continual revising of her novels and stories. We recognized this striving toward perfection in the characteristics of Laurel.

The many relationships within the book offered opportunities for our discussion. We could see Laurel revising her perceptions and learning more about her father and mother's relationship. Some participants believed that Laurel was too controlled, "not a real person." Others believed that she was just being patient. The contrast of characters generated a rich discussion because participants both appreciated and were frustrated with some of the reactions from the judge, Laurel, Fay, Fay's family, the bridesmaids, and the friends of the parents. Participants wondered why the judge married

Fay, and the main answer was that "he was alive with her." We could understand her attraction, in terms of sexually and vitality. Additionally, the judge was ready to move on with his life, even though that is a hard reality for grown children to understand or accept sometimes.

Themes that we discussed were silence, death, and sense of place. First, we talked about the silence of the mother at the end when she was angry with her husband, who was unable to help her. The father was silent because he could not help Becky. Laurel is silent, even as she listened to Fay's many comments. The death of the mother, father, and Laurel's husband were points of discussion because in each death, someone was unable to help. We could also understand why Fay wanted to enter into the Carnival celebration. She did not want to participate in death. The other theme of place was found in the southern setting. We could see, hear, and feel what was happening in every scene in the novel. For example, the bedroom decorations are described, so we could picture that room and the house.

Some of the issues we discussed were the issue of control, sight, symbolism, and class relationships. We thought that the species of birds matched the people. For example, the bird trapped in the house is Fay, and other's believed it was Laurel, who is trapped in her memories. The breadboard was another source of many comments and conclusions. The class relationships found in the South in the early 1900s were strongly revealed in this novel. The two families represented two separate classes. We could understand Fay's reactions and experience coming into the home of the established upper class. Finally, we saw Fay's moving into the house as a symbol of the changing times for the South.

We read many excerpts from the novel about who were the optimists in the book. We could see that the judge was an optimist, even when he could do nothing to help his first wife during her illness. Laurel was truly the optimist's daughter.

Our final conclusion was that this seemingly, simple story has much to say about relationships. The humor in the story helped soften the depiction of death and the choice to move on with our lives. We saw changes in everyone in the novel. Our rich discussion helped us to look again at the characters' responses and conclusions.

Sharon Taylor, 3-21-04

I began by talking a bit about Eudora Welty and some of the characteristics of her writing and how they fit into the whole Southern Literature themes.

We had one participant in the group who is a devoted Welty fan and had read most of her fiction, so she shared her sense of the reflections of Welty's own (intensely personal) life that come through in her writing. When we started talking specifically about the novel the first character that they wanted to discuss was Wanda Fay whom they thoroughly thrashed. They were not impressed with my contention that she represents the

"new" South! We spent most of our time talking about Becky, the father, and Laurel. We, of course, talked about memory: how selective it can be, how layered, and how elusive. We definitely saw Laurel as being freed by her looking at her past in a deeper way. We felt that Becky's memory of the past trapped her and impinged on her relationship with the judge and even with Laurel. They all needed to "see" each other in new, more complex ways and forgive each other for things, even in memory. Unfortunately it was too late for Becky and the Judge, but not for Laurel. We talked a bit about the symbolism – the birds, the flowers, the bridesmaids, the breadboard ... I don't like to be too heavy handed with this, just let the group feel their way, and they had some good insights.

The book offers opportunity for humor too. We loved the whole Chisom family scene. Everyone has bizarre funeral stories to relate. Also the Chisom-like family at the hospital was familiar to us all. When the usual question of "why the Pulitzer" came up, I reminded them that a criteria is that the writing represent a segment of American life. They were much more willing that this book get the award than they were last month when we did the Scott Momaday book!

Norleen Healy, Jan. 2004

Having read previous scholar comments on the archives, I wasn't surprised to be asked by the group why this book won the Pulitzer Prize. So, that's where we started, reviewing prize criteria and past winners. I gave some background on Welty and her photographic viewpoint. Then we talked about plot, characters and had some good laughs and head scratching moments over Fay and her family. We began to unravel how the comedic characters and farcical plot serve as one layer of the novel. The other layer exists on the thematic level, we decided, and reveals truths about meanings of life and love. After some time spent at this level of reading, the group started to see the complexities of the novel and its value beyond its disguise as light entertainment.

Julianne Couch, Laramie 02-03

[Excerpted comment on suitability of this novel for discussion]

I do like much of the author's work, but this book turns on too little (most of the dramatic energy is in a single scene) and the subtlety of Ms. Welty's style (especially as regards symbols) leads to confusion in places where some elements don't seem to work as symbols or narratively. We did find room to talk about human values, about life and death, etc., but not to the depth of the other books in the series...."

Michael McIrvine

[Excerpted comment]

Although it is not challenging on the surface, it can generate a rich discussion. There again, it might be a good idea to send members home with some questions to ponder as they read. Why does Judge McKelva die, for instance? Does he somehow will himself to fade? What relationship does his death have to that of his wife? Is being an optimist a good thing in this book? Why are there so many references to time? Why is Laurel silent throughout so much of the novel? At what point does she begin expressing herself more, and why? Pursuing these questions, the Newcastle group came up with some amazing insights, not only into the characters, but into the way Welty seems to be commenting on the culture of that southern town. The prose is spare, but the mysteries are substantive and intentional, I believe.

Julene Bair

We first considered the book from the standpoint of the two families involved--the McKelvas and the Chisoms--their values and the ways in which they solved problems, the first bolstered by imagination and contemplation, the second confrontational and reactive. We then considered who the optimist was and was not (Clinton and Philip) and why the Judge's first wife, Becky, felt betrayed by her husband. Finally, we considered how Laurel resolved the issues of her husband's, her mother's and her father's deaths, and how memory is adaptable and can be interpreted to give new meaning to life: the past is impervious; memory is not. The group loved the character definition and found a number of passages to enjoy because of the wisdom contained or the experience crystallized.

Jack McDermott

This book, I'm sorry to say, was roundly loathed by the Afton group. They expressed contempt for the characters, a lack of admiration for the aims of the novel, annoyance with the writing style, and general doubt about Eudora Welty.

This all came on the heels of my introductory lecture about the Pulitzer Prize. Since this was the opening book of the series, I wanted to set the stage by explaining what the Pulitzer is, how it's selected and by whom, what it means, and a little bit of theory about the making lists, i.e., the formation of a literary canon.

So, on the heel of that, they laid into *The Optimist's Daughter* with a vengeance. Which isn't to say it was a bad discussion--just negative, and, well, pessimistic.

We did talk at length about motivations, surface versus deep. We discussed polarized relationships, for instance between rich and poor, north and south, city and small town, past and present. A brief discussion blossomed concerning the symbolism of flowers, which are everywhere in this book. We of course talked about the bird which wouldn't "just fly free of its own accord," and

about the connection between the coffin and the open desk.

We had a pretty good time, even through the negativity, and I think I convinced them to some degree that there is merit in this book.

Peter Anderson

Regarding Peter's message about his group's negative response to *The Optimist's Daughter*:

The Albany County Library group has questioned all but Steinbeck's novel as recipients of the Pulitzer. The series is interesting in that it raises fierce discussion about the criterion regarding a view of American life. The group seems to think the prize should reward a certain perspective about American life, that stories we like to hear should be given the prize. I have found this point of discussion quite interesting. We are finishing the series in two weeks with *The Optimist's Daughter*. I feel comfortably forewarned.

Diane LeBlanc

This was one of the most vital and vitalizing discussions I've had with book groups. Everything "clicked." We had many new people in attendance, everyone present was an enthusiastic student of literature and the Second Story salon is cozy and conducive to good conversation. We touched upon virtually all aspects of the book, with most people feeling it was a worthy work but remaining a little baffled over its having won the Pulitzer. The majority were saddened by the book, on behalf of its main character, Laurel. Although the author seems to write a triumph for her in the end, we were not as convinced of this as Welty perhaps wanted us to be. Many cited the apparent paucity of Laurel's present life in comparison with the past that she is so enamored of. While she may have a challenging occupation, there is little mention of it in the book. She seems engaged only by the past.

