

Distant Neighbors: Twentieth-Century Mexican Literature

DISTANT NEIGHBORS: TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICAN LITERATURE 1

OVERVIEW	1
SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS	2
GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE SERIES	2
THE UNDERDOGS	3
THE NINE GUARDIANS	5
LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE	10
TULA STATION	15
LOVESICK	19
HECTIC ETHICS	23

Overview

Mexico's twentieth-century literature reflects the effort to forge a new national culture in the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1910-40). This great social movement toppled the dictatorship of General Porfirio Diaz, plunged the nation into two decades of civil war, and resulted in profound and contested social reforms that changed the identity of the country. Revolutionary fervor abated after 1940 and was replaced by a semi-authoritarian, one-party political system that ruled for the rest of the century. The new urban, industrial nation that emerged left rural and indigenous people far behind.

Since 1910, Mexican writers have struggled—and continue to struggle—to make sense of la Revolución and to define this new Mexican national culture. Some writers and intellectuals have become critical of Mexico's revolutionary legacy, particularly its failed social programs, its lack of democracy, and its corruption. Their writings frequently look past what they see as the forced construction of a national culture and focus on more universal modern and post-modern themes.

In 2000, free presidential elections finally led to the demise of the “revolutionary” system. Mexicans now face an exciting yet uncertain future. The shift towards democracy and away from the revolutionary legacy has allowed writers to reevaluate the nation's troubled past. At the same time, they now draw on a wealth of cosmopolitan themes that reflect Mexico's new position in an increasingly global culture. The six books in this series offer perspectives on twentieth-century Mexican history and culture from the early days of the Revolution to the end of the century. They invite us to become better acquainted with the experiences, values, and expectations of our “distant” neighbors to the south.

Mariano Azuela's *The Underdogs* (*Los de abajo*, 1915) is widely considered to be the great novel of the Mexican Revolution. A doctor with Francisco Villa's revolutionary forces, Azuela came by his knowledge of the Revolution

firsthand. His novel depicts the military exploitation of the underprivileged—their hope for a more just society and the eventual disappointment of that hope—in a series of linked and sharply realistic sketches that reflect the author's own disillusionment with the revolutionary cause.

Rosario Castellanos's *The Nine Guardians* (Balun-Canan, 1957) is a hauntingly beautiful evocation of life in rural Chiapas during the early post-revolutionary era. The author reflects her own childhood experiences through the eyes of her seven-year-old narrator as she watches her once-wealthy family forced from its land by land-reform policies. In her concern for the plight of Mexico's Native Indians and of Mexican women in general, Castellanos raises issues that seem at the same time “historical” and frankly contemporary.

In Laura Esquivel's first novel, *Like Water for Chocolate* (Como agua para chocolate, 1989), Tita, the youngest daughter of a Mexican family, uses her knowledge of food and its mysterious power to assert her own identity and importance in a world generally content to see her the victim of tradition. The novel's magical realism combines romance, sensuality, superstition, and traditional recipes to make food and food preparation a potent symbol of Mexico's past and the place of women in it.

In *Tula Station* (Estación Tula, 1995) by David Toscano, three interwoven and thematically linked narratives explore love and striving in past and present Mexico. Juan Capistran's historical pursuit of the elusive Carmen both echoes and comments upon Tula's quest to assure its place in history and the contemporary writer Gomez's struggle to comprehend modern life. The novel's traditional weaving together of historical and fictional characters and events and its spare style and multiple narrators combine to create a striking mixture of the old and new in Mexican literature.

Set against the bloody complexities of the Mexican Revolution, journalist Angeles Mastretta's second novel *Lovesick* (Mal de amores, 1997) offers both a love story and a panoramic view of Mexican history in the first fifty years of the twentieth century. Emilia, the daughter of a progressive Puebla doctor and eventually a physician herself, is torn between love for Antonio, a stable and devoted colleague, and Michael, a childhood friend turned revolutionary. The richly detailed love story played out against the backdrop of revolutionary turmoil led Kirkus Review to call the novel a “south-of-the- border *Gone With the Wind*.”

The eight stories in Francisco Hinojosa's collection *Hectic Ethics* (Cuentos héticos, 1998), the first translation into English of the author's works, suggest the extent to which postmodernist ideas and structures have emerged in contemporary Mexican writing. Minimalist in characterization and plotting, Hinojosa's cleverly conceived stories explore the complexities of human values and relationships from darkly humorous satiric perspectives. All too often, the worlds Hinojosa's ironically distorted characters inhabit begin to look uncomfortably like our own.

Suggested Further Readings

For further exploration of twentieth-century Mexican literature, look for these titles at your local library or bookseller. The Wyoming Council for the Humanities cannot provide these titles for addition or substitution in this series.