We concluded that optimism, in the context of this book, is not necessarily a good thing. Judge McKelva seemed to have applied the outlook blindly, as a means of denying his first wife's dire condition. And one member of our group shared the (brilliant, I thought) insight that perhaps the book is called *The Optimist's Daughter* because, like her father, Laurel lives in constant denial, married to a delusive sense of the past. Sara Martin did a fabulous job of co-leading the discussion. She researched the book and its author thoroughly, and these insights into Welty's own past were fascinating, especially in revealing parallels between the author's life and this particular book.

Julene Bair

We detoured our way into a discussion of marriage and family with a debate about why Judge McKelva died and how critical cause of death was to the novel. Some

readers felt it was a significant plot flaw that could have been remedied with a sentence or two, such as, "Then some unexpected and devastating test results came back and the Judge was doomed to die of a rare disease." Other felt that the ambiguity surrounding his death was intentional and critical to the novel's themes of marriage and salvation. I pointed the group to the doctor's private comment: "The renegade! I believe he's just plain sneaked out on us" (34). Why might the Judge have "sneaked out"? This question led us to Fay's character, her marriage to the judge, and the scene in which she "abuses" the Judge, saying "enough is enough. . . . This is my birthday!" Some readers felt that Fay and the Judge had a good marriage, and that in this scene she selflessly attempt to normalize his illness in order to help him heal. Others saw the marriage as a significant lack of judgment, ironically, on the Judge's part, and viewed his death as a metaphorically acceptable way to leave the marriage. After discussing his marriage to Becky, her despair and death, and his reaction to her death, the group realized the significance of "seeing" to the themes of love and marriage. The Judge's blindness to Fay's true character, brought out comically through her destructive family, may in fact have contributed to his need for corrective surgery and his subsequent death.

The conflict of optimism and despair grounds this tragedy in the differing attitudes toward death and grieving. We discussed Laurel's decision to burn and abandon her memories, focusing on the statement, "Memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that came empty but full again, in the patterns restored by dreams" (179). A creative individual like Laurel, the designer who seeks patterns in chaos, holds the promise of finding new love and life, rather than living her grief in the constant presence of her six bridesmaids. The future seems less hopeful for Fay, who destroys antiques and art with nail polish and hammers. For interest's sake, I provided background about the novel's origin as a long short story and Welty's deletion from the novel manuscript of 20 pages about Laurel and Phil's romance. Welty states in an interview that she desired this novel to be a tragedy of the McKelvas, each of whom realizes at different moments that she or he failed to save a loved one.

Given the broad themes of marriage, family, death, and salvation, readers were able to place this novel in the Pulitzer Prize category more readily than some of the previous.

Diane LeBlanc (Albany County Library group)

Most of the group liked this book. Barbara talked about the "interior" story of adjustment to grief and loss, and acceptance of the meaning of the love(s) in Laurel's life. And the importance of reading in her life. What do we really know about those close to us? The judge never really sees Becky: she feels betrayed and never reaches her potential in Jackson. When things don't work out, he leaves. The optimist sees through rose-colored glasses and is in denial. Laurel comes to grips with the idea she

doesn't want that kind of life. In the end, all we have is our perception/memories: things weren't really perfect. Revise.

We talked a lot about symbolism. We felt the breadboard was a symbol and a possession. Barbara talked about water (Phil dies in water in the war; there are many references to bridges and the confluence of the Ohio & Mississippi rivers, confluence of memories and the new, floods of feeling, cleansing and rebirth. . .), birds (fear/chaos/mess, the past, a bird in the house is a sign of death. . .), and hands (creativity, the breadboard, trimming roses, daily life, fingernail polish on the desk. . .), etc. We had a long discussion about why Laurel burns her mother's letters.

Carol Deering

This was the largest turnout we've had in Clearmont. Twelve people checked out the novel and eleven came for the discussion. I had given them some questions to consider as they read the novel as someone in *bd-talk* suggested, but this didn't seem to make them "like" the book any more; it did, however, give us a starting place for discussion. They had already been discussing the book among themselves and just knew I'd like this one as much as they didn't. They've learned to be amused and tolerant of my bad taste. It often seems that the books they like the least are the ones I like the most.

Interestingly, they did, in the discussion, bring in the elements in the book that are most central to the characters and theme. We talked about memory and how we define the past. We could all see how Laurel wanted to idealize her parent's marriage, how her memory of that and her mother began warmly and then, as she delved more deeply, evolved into something much more complex. We talked about how dangerous confronting the past can be (even though, in Laurel's case, redeeming). They could see how Laurel and Fay represented two extremes and how each could benefit by taking on some of the qualities of the other. Granted, the some of the people in the group had a little trouble with this at first, but we ended up agreeing that there was something to be said for Fay's energy and vitality. We enjoyed the *Chisolms*. The culture in Jackson, while definitively Southern, was not so unlike the towns many of us grew up in, even in Wyoming. Who hasn't experienced a "viewing" or funeral like the one in the novel? This novel lends itself well to a discussion of the characteristics of Southern literature, and most people are familiar with some Southern writer. Faulkner and Tennessee Williams (especially) were ones many could recall and see the parallels -- the idealization of the past, the detached father figure, etc.

Of course, the question at the end of the discussion was "Why this book for the Pulitzer?", and I turned the question back on them and asked them why they thought this book was chosen for that award. They said all the things I would have said, so they appreciate it even if they didn't "like" it!

Norleen Healy (Clearmont group)

Unlike some previous experiences I've had leading discussions of this book, the Pinedale group really enjoyed it. Considerable discussion surrounded why Laurel relinquished everything to her father's young wife. This brought out conversation about the way people feel about heirlooms, belongings and family artifacts. One participant asked the perennial question, "doesn't anyone feel sympathy for Fay?" That brought on a good discussion of the variety of motivations people have--often hidden--for the seemingly odd and even destructive things they do.

The group debated the book's prose style and methods, and its role as an emblem of time and place. Finally, it was succinctly stated that the real optimist of the story is Laurel herself.

Peter Anderson

The Rock Springs group had a good discussion of Eudora Welty's "The Optimist's Daughter." Because of the "transparent" way in which the book is written, where it is easy to forget that the author and her "themes" exist, this was largely a character-based discussion. We looked closely at each of the main characters in turn, and some minor ones as well, exploring their behavior and motivations. We noticed, too, some of the light-handed symbolism that Welty uses (that of birds, for example). Through this, various themes emerged: the outsider/insider tensions of the small community, one's relationships to one's parents, one's relationships to one's past and future, the tension between "old" and "new" societies, the loneliness of the sick and dying.... Finally, we took pleasure in Welty's descriptive powers, by reading several passages out loud.

I found some good materials on the book itself in Volume 105 of the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* series, and the NYT review by Howard Moss (referenced on the WCH fact sheet) was very helpful. Some of my very best materials, however-vivid details, anecdotes, testimonials about this rare and wonderful writer--came from the countless articles about Welty's life and work that appeared after her death on July 23, 2001 (easily obtainable through a search on a periodical database).

Given that Welty has not published any major fiction for decades, and yet has reportedly never ceased writing, our group was intrigued by the prospect of new Welty manuscripts that Richard Ford (her former neighbor, fellow Pulitzer winner and literary executor) may find suitable for publication in the years to come.

Rick Kempa

The *Optimist's Daughter* provoked extreme responses from the group. Two readers called it a near perfect novel, and two others felt time spent reading it a waste.

We grappled with the following questions during our discussion:

1) How is Laurel's life determined by her perception of her parents? Are all of our lives influenced by perceptions of family? Do our parents/families make it difficult for us to develop our individuality? How are we trapped or set free by family connections?

2) Before the funeral, people tell stories about the judge that seem untrue to Laurel. Why are these stories so disturbing to Laurel? Is it a universal human tendency to tell stories of mythic proportions about the dead? What might lead the characters in the novel to tell these stories about the judge?

3) How does love give meaning to life? Or does it? Compare Fay (isolated, dispossessed, without memory or past) to Laurel (long history of belonging, connectedness, love). Again, is our history a burden or does it give our lives meaning or both?

4) What is the significance of the bird caught in the house? How are Laurel and the bird alike?

5) The Optimist's Daughter is often seen as Welty's autobiographical novel. Laurel, a designer of fabric, is an artist. Is Welty trying to tell us something by the novel about an artist's role in society? If so, what?

Because a few had such a strong dislike of this novel, we talked a little about the difference between books we read on our own for fun and books we read in discussion groups or to which we award Pulitzer Prizes! Do we expect different things from prize-winning books or from book discussion books than we do from the books we read for fun?

Carol Bell

I began the discussion by a quick review of the books we had read and the types of communities in transition we had already explored. Then I asked them what kind of community was in transition in this book. The group did not like the book and felt that the characters left them cold. They could not identify with anyone in the book and felt the story was dry. However the fact the book left them cold led into an interesting discussion. The group felt Laura leaving everything behind rang false; they all have family items that they cherish and could not believe Laura would just walk away from everything. This led the group to be reflective and led to a discussion about "materialism" and memory. The group suddenly found themselves justifying their desire to keep things belonging to their families and ancestors. Then they all laughed realizing that somehow Laura's action produced in them feelings of guilt that they wanted "things" and they felt compelled to justify their desire for family treasures. They were also appalled that Laura burnt all the letters.

We discussed the two families in the book, how they solved problems, grieved and were or were not linked to their families. They enjoyed the brief summary I gave of the symbolism in the novel; in fact came with questions about the birds and plants and how they were woven into the story.

Katie Curtiss

My experience with this book in the past has been troubling. A couple of groups have disliked it immensely. But the Jackson group agreed it was one of their favorites.

They liked its "slice of life" appeal. They liked its gentle depiction of the social stratification of the South. They liked its atmospheric settings, all lazy and warm and scented with flowers. One reader commented that the experience of reading it is "lush and fragrant."

Readers from the South commented especially on the region as an insular world, still very much held apart from the assumed rest of the country.

Peter Anderson

We discussed many of the intriguing facts about Welty's life. Many were stunned to learn that she lived with her mother for 57 years and we found it interesting that there was little said about her father. One participant had extreme dislike for the book because she felt Laurel was too weak and silent. We used her dislike to discuss Southern expectations regarding behavior and, of course, that led into class distinctions, a major theme throughout the novel. We imagined the novel would make a great play as either a tragedy or a comedy. Most of us especially enjoyed the realistic dialogue. We laughed about the funeral scene because many of us have attended funerals where something unusual happens. We also spent some time speculating why the program series has been cut from six to four. Many of us will miss six sessions (our groups has been together for several years), but we understand how the cut will save money and make it easier to run the program.

Tammy Frankland

A Thousand Acres

Ten of us met at the Lusk library to discuss *A Thousand Acres*, and we had an interesting and wide-ranging discussion. That the land is tiled and conceals an underground river was seen as symbolic of all the undercurrents in the text. Ginny certainly "buries," literally and figuratively, miscarriages, emotions, and events. And while she is most obvious in this, the whole family does this and it is only through the sudden action of Larry that light is shed on those undercurrents. Other discussions included relationships, dreams, respect, expectations, and the many stories of the participants which surfaced as a result of this text. While the discussion may not have been as focused and centered as an academic discussion would have been, it was a wonderful opportunity to share stories and ideas about a text.

Wayne G. Deahl

Twelve readers gathered to discuss Smiley's book, the last in the Pulitzer series. I began by a brief biography of Jane Smiley and some information about her website. In addition, from an interview I learned that she believes that once a book is written she needs to and does move on. In other words, that book, in this case, *A Thousand Acres*, represents her views, passions, concerns, at the particular time it was written. She no longer considers it relevant to her life. At that point the group broke out in discussion of her issues: feminism, pollution, family, incest, and others. We talked about how these issues had evolved since the 1980s. I asked if they felt she was strident in her politics, but they didn't think so.

When I asked if they had read others of her books, several had, and didn't like these later books, especially *Moo*. This book was a winner, however. The readers loved the drawing of the characters, loved the story, and felt that the book had a lot to say that was timeless. Farm life, the role of the farmer's wife, the contradictory sense of community (we want to know, but we don't want to know) all came up for discussion. This led to a good exchange on how farming/ranching has changed and how it has not. And THAT led to life and community in a small town. We ended by talking about community and change as it is apparent in all four books we read for the Pulitzer series. At the end we spent a little time on choices for series next year. We all enjoyed the Pulitzer series. Some books were hard, but reading with a goal to discuss a book with fellow readers provides a powerful incentive.

Barbara Gose

This was our last meeting and once again an engaging, invigorating and excellent discussion. I began with an introduction to Smiley; personal background, as well as her education and literary career. Additionally I gave a brief talk about *King Lear* and how and why Smiley wanted to re-vision the story in *A Thousand Acres*. This group has a long history of reading and discussing books together so I mentioned other books we have explored such as *Silent Spring* and *Ordinary Love/Good Will*. I also briefly presented the concept of eco-feminism and how Smiley combines male domination of women and nature as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. From this platform I introduced a way to explore the book, within the series in terms of transitions. We explored a family in transition as well as a land in transition.

The discussion went in many directions. We compared Ginny and Rose; the power of Larry and the ways in which Ginny and Rose reacted to him in different ways to finally find their own voice. We talked about the *Monopoly Game*, and Jess; the husbands and how the voices of Rose and Ginny were constantly silenced.

As to the book one member said he loved the fact that he was completely drawn into the story and appreciated the constant weaving of the story - you could not miss a beat as each situation tied in so well to the next chapter. He said he felt the book was finely crafted and there was no "fluff"; it was riveting.

We had a great discussion of the last paragraph in the book and contemplated the meaning of the "obsidian shard". In wrapping up the discussion I asked the group to react to the quote "memory can look back in order to move forward and transform - altering our relation to the present and the future" in terms of *A Thousand Acres* and *The Optimist's Daughter*. This brought us into a discussion of the books in the series and how they tied together. All agreed this was a terrific series, well tied together and every book a terrific read. Somehow we then talked about secrets - should they be kept? Or should they be shared? Suddenly we were referencing back to *The Way West* and *Brownie*. A member of the group then said -"gosh we could explore a million more themes in *A Thousand Acres*. The conclusion - this was a great book and a great series.

A member of the groups gave me "A Reader's Guide" to Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. It is an excellent resource to this book and many others. ISBN 0-8264-5235-3

Katie Curtiss, Sheridan

There were fewer of us than usual at the Baggs discussion of "A Thousand Acres" - this was after all a rescheduled meeting due to a weather event—but it was a good one. I happen to agree with what several critics have written of Smiley's book—that it is a book of "genius," "awful power," "near-miraculous success," one that will stand the test of time—and so I was hopeful that others would see the same virtues in it. I was not disappointed in our conversation.

The good folks of Baggs recognized Larry, Ginny, Rose and some others as character types familiar in the ranching world, and the collectivization of the family farm as a reality that has hovered over some of their own lives or the lives of people they know. We appreciated the authenticity, and were drawn in by it.

One can groove on this book without knowing much about its *King Lear* connection, but I found that sharing a bit of this connection was a key to understanding the author's main intent. My most helpful source was Susan Trehle's essay, "The Daughter's Subversion in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*" (*Critique*, Spring 2000 Vol. 41:3), which explores how Smiley is not merely retelling the *Lear* story, but inverting it, to show how those who have always been seen as the villains can in fact be the victims; how the "tragedy" is not that of the domineering man—*Lear* or *Larry*—but of all who were silenced by and subjugated to their will. We talked quite a bit about poisons, too—both in relations among people and between people and the earth, and we were saddened, I think, that there was no redemption here, as there was in all the other books in the series.

Finally, In this case I was glad to NOT bring the Hollywood version of the book, for I thought it really diminished the story itself.

Richard Kempa, 4-7-04

This novel always generates interesting discussion. I started by telling them just a bit about the elements from King Lear that are so strongly reflected, though inverted by seeing the story through one of the two older sisters (the evil ones in Lear). I didn't go too far with that, but we did talk about how the telling of the story in retrospect by Ginny certainly shapes our view. We agreed that she was a reliable narrator where-as Rose or Caroline would not have been as anxious to tell it "right". Then we covered the obvious themes: the importance of "appearances" in the culture, the devastating effect of secrets and silences, the patriarchal nature of the society, the thin lines between love and hate, the many aspects of pollution (literally and figuratively). Several in the group said they felt disconcerted by the fact that they didn't find any real "hero" in the book. That led us into a discussion of modern literature and how images of a hero/ anti-hero are reflective of a culture. Many in the group are or come from ranching families, so we talked about how farming and ranching has changed in the last 30 years and how that affects tradition farming communities.

The group didn't have trouble seeing how this novel would receive a Pulitzer.