Homero Aridjis, *1492: The Life and Times of Juan Cabezon of Castile*

Arturo Azuela, *Sounds of Silence*

Gabriella De Beer, *Contemporary Mexican Women Writers: Five Voices*

Rosario Castellanos, *City of Kings, The Book of Lamentations*

Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, *The Moon Will Forever Be a Distant Love*

Laura Esquivel, *The Law of Love*

Carlos Fuentes, *The Death of Artemio Cruz, The Years With Laura Diaz, Where the Air is Clear*

Guadalupe Loaeza, *Debo, Luego, Sufró*

Gregorio Lopez y Fuentes, *El Indio*

Barbara Jacobs, *The Dead Leaves*

Angeles Mastretta, *Mexican Bolero*

Carlos Montemayer, *Blood Relations, Gambuscino*

Fernando del Paso, *Palinuro of Mexico*

Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa, Tinisima*

Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*

Gustavo Sainz, *The Princess of the Iron Palace*

Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Just Passing Through, No Happy Ending*

General Comments on the Series

This citation comes from the [Librarians' Index to the Internet](#):

Aztlan: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research

Contains the full-text of articles from volume 1 (1970) through volume 23 (1998) of *Aztlan*, a journal "dedicated to scholarly research relevant to or informed by the Chicano/a experience." Browsable by author, title, and issue. From the Chicano Studies Research Center Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/csrc/library/aztoc.html>

Subjects: Mexican Americans -- Periodicals

The journal contains articles and book reviews relevant to books/authors from the *Distant Neighbors*

and *Family Photographs* book discussion series—on topics such as religion, humor, and folklore.

I haven't found a good subject index for the journal (the link on the site doesn't work anymore), but even browsing by issue is useful.

Deb

Ann Noble's comments on the series *Distant Neighbors* in Jackson 02-03

The series was a great success. We had the added plus of occasionally being influenced by the group reading the same books in Spanish at the same time. Many in the group thought the book *Rain of Gold* should be included in the series.

The resource sheets on WCH's web site are very valuable. Please add to the archives the suggestions other discussion leaders made on this series since not much material is available on the books and authors.

The discussion on our list serve a few years ago as to how books in a series are chosen, by whom, and why helped when the question arose at our last meeting. It's important to remind ourselves as discussion leaders as well as our participants the value of a humanities based discussion. A few confessed that they had come initially to meet other book lovers and to read "fun" books and were surprised by the selections. Participants were interested in the WCH's intent in sponsoring these book discussions. I WCH to put in writing and post on the web site this information which would be appreciated by new discussion leaders as well as veterans.

During our discussions of this series I was reminded how important it is to think out of the box, to discuss issues we don't usually discuss in our everyday lives, and to remember that reading isn't always for pleasure but is almost always enriching.

I thought it might be helpful for those leading this series to have a survey of the historical events of late nineteenth and twentieth century Mexico. The linked document (a condensed version of the World Book Encyclopedia's entry on Mexico) will give you some historical/political context for the books in the series.

Judy

Did you see the article on translations in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 27, 2002, p. B7-B9? She discusses how different a book can be depending on the translator.

Susan Simpson

The Underdogs

I confessed my ignorance of Mexico and Mexican history, and believe me, it is enormous. This series will be an educational experience for all of us, with the exception of our member from Mexico.

We began the discussion with general talk about Mexico, the revolution and current events. I passed out a couple of hand-outs; a condensed timeline and a brief history of the revolution. I also brought a large map of Mexico, which the group avidly reviewed. This bunch really likes maps, and some of our best discussions have involved looking places up on maps. Thank goodness we have Gabriela or we would spend much time trying to find places. She also gave us some insight into the current status of the Mexican people regarding land ownership, wages, jobs, politics, etc. Very informative.

When we finally got around to the book, I gave background information on the author. We quickly moved into a discussion of war and the brutal/violent acts that occur. There was consensus about ideals being turned upside down, social inequality of war, the similarity of so many conflicts over time (Korea, Viet Nam, Iraq, Israel/Lebanon). Most felt we don't seem to learn from the past; that it is "human nature," [whatever that is], to keep repeating the same senseless mistakes. We talked about how the book was circular nature, e.g., Demetrio goes home to the place he became a rebel, and nothing seemed to have changed except his son was older. We touched on the spoils of war, the drinking these fellows undertook, their apparently self-appointed status in the small group, the totally unorganized nature of war. I related that somewhere in the past I read that an Indian survivor of the Little Big Horn Massacre was asked what it was like to be there and replied something like, it was hot, it was dusty, it was chaos. We talked about Luis and the author – how they seemed to be alike and different. The roles of women, the stay behind ones and the camp followers and warriors didn't generate as much discussion as I thought. One member brought several National Geographic magazines from 1914 with photographs showing many of the things we just read about such as: cockfights, a marketplace, church bells turned into cannons, federals and rebels and the women soldiers. One member commented on the concept of being caught up in a hurricane, and we talked about how the men seemed to end up fighting for the sake of fighting, not for ideals – the revolution being like the volcano erupting.