This was our last session in this series, so we spent some time reviewing the books and talking about how they tied together. We agreed that they all reflect some aspects of communities in transition (and "families in trouble" someone added).

Norleen Healy, 3-22-04

This book generates good discussion, even for the people in the group who had problems with it. I began with a bit about Jane Smiley herself and reminded everyone that we had another Smiley book last year (*Ordinary Love* and *Good Will*) toward which we had wildly divergent attitudes. I explained how the basic plot and major characters were highly similar, but what Smiley does is change the sympathies by telling the story from Ginny's viewpoint and making Larry and Caroline the "villains" whereas in *Lear* the two older sisters are REALLY evil and the youngest sister, who takes care of her father, is the sympathetic one. By the way she inverts the way we see the characters, Smiley suggests a lot thematically about *1000 Acres*.

We looked at how the story is told in retrospect from Ginny's point of view – especially interesting when we remembered places where she (in looking back) realizes that a turning point occurred and wondered what or if anything could have been done or said to make things go differently (suggesting the free will vs. fate theme in tragedy). We also talked at length about the role of secrets in all the characters lives and the reticence which overlays the whole culture. Why didn't anyone object to the way Harold talked to the girls at the Church supper (not even the girls themselves) for example? Some of the group insisted that that's how these rural communities are – don't get involved in other people's lives and avoid embarrassing scenes. Look the other way. Even within family members, reticence is the norm. We had an

interesting discussion about the necessity to "keep up appearances;" the more things unraveled, the more obsessively the characters adhered to routine and appearances (e.g. Ginny's cleaning all the crevices in the stove and counter with a toothpick when she is just cleaning up after a meal). We talked about the use and ramifications of use of all the chemicals and marveled that they seemed to know how dangerous the chemicals were in terms of the way they handled and stored them, yet they allowed them to permeate their soil and water. Someone pointed out that their whole environment is polluted, be it physical, emotional, psychological, ethical, moral and so on.

We agreed that Smiley's attitude about the role of women in a patriarchal society is clear and highly thematic in this novel. As long as they keep "silent" they're fine; they're "bitches" and "whores" when they speak out. Lots of discussion on this point, both in terms of the novel and rural cultures is general. Our female/male ratio happened to be 15-1, so, in this case, our male voice suffered somewhat. All in all a great discussion for our final time for this series.

Norleen Healy, Feb. 2004

Our discussion about *A Thousand Acres* was rich with multiple strands of conversation that reflected critical thinking and involvement with the issues in this novel.

We started our discussion by looking at a picture of a Sears, Chelsea house similar to Larry's house and at a map of Iowa where we could locate and better understand the place of the novel. We found Mason City and talked about the proximity to Minnesota and the "cultural" oasis of Minneapolis. We also discussed the author's background, experience in Iowa, and other novels.

One participant pointed out the many similarities of the novel and *King Lear* in plot, sub-plots, atmosphere, format, and first letters in character names. The group agreed that this novel is a classic because it an American tragedy based on Shakespeare's classic tragedy, *King Lear*. Smiley has reframed this tragedy to focus on the land and people in a modern setting.

We talked about the loss of family farms and abandoned homes. We discussed the issue of betrayal of land, economy, and people in the novel. Then we focused on the issue of incest with the subsequent silence and secrecy. Our conversations were strengthened with information and quoted material from Janice Doane's *Telling Incest*: "Smiley's novel uses recovered memories of incest to signify a woman's capacity to reconnect with deeply silenced 'truths' about her personal and cultural subjugation" (71).

Personal experiences of farming communities where the "men ate first" were referenced in our discussion of the patriarchy portrayed in the novel. For example, one older woman said she did not know that turkey had white meat until after her father died.

We enjoyed discussing the characters with participants centering on the changes and transitions found in the novel. Some believed that the characters were the never the same. Also, the monopoly games revealed the characters' greed. They were not able to resist in the game or their lives. We had mixed reasons for Ginny's attempt to kill Rose. We concluded that without Rose's insinuations, Ginny would have continued to "not remember" the incest. Each of the daughters' responses was typical of incest victims: anger, denial, and acceptance. Also, Ginny's move to Minneapolis shows numbness in response to incest. Additionally, we talked about the limited options for such a farm wife. Some participants believed that the "rules" have changed since the time of the novel. Others believed that if the setting of the novel had been twenty years earlier, the outcome would have been different.

Our final discussions returned to our initial response that *A Thousand Acres* is a worthy Pulitzer prize choice for a classic novel because this novel could have been put in any setting, such as a logging community, and it would still be a classic. When the economy shifts, our "good" and "bad" qualities surface, just as the poison in the land of the novel. Then the "blue print" for the culture is revealed. The draining of the land started out for "good" but in the end, it was "bad." Just as the characters in this novel, many of us have also made decisions and actions for positive reasons and experienced the negative results.

Sharon Taylor, Dec. 2003

Group members dove into the center of the novel asking the question "Why did Ginny want to kill Rose?" We explored a variety of topics and themes, including betrayal and revenge, appearance vs. reality, secrets and truth, subordination and silence, and self-delusion. Discussion of Ginny's intent to poison Rose also stimulated conversation about other kinds of "poison" and methods used to poison the land and the human spirit as illustrated in the novel. Those comments, in turn, prompted observations and speculations regarding illness or sterility as a consequence of human action – or inaction.

Several noted how the novel might offer a criticism of a patriarchal or male dominant culture, referring to critics who suggest the novel reflects the idea that a patriarchal tradition creates an essentially "dysfunctional" society. Some comparisons to Shakespeare's *King Lear* were made, but members were more intrigued with the motivations and psychology of Smiley's characters, and what that contributes to a "classic view of America." We also spoke about the influence of setting or landscape on the characters. I shared drawings and blueprints of Larry's house (The Chelsea) based on Sears' catalog information found at <http://architecture.about.com/library/bl-foursquare-sears-chelsea.htm/design> which will most likely be very familiar to a number of readers—and might stimulate consideration of the "grid" pattern that is so prevalent throughout the novel.)

Finally, we discussed this novel and characters in relation to the other titles in the series, noting the various perspectives of American culture offered and readers' favorite selection of the series and their criteria for that selection. (*The Way West*, *The Color Purple*, and *A Thousand Acres* were the most frequently mentioned titles, although *House Made of Dawn* was lauded for its "poetry".) Most agreed three criteria influenced which they chose: the reader's ability to "connect" with characters, the interest in the story line and the narrative style.

Ebba Stedillie 02-03

The group seemed to like the book, some very much. Some people looked for heroes and couldn't find them. We discussed disinheritance in all its permutations, pollution as environmental fact and as human metaphor. In all three books so far, we found the effects of the breakdown of a culture and a way of life on human behavior and values, the place of hope and despair in human existence.

Stephen Lottridge

People seemed ambivalent about this book. It tackled large issues but ended badly for some. People and their landscapes, how generations of silence can flow from a single choice, security vs. inner peace, sisterhood, the "optimum distance" from which to see a father. Barbara opened with the comparison with *King Lear*, which was interesting. The general feeling of the group was that the book was not good toward women. Ginny was marginalized throughout most of the novel. There appeared to be no redemption at the end. One participant wondered, "Do all Pulitzer Prize books have to be black?"

Carol Deering

Jane Smiley is one of my favorite contemporary writers, but she tends to leave a lot of people cold. I can understand that. Jane Smiley is herself a little cold, brittle, intellectual, difficult. A streak of annoying superiority runs through her. But she's a good writer. I had prepared for the meeting by delving deeply into *King Lear*. *A Thousand Acres* is a retelling of *Lear*, of course, from a somewhat post-modern feminist point of view. I found that participants generally felt intimidated by all this. Since it's not crucial to a reading of the book to know the *Lear* story and criticism, I'll likely avoid bringing it up in the future, except in the most superficial manner. I'll be ready to explain it all - how the *Lear* characters' motivations are recaptured and twisted in *Thousand Acres*, how Smiley seeks to trace psychological motivations embedded in culture rather than in human universalities, how the 20th Century has overlaid literature with feminism and Freudian constructs, etc. - but I won't demand the group learn these things.

We didn't have much time at the end [last meeting] to discuss prizes and the Pulitzer in particular. This is something I wish we could have done more of. Next time,

I'll seek to arrange the discussion a little differently. A discussion bringing everything together at the end would add greatly to this series. We did talk about theoretical issues a bit here and there as the season progressed, but I believe participants would appreciate a summation.

Peter Anderson

I was interested to hear the Clearmont group's reaction to this novel. Clearmont is a conservative and very agricultural community. Of the 8 people there, 6 were women and long time (even generational) locals, 2 were men, one of whom grew up in Iowa. The women all liked the book and the men didn't. The women each told of particular ways they identified with the characters and the setting. The men thought it was exaggerated and no one "not even Job" had that many bad things happen. The women, including me, vehemently disagreed! Once we got past that, we had a good, good discussion with a lot of references by everyone to particular passages in the book.

They asked about the King Lear aspect, so I briefly summarized the Lear story and drew the most obvious parallels. I don't think this is essential to a discussion of the novel, but it's interesting if they want to know. We discussed how the book reflects rural society - the way lines are drawn, the competition, the resistances, what happens to those who challenge the accepted views of behavior, and the patriarchal nature of the "rules", the importance of appearances. Everyone agreed that the characters of the women were shaped by a culture that devalues and silences women.

We talked about family relationships and the roles assumed by various members. Most felt that every family has a Ginny - someone who wants to "fix" things, who resists a point-of-view in favor of peace. We traced Ginny's development from silence to beginning to acquire a voice to finally "speaking out" by claiming her past and her need to finally "set the record straight" if just for herself. The group was intrigued by her intent and method for killing Rose!

Another theme we explored is the thin line between love and hate and the fragility of relationships, especially when "silences" undermine. Last year this group read and hated *Silent Spring* yet they were surprisingly sympathetic to the environmental concerns in the novel. We found it ironic that most of those thousand acres were built on top of a swamp.

We agreed that there were no positive male figures in the novel (not even Jess) and acknowledged Jane Smiley's "feminist" agenda", but they did agree that it was not forced but acceptable in terms of the society she portrayed. Even if he is so unredeemingly bad, Larry is believable. The women in the group had no trouble accepting this, and the men did acknowledge that his obsession with land and ownership which carried over to everything was within the realm of possibility. Some in the group didn't believe him at the end of the novel - they thought it was an "act". In light of that we spent time taking a hard look at the final paragraph where Ginny talks about her father.

I was impressed with this group's insights into the novel. I expected more resistance to it. They even agreed that it was worthy of a Pulitzer for its depiction of that rural community and alluded to passages where Smiley's writing was notable - like the monopoly game!

Norleen Healy (Clearmont group)

This group seemed to appreciate "Thousand Acres" a lot, a welcome change from my experience with other groups, who often find it too oppressive. I had mentioned at the previous meeting that "Thousand Acres" was an inverted adaptation of "King Lear," and we spent a lot of time talking about Shakespeare and the nature of tragedy. I drifted into something of a monologue for a few minutes about how American audiences no longer deal with tragedy. For instance, instead of comedy and tragedy we classify movie and television plots as comedies or "dramas." So-called "drama" is ostensibly a type of comedy, since usually it means a "serious" plot, but one in which heroic characteristics of the good guys eventually prevail. That made for some interesting discussion about our culture's expectations and tolerances in reading and entertainment.

Come to think of it, I also went on for a while about writing schools in America, and how their impact on our national literary output remains, as of the end of the century, still ambiguous at best. Sometimes I talk too much.

We reviewed the concept of the Pulitzer Prize - its origin, a bit of its colorful history, the selection process. We all tried to say a few words in summation about the Pulitzer in particular, the vagaries of prize-giving and the reverberations (or lack thereof) in American culture of lauded books.

Peter Anderson

This is a great book for a discussion series, because even those who don't like *A Thousand Acres* love to talk about it! We began our discussion by talking about family--the ways in which parents often assume ownership of children. We talked about the difficulties of recognizing one's own identity when one feels "owned" by parents. Ginny and Rose face this predicament; so does the optimist's daughter in *Welty*.

We spent a lot of time comparing the novel to *King Lear*, which many of us reread after reading *A Thousand Acres*. We talked about the way Smiley presents the "normal" interpretation of *King Lear*'s behavior in Larry through the neighbors' gossip and through Ginny's self-doubt. The neighbors see Rose and Ginny as evil, Larry as victim. I can't imagine discussing this novel without talking about Shakespeare, because it was written indirect response to *Lear*. We talked about how we read and respond to a novel differently when we are aware that the author meant for us to read her novel with another piece of work in mind. Someone pointed out that in Shakespeare, people often

escape to the country for clarity; in Smiley, the city is Ginny's escape and the place where she starts again. The country is far from idyllic in Smiley!

It's worth noting one particular similarity between *The Optimist's Daughter* and *A Thousand Acres*. After her father's death, Laurel has trouble imagining Fay as the caretaker/inheritor of the family home and its furnishings. During a scene in the kitchen, Laurel decides to let go of everything and move on. In Smiley's novel, Ginny has a similar response to sharing Rose's and her mother's household goods with Caroline. Ginny finally drives away leaving everything to Caroline. These two passages make the same point about how we are set free from the past by letting go of "stuff." Both women are empowered by choosing not to hang on to the belongings of their dead loved ones, and we sense that they are taking control of their own lives at this point. The past no longer has a hold on them.

Carol Bell

First we reviewed the communities in transition we had so far discussed and then flowed into a discussion of how the community in this book was in transition. We discussed the generational transitions, the transition of a farming community and the environmental transition. The discussion was lively; in fact sometimes so much so that addressing a single theme was impossible. The group spent the most amount of time discussing the relationship amongst the sisters, their relationship to the father and the perspectives they each presented. The group also discussed the domestic symbols in the book - "the couch on the front lawn" and the subtle messages the father presented in his desire to give the message that the problems at the farm were the fault of the women, not the men. Finding one's sense of self and voice in families as well as within an abusive patriarchy was examined both personally and in reference to the book. I threw out the question "is this a feminist book with a forced or acceptable viewpoint in terms of the society and people portrayed?" No one felt that Smiley had an axe to grind or an agenda to complete.

One woman related that her mother had left an equally oppressive farm situation to move to town and wondered still today, what gave her mother the strength to do so in the context of the social constraints and "silence" under which women were expected to live in farming communities. This comment led to a discussion about the generations of women presented in the book. All agreed that none of the women, or men for that matter, ended up in a space that allowed them to be comfortable with the transitions they were witnessing and living. We also discussed the "silence" that seemed to be passing on to the third generation. All agreed that there were no heroes in this book but all planned on recommending it to friends. When I left the library at 8:45 there were some participants gathered in the lobby still talking about the book.

Katie Curtiss

A number of readers had encountered this book in the past, and described their dread at re-reading it because it's simply hard to take. Great comments came out concerning Smiley's depictions of farming, the Midwestern flatlands, details about food preparation and house cleaning and her adeptness with, among other things, dialogue.

We talked some, but not too much, about *King Lear*.

We spent time discussing our notions of order, heritage, routine and expected, predictable elements of life. The debate centered on how these things inevitably fall apart, of course.

This was the concluding book of the Pulitzer series, so we spent some time at the end talking about the Pulitzer Prize, the problematic nature of awards, the formation of canons and lists of great "American" books, the teaching of literature and the difficulties inherent in positioning any given book as being representative of our culture.

Peter Anderson

This book was well received. Our primary focus revolved around the characters and how Smiley presented them. None of the characters had redeeming qualities. We felt it was an accurate representation of farming communities and spent a great deal of time discussing the dichotomy between appearances and realities. Most members felt this book covered environmental issues quite well and that the poisoned environment affected characters' actions and psychologies. Another member indicated that this book also accurately depicted incest and its affects on the family. Many felt it was worthy of the Pulitzer because of its honest depiction of incest. We compared this book to other texts in the series and briefly discussed Shakespeare's *King Lear* and its relationship to this text. Since we are moving to a four-book format, I recommend eliminating *The Optimist's Daughter*.

Tammy Frankland, Natrona County Public Library

The Way West

With debt owed to other discussion leaders I was able to introduce *The Way West* and the Pulitzer series with information on the prize itself and on the author. The group (six in attendance - perhaps due to the change of venue as the library has moved into temporary quarters to allow for the building project and groups meet in a second small building) was curious about the prize and we talked about criteria, winners and nominees, and also the National Book Award. I gave some background on the history of the period of the 1840s. There was a spirited discussion on Guthrie's women characters, his depiction of Native Americans, and his views on organized religion as seen through the preacher character. The importance of landscape was discussed. Dick Sommers was analyzed as Evan's hero and Guthrie's as well. The consensus of the group is that Guthrie shortchanged us, as he gave

much less attention to the trek to Oregon after the train left Fort Boise. Did he write what he knew, what he liked best, or is it simply that a book cannot contain everything? Several readers pointed out Guthrie's accuracy in the details of the trek. We ended with a lengthy discussion of Manifest Destiny, what the motives of the train members were, and what the west is like today. The group was interested in reading *The Big Sky* with its depiction of mountain men, and contrasting the pessimism of that book with the optimism of *The Way West*. It was an in depth discussion and an excellent beginning to the Pulitzer series. All twenty of *The Way West* were checked out, so we assume that folks read the book, but some were unable to attend.

The group is looking forward to *The Optimist's Daughter*.

Barbara Gose

The book was A.B. Guthrie, Jr.'s *The Way West*. I began by giving them a map of "the way West"--the Oregon Trail, and we discussed what constitutes a Pulitzer winning novel. They suggested that, at least, for *The Way West*, it was a novel that it involves a sense of community and involvement, maybe a sense of movement, a sense of place. They concluded that probably it is an American story. I asked them to hold judgment on what constitutes the American story and a Pulitzer prize winner until our last discussion.

The group began a lively discussion of the characters in the novel, why they went west, what they hoped to find, how they coped on the Overland Trail, the differences between men and women and their experiences--women's work vs men's work, and they identified those characters they admired and respected--Lije Evans, Dick Summers, Becky Evans, Brownie Evans--and those that they abhorred--Henry McBee, Curtis Matt. They were a bit ambivalent about Tadlock. They also mentioned that in the 21st century, we cannot expect to understand completely or realistically what this group of people endured, but they acknowledged that in small communities and societies, we learn to recognize and accept the differences among people. We also talked about how even a wagon train group, a community, one that did not always like each other because they carried their society, laws, customs with them, ideas that did not always coincide.

We also discussed the sex in the novel. Some were surprised that Guthrie had so much of it in the novel, but they agreed that sex is natural and not always pleasant for even then there were desires and needs that resulted in rape and sexual abuse. That part of the discussion was really quite lively and revealing! We ended by discussing how many people changed, how many did not, how we become a community and how communities break apart.

Some of them thought the book was slow reading, and we discussed that this was 2000 mile journey, 10 or 15 miles a day. They thought that Lije was slow also, but always steady as were Rebecca and Brownie. It was an interesting discussion and all people participated.

Linda Ross, Gillette

I began with some information on the series itself and some of the themes we will explore. In particular the relationship of individuals to cultures and family; relationships to the land and environment; and what happens when individuals or communities lose a sense of identity. In terms of the last theme I asked them to consider when people lose a sense of identity, or community, what enables them individually or as a community to weather change.

I handed out maps on the Oregon Trail and gave a background on A.B. Guthrie and his "trilogy". I spoke about A.B. Guthrie as an historical realist. Finally I quoted from Guthrie when he explained what he had in mind when he wrote the way west. He wanted to write a novel about the Oregon Trail -- what kind of people went, in what circumstances, with what purpose, and with what emotions (to paraphrase him).

The discussion was based around a few questions which took us in many directions. I first asked: "what motivated members of the train to go?". In this way we examined the motivations of those who went and I could tie that into Guthrie as "historical realist" and a discussion of Manifest Destiny. Next we explored how people reacted to changes in geography and their new environment. We discussed how this community in transition weathered change and created bonds. Finally we discussed the idea that with progress and the settlement of the west something is gained, and something is lost. We discussed Mercy and Brownie and how their story represents what Guthrie thinks about who will create a future in the west. We rounded the evening out with a discussion about stereotypes and the view of Indians in the *Way West*. I mentioned looking at the novel, historically. When the book was written and when the story takes place are incorporated in the writing of the novel but a 3rd dimension, which is when we are reading the book, must also be considered.

Katie Curtiss, Sheridan

The Way West attracted a small crowd despite its popularity. Jennifer brought maps of the Oregon Trail purchased at the National Historic Trails Center in Casper, and I brought an ironically named 21st century item, "Oregon Trail Chapstick: One of the Trail's little Luxuries". We discussed Manifest Destiny, the idea that Americans were destined to spread westward to occupy the entire continent, and the way in which that idea affected the pioneers' attitudes to the native occupants of the land. We also noted the aggressive, violent words A. B. Guthrie used to portray the settlers' approach to Indians, to women, and to the land itself. I asked whether the depiction of the various Indian groups seemed accurate, was it meant to be a reflection of the times, or the view the pioneers used to justify their actions. Surprisingly, many thought it was accurate, with one comment "if you wear skins all the time, you're going to smell." Others thought

Guthrie had the pioneers echo the reactionary images from the popular press and pulp stories of the mid 19th century.

Some questioned the historical authenticity of *The Way West*, his story of a wagon train's 1846 journey from Missouri to Oregon, since Guthrie was not schooled as an historian, and wondered how he could complete his research, writing the book in only six months as a sequel to his successful first novel, *The Big Sky*.

In his first trilogy and in the books that followed, Guthrie increasingly demonstrated that the conquest of the West by the American settlers was in many ways destructive, and led to the spoiling of the land. To an interviewer, Guthrie remarked of the settlers, "They destroyed the bison, cut the forest and dug gaping holes to extract precious metals and coal and then moved on to another valley." Several of our members are third and fourth generation pioneers and shared the struggles of their grandparents. Later in his long life Guthrie became a spokesman for environmental causes.

Guthrie was interesting to the group, being raised in Choteau, Montana, and returning to marry a childhood friend after 27 years in Kentucky as a journalist and creative writing teacher. Against the advice of other professors in the department at University of Kentucky, Guthrie selected a discontented student named Walter Tevis for his class, based on a short story that Tevis enlarged into the popular novel *The Hustler*. In a speech decades later, Guthrie wonders if anyone can teach writing; the most he can do is mentor someone who already has the talent to write well.

The group wondered about the criteria for the Pulitzer prize, since the four books in our series are so different, with no unifying theme. I will see if we can indeed find somehow to tie the four books together at our last meeting.

Claire Dunne, Basin

Eight people attended what has become our annual Christmas potluck dinner before the discussion. Everyone liked *The Way West* very much and agreed heartily with the person who described it as a "comfortable read." Since reading and discussing most of the books in this series has made us feel some degree of discomfort, this book was a chance to just relax and enjoy.

I told the group a little about Guthrie's life and the high regard for him as a western writer. We discussed a list of Oregon Trail facts that I had in my files from teaching the novel many years ago. Statistics for volume of traffic on the trail showed that in 1845 when Guthrie's fictional wagon train crossed 2,500 people went to Oregon as compared with 1852 when the greatest number, 10,000 made the trip.

Because our community is located on the Oregon Trail, we were fascinated with Guthrie's account of the journey through the country we know well and were impressed

with the accuracy of his descriptions. We discussed the novel's linear plot, tied to a journey, as a typically Euro-American plot pattern and compared it with the non-linear plot of *House Made of Dawn*, the last book we discussed. Group members thought the use of multiple points of view was an effective way for Guthrie to encompass in one novel the variety of experiences and multi-faceted reactions to making the trip. They appreciated the fact that women's feelings were included equally with the men's. We discussed the different ways some characters were challenged by their experiences on the trail and rose to the challenges admirably while other's did not show strength of character through adversities. We speculated on what the characters would become once they reached their destinations. We talked about the theme of "progress" and its cost that permeates the book, especially in Dick Summer's thoughts.

I brought up the point Frederick Jackson Turner makes in his frontier thesis, that the existence of a huge area of undeveloped land that Americans could always move into has shaped the American character. We discussed how the frontier shaped the characters in the novel. I also mentioned that Revisionist western historians now see that movement in less mythic terms than it was seen at the time the novel won the Pulitzer Prize. Then we discussed whether Guthrie supported the mythic or the revisionist view of western settlement in the novel. That led to a deeper level of discussion of the novel and our views of the West's history.

As we thought about why the book won the Pulitzer, we agreed that it, more than any of the books we have read so far in this series, was a celebration and affirmation of the strength of the human spirit. I suggested that they would find many points to compare and contrast as they read *The Grapes of Wrath* for next month's discussion.

Marcia Hensley, Dec. 2003

My first thought about reading A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s *The Way West* after Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was, "Whew, we've been on the road for a long time." However, the juxtaposition proved to be favorable as comparisons and contrasts enabled us to consider different motives for American migration and the role women played in Westward expansion.

Our discussion opened with our contrasting reactions to migration hardships catalogued in each novel. Reactions to the Joad family's hardships were shaped by the economic forces that displaced them from their homes. We pitied them, admired their strength, and overlooked their naivete as they found themselves strangers in a strange land. Reactions to Guthrie's characters, in contrast were admittedly judgmental. Although all of the families in the wagon train had different motives, spanning the spectrum from altruism to pure self interest, the choice to leave "home" seemed to be their own. Readers found themselves less interested in Guthrie's characters than in Steinbeck's, saying they found Guthrie's developed by circumstance rather than by inner forces. For example, Lije Evans appears to be a reactionary leader who can

rise to an occasion, but who does not create occasion. Dick Summers, in contrast, embodies the West in ways larger than life. Neither seems real. In fact, readers found Summers' end-of-chapter quips befitting of no one less than a Hollywood hero. After traveling with Ma Joad, readers found life on the trail with Rebecca Evans and Amanda Mack uneventful, even comfortable. I raised issues of historical accuracy, specifically that Guthrie seems to have taken great care to present history in context of his plot. Debates over mules vs. oxen and concern about the vulgarity of burning buffalo chips appear as part of the daily life on the Oregon Trail. Nevertheless, readers familiar with pioneer women's history found the women passive and peripheral to the action when in reality the women performed a significant share of the divided labor. I noted that Guthrie has been accused of "not being sympathetic toward his women characters." In response, Guthrie said in an interview with Sue Mathews, "I think I am sympathetic. . . .When I wrote *The Way West*, for example, I began to think about Rebecca Evans, a rather hefty woman, jouncing all over the plains, and I thought 'that must have been hell on her breasts'--and I put that in the book to express in a physical way the hardships those pioneer women endured." (Women and Western American Literature). So it seems despite its lack of intricate portrayal of women's food preparation and family crisis management, given in such detail in *The Grapes of Wrath* that readers salivate for the stew Ma cooks in the boxcar camp, *The Way West* intended to present women as duty-bound pilgrims doing as nature allowed.

These two books in particular fueled good discussion about the diversity in content and craft in novels awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Diane LeBlanc

A simple, quiet discussion. People were very generous toward this book. A lot of discussion centered on westward migrations, and since a number of people in the group had ancestors who came west with the Mormons, the talk included a lot of family history, which was wonderful.

Here are some excerpts from my notes which made it into the evening's discussion one way or another:

***Paradoxes:**

Landscape. It's so big it's almost incomprehensible. At the same time, it's shrinking rapidly.

Time. It seems to take forever to complete the trip, and in fact they still haven't gotten there when the story ends (and their work is just beginning.) At the same time, the story is about time ending (or at least changing to a new phrase).

***Free Will and Consequences:**

This is a story where every action seems to have inevitable consequences. Fairman buys cheap wagons, and they haunt him. Mack kills an Indian and his guilt and anger over that accelerate his other actions. Every choice made along the trail has consequences in terms of

increased or lessened hardships. Summers understands this, above all else.

The book seems to be commenting on the tumultuous state of world and domestic politics and the social circumstances of the late 1940s.

***Characters:**

a) How does the reader get to know characters?

- 1) Directly (through expository description)
- 2) Indirectly (through either actions or thoughts of characters)
- b) Some characters are fully developed. Others are stock characters--two-dimensional, conceived to accentuate a specific limited aspect of humanity
- c) Dynamic characters change over the course of the story. Static characters stay the same.
- d) Some characters illustrate the so-called "concrete universal."

The Way West is a characters story laid over fairly cliché events. Guthrie writes novels which read like action stories, but he is principally a "character" author. The real story lies in his people.

***Historical Study:**

Consider the three phases of analysis:

- a) the period of time in which the story is set--mid-1840s
- b) the period of time in which it was written and published.
- c) the time we are reading it

The story contains three levels of historical interpretation. The first two were incorporated into it at the time of its publication. The third attaches at the time the story is read.

Peter Anderson

With the discussion, we saw parts of a video, which apparently was a parody--few if any of the characters seemed true to the book. We compared the preacher of *Grapes of Wrath* (who quit) to that of *The Way West* (who kept trying). The women were surprisingly strong, juxtaposed to the raw, difficult description of Western life. The book was somewhat judgmental about Indians (dirty, no clothes. etc.), which bothered some of the group--but not enough to sway the overall positive opinion.

Carol Deering

At the first meeting of the season in this series (Pulitzer) I usually spend some time laying the groundwork for discussing the Pulitzer Prize and what it means. I share with the group the criteria of the Pulitzer's fiction category, and we discuss briefly how open-ended it is. I describe the history of the prize, including a very brief overview of Pulitzer's life and personality (since I think it bears on the wider discussion of American literature). I list a few of the other books that have won the prize over the decades in order to show how disparate they are, and to set the stage for later discussions of how events and cultural forces

have influenced selection. I explain how the Pulitzer committees are selected and how they narrow down the thousands of annual submissions to a group of finalists.

I usually try to have an overriding "issue" or two to pursue over the course of a discussion series, and for this one I trace three issues: (1) In what ways can literature represent a vast, diverse culture like America?; (2) How does an influential prize (like the Pulitzer) establish a canon?; (3) What is good and/or bad about literary canons? I laid out these questions briefly for the group and promised to return to them periodically during the series.

All this we did in the first twenty minutes in Pinedale. Then the group dove into "The Way West." In general, people seemed to truly enjoy this book. It was described as a fun book to read, a great depiction of the environment and circumstances, a beautifully-written work and an epic. I suggested that Guthrie, although spreading his books over big frameworks of plot action, is primarily a "character writer," and this instigated a discussion of all the many strengths and foibles of the characters. Noteworthy: readers' admiration for Rebecca Evans in particular. A few participants complained about the novel's treatment of Indians. They felt the Indians were treated poorly by the characters in the story and by the novelist. Some in the group suggested that the novel needed to be read in light of when it was written, which brought on a discussion of how attitudes toward Indians (and others) have changed over time. Astute readers then suggested that the depiction of Indians may have been the author's way of talking about how Indians are fictionally depicted. Such a discussion always surfaces around this book, and I usually just let the group work it all out, which they usually do.

Finally, I tried to talk about how the book may be as much "about" America in the 1950's as about America in the 1850's, pointing to the book's sense of sorrow at lost naivete, it's sense of hope and foreboding about the future, its ambiguous sense of striking out and simultaneously re-rooting.

Peter Anderson (Pinedale group)

I expected this group to be enthusiastic about this book, and they were. I handed out a map of the whole Oregon Trail because I think it's a bit easier to see the journey they took rather than by the segmented parts of the trail in various sections of the book. We talked a bit about the historical background -- why they were worried about the British getting Oregon in 1840 and how it was all settled with the compromise in 1848. We also talked about the practical/historical knowledge that Guthrie clearly had in writing the book -- ref. to journals, diaries, etc. Most everyone had personal stories to share about their own interest or connections with the Oregon and Bozeman trails. One participant told us about a "buffalo wallow" on her ranch land a few miles from where we sat and about the devastating effect of the buffalo herds on the land. This group was particularly interested in the references to the buffalo in the book. The group in Clearmont is mostly women and of course they wanted to talk about the woman's role on the trail. I told them that Guthrie is

sometimes accused of marginalizing his women characters, but they didn't seem to agree with that view. They thought the reader could clearly see that the women were the real heroes and the ones who suffered the most, that the men got to "ride around and hunt and admire the view while the women were doing all the real work". Our one lone male voice pointed out that in 1840, "all men were sexist!"

We talked about the Turner thesis and how the book reflects it, and about the suggested incompatibility of nature and civilization. I asked them how they felt about the way the Indians were represented in the book, thinking that some of them might want to quibble with the generalizations the book seems to draw about how the were all thieves, dirty, horribly smelly etc., but they thought it was probably pretty realistic. A couple of them were familiar with *The Big Sky* where the Indians are more admirable which led us to the possibility that Guthrie was illustrating the degrading effect our "civilization" had on the Native Americans. Of course this view can be reinforced by looking at the passages in the book where Summers remembers the earlier period in the area, before the settlers.

Several alluded to passages they particularly liked; many of those turned out to be those ruminations Summers has about the aging, philosophy, etc. They wished the ending hadn't "trailed off"(!) as it did. Time got passed us, so we never did get around to a discussion of this book as Pulitzer Prize which I wanted to do - - how it reflects issues of 1950 as well as those of 1840, but maybe next time...

Norleen Healy

We had a wonderfully inspiring conversation about "The Way West" to launch our Rock Springs book discussion. Twenty folks were there, and nearly everyone actively contributed.

The bd talk archives gave me helpful information on themes and threads. I'm grateful for that! One published source that I found especially good was Fred Erisman's chapter on Guthrie from the reference text "Fifty Western Writers," in which he laid out half a dozen of the main themes of Guthrie's western novels. (Western Wyoming College library could send this to anyone on request.)

Here's a comment by Guthrie about his intent in writing the book that others may appreciate:

"I wanted to write a novel about the Oregon Trail. I wanted to show what kind of people went, in what circumstances, with what purposes, with what emotions. I wanted simple men to go along, and grasping men, and wise and foolish men, and mean and noble men, and simple heroic women and tired wives and pregnant women and a seduced girl. And I wanted a preacher, a Methodist, I decided, maybe partly because I was reared in that faith."

--from the book "A.B. Guthrie Jr." by Thomas Ford (G.K. Hall, 1981).

Rick Kempa

Sheridan Wyoming September 13th 2001.

I began the discussion by handing out maps of the Oregon Trail. One is the trail on a map showing areas claimed by the U.S., Mexico and Canada, another showing the trail on a topographical map and the third map showing the California-Oregon trail from Fort Laramie to Oregon and California. I then gave a brief 'historical' over-view of the time frame, the Oregon question and the treaty that established the boundary with Canada. Finally I gave an overview of the series and the themes that we will be discussing, and ways in which we can tie the books together as we move along, so to speak.

The discussion was somewhat difficult because not everyone had finished the book. We discussed the role of landscape in Western novels and how the landscape in *The Way West* was both overwhelming yet shrinking. Many in the group felt that the landscape was not very descriptive in the book nor did it play a major role; all agreed that the landscape was bigger than life in other books they have had read. We discussed why the landscape did not play a grand role in this book. Suggestions were that perhaps the travelers spent most of their time putting one foot in front of the other and the landscape was something that was a backdrop to the every day struggle to get to Oregon, thus there was little time to consider the landscape. I mentioned the recent publication of Susan Badger Doyle's book, a compilation of all the diaries from the Bozeman Trail, and my sense, from reading those diaries, was that indeed putting one foot in front of the other is very evident in those diaries. At this point two women who are new to Wyoming mentioned how they were struck by the power of the wind in the novel, something they are having difficulty with now that they live in Wyoming.

We talked about the characters - were they stereotypes, rich, evolving or shallow? Everyone shared their ideas as to whom they liked and who was not developed. Several women liked Summers the best; they liked his reflective nature and his awareness of the changes that were occurring at the time. He was, for the group, a character who represents the west in transition, whereas Evans was a forward-looking character. Evans and Rebecca were both favorite characters. This led to a discussion of the father-son relationship between the Summers and Evans as well as a discussion of the father-son relationship between Lije and Brownie and Brownie's relationship to Summers (particularly in terms of Mercy). Finally we talked about the role of Rebecca Evans and her knowledge of the father of Mercy's baby, which she kept from Lije. The group liked the strength of Rebecca as mother, wife and the way she nurtured and protected other woman, as well as Lije.

We discussed the irony of the rules of the train in terms of sexual relationships, and how Amanda's fear of pregnancy resulted in Mercy's pregnancy. No one was surprised by

Mr. Mack's actions; after all that is why the train had such rules.

I read a passage from the book wherein Rebecca discusses her feeling about home in Missouri, the road and her feelings about being a woman. (p 140). This led to a good discussion about communities on the trail as well as in transition. We discussed when Rebecca stopped looking back and transitioned into seeing the place they were at the moment as home, to seeing Oregon as home and then did not look back. This included a discussion of how people deal with transitions into new places and spaces.

The group felt that the characterizations of women and Indians were pretty true to the time frame. We discussed bringing 21st century sensibilities into 19th century realities. The group mentioned that the physical descriptions of women - bountiful breasts and heavy hips - should not be surprising, after all the book was written by a man!

We discussed that most of the characters were stereotypes but that did not bother the group. They felt that it was an appropriate way to present a "picture of America on the move" and characterize national transitions. A discussion of how we stereotype and characterize people ensued, within the framework of the tragic events that have been unfolding this week. One member of our group recently moved here from New York. She shared with us her terrible feeling of disconnectedness from New York because she cannot call anyone at home; all she gets is a busy signal. Fortunately her brother called to let her know her friends and family are all safe. We then transitioned into a discussion of how the people on the trail must have felt when they were unable to contact friends and family and how long it took them to get news and letters from home.

At the end of the discussion I asked the group to re-read the brochure on the series to familiarize themselves with suggested themes so that we can have threads throughout the discussion. I also asked, if they felt comfortable, to bring to the next discussion a favorite passage from the book which either represents the themes to be discussed or just a passage they thoroughly enjoyed.

Those who did not finish the book asked to keep the book for a few more days because they were energized by the discussion and now want to finish the book.

Katie Curtiss

A great discussion, although we continue to have a fairly small group for this series. The library staff does a wonderful job -- I wonder if it's the day, the time, the subject or a combination of these which keep us at about ten or twelve participants?

Here are some potential discussion questions:

1) Is "The Way West" about endings or beginnings?
In what ways can any moment in history (including our

own) be seen as simultaneously an ending and a beginning?

2) Is there such a thing as progress? Do we have a choice of whether to engage in progress or not?

3) What does "the will of the nation" mean? Although politicians no longer talk about it, is the idea of "manifest destiny" still with us?

4) Is the American west in a state of decline or improvement right now? What measures would you use to make such a judgment?

5) What do you think of Guthrie's female characters? Is his an accurate depiction of the 1840's? The 1940's?

6) Do we always, inevitably, destroy the things we love, as Guthrie was found of saying, and as his series (including this novel) seems to be saying?

7) Right now (2001), people are moving into the intermountain west in droves. Why?

8) Right now (2001), would you say our nation is young or old? Why?

9) What makes an individual great? A nation? An historical epoch?

Peter Anderson

Guthrie's novel *The Way West* was well-liked by almost everyone in the group. Those who didn't like it mostly criticized Guthrie for his portrayal of women. The critics felt that the women in the novel were unrealistically cooperative and compliant. Their comments provoked an interesting discussion about the difficulties a writer must face when trying to portray the women of a previous time to modern day readers. Though some felt Guthrie's women were unrealistically wimpy, many in the group felt that women in that day and age probably WERE cooperative and compliant because they had no choice.

We spent some time talking about the issues that the book raises about progress vs. the environment, organized religion vs. a sort of loose spirituality, the dream vs. the reality of the American West. Guthrie tends to bring up the issues without coming down on one side or the other of them. Progress seems inevitable and grand, and at the same time criminal and sad. Organized religion seems a farce, and yet the group does rely on the rituals provided by the preacher after the death of one or another member of their party.

The group felt that in its day, *The Way West* must have been quite an eye-opener. We couldn't think of another book of that time in which the settling of the West was portrayed so unromantically. Guthrie presents human weakness and failures in relationships as the main threats to the success of the journey; the dangers of the western landscape are easily overcome when the group is cohesive and everyone is at his/her best.

We talked briefly about the themes in *The Way West* that turn up in the other books in this series--

displacement/loss, progress, family ties, the power of love and land, and freedom.

Carol Bell

Casper: I began the night sharing information about the author and providing a summary of a 1951 book review about the novel. As the evening progressed, we discussed the theme of "progress" and the realistic and mythical qualities of the text. Many participants did not think this novel was worthy of the Pulitzer Prize and I used this opportunity to provide background information regarding the history of the prizes and the selection process (www.pulitzer.org is a great site). We also compared this novel to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Character development was a source of dissension among the participants; some thought they were well developed; others viewed them as stereotypical. The fascination Americans continue to have with Western expansion was the ending theme for the evening.

--Tammy Frankland