Really, though, we spent most of our time talking about Mexico and the revolution and current events rather than the book itself. We got onto the current state of affairs in Chiapas and the ongoing situation with the Zapatistas. Gabriela told us a bit about how workers come here to earn money and then go back to Mexico and start a business, for example a slaughter house, but without subsidies from the government, like the US provides, people go broke and have to start again. We concluded with the sentiment that war corrupts, it's always been with us and it always will be.

Kim Knowlton, Pine Bluffs

For my part, I began with some biographical information about the author and some general points about the Mexican Revolution, although this is far removed from my area of expertise. I plan to ask a historian to attend next time as a participant. Most participants struggled with the episodic structure of the text, but we had a fruitful discussion about some themes*revolution, war, gender, identity to name a few. We all failed to sympathize with any of the characters, except Camilla. She was even questionable. We were left with a sense of purposelessness about the book and the revolution, which was probably the point. We discussed the poor quality of the translation and questioned whether we were reading Azuela or the translator. Awkward phrases were found throughout the text. We examined the title "underdogs" and its irony. Despite participants' dislike of the book, we left the discussion with a better understanding of this novel and Mexican history.

Tammy Frankland, Casper

Ten participants came to discuss the first book in the Distant Neighbors series. I gave WCH background information, then handed out a questionnaire with three questions: 1. Why are you here tonight? That is, what do you hope for in terms of discussions and this series?; 2. What do you want to ask about this book?; 3. What do you want to say about this book? Please give an example from the book; use a page number for reference to quote a passage, etc.

After only five minutes or so, they were ready to go. Most answers to # 1 were a combination of reading new books, interest in Mexico, and getting together in a welcome social group to discuss issues and values. #2 answers began to engage everyone in a lively discussion, and blended into number 3. I had prepared material on the Mexican Revolution and its precursors (references follow), as had one of the group members (!). Most discussion centered on the writing style, the chaotic nature of the episodes, and changing values and behaviors as the book progressed. I filled in with information on Huerta, Villa, Zapata, Obregon, Carranza, etc. There were comments about the descriptions of landscape, wildlife, weather. Comparisons were made with the situation in New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.

References: Mexico: A History, by Robert Ryal Miller (1985), A Concise History of Mexico, by Brian Hamnett (1999), <http://www.mexconnect.com/mex-/history>

Bob Brown

We spent much of our time discussing the concept of revolution and how The Underdogs showed experience, ideas and characters that seemed to be similar to those of other cultural contexts. Members of the group discussed their own experience particularly with living in or coming

from social situations of great inequity, in Peru, Mexico, Argentina, and inevitably our talk focused on current politics in the United States.

While it seemed that many revolutions tended to result from these gross societal inequalities, we were unable to categorize as exactly the same the American Colonial revolution, and we were somewhat perplexed by the conflict between Islam and the West. We spent quite a bit of time discussing the horrors of war. From a literary point of view, we were able to agree that few if any of the characters of *The Underdogs* were sympathetic, though we did feel pity for Camilla, and we also discussed why Azuela may have chosen to utilize an episodic technique to portray the dissolution of idealism realistically.

Kevin Holdsworth, Jan. 2004

Preliminary considerations:

- Discussion is not the same as evaluation. If you do or don't like a book, please examine the reasons why.
- We will need to rely on group members who have significant understanding of the Mexican Revolution to share their expertise with us.
- The discussion leader, Kevin Holdsworth, can be reached at:

Discussion Questions: *The Underdogs*

- In what ways does *The Underdogs* express sentiments in relation to revolution that are similar to/different from those from other cultural contexts?
- In what ways is a theme of the book the dissolution and/or change of idealism?
- How does the episodic nature of the plot advance both theme and action? Can you make comparisons to other works that use a similar technique?
- Explain ways characters devolve in the story.
- Compare *The Underdogs* to other war narratives.
- Why are women so notably absent from and unimportant in the story?
- Are any of the characters likeable?
- Why does War Paint kill Camilla?
- Explore the irony in Luis Cervantes' vocation as a restaurant owner in El Paso.
- React to the scene where Demetrio Macias revisits his wife and child.

Members saw the style as one of shoot-em-up westerns, and they like shoot-em-up westerns. They saw the novel as action-packed and fast moving. We looked at the author's background and how that contributed to the novel and at Demetrios and Luis, their desires and their actions. Everyone "booed" the women, and how they broke from

tradition. We talked about the portrayal of the revolution, especially how it began with ideals, but ended with soldiers fighting only for the sake of fighting. We related the comments to war in general. People could see a parallel between the Mexican revolutionaries saying they were fighting for the people and the U.S. government saying it wants to free the people in Iraq.

Maggie Garner 02-03

In Meeteetse, we discussed Mario Azuela's *The Underdogs* (02Dec02) as a social novel, focusing upon Azuela's poor view of human nature and the effects of war (violence) on a society.

In general, the group found the characters unsympathetic but suggested this was the author's intent. The wealthy landowners are corrupt, the poor Indians who seek equality are brutal, and the intellectuals who rationalize their behavior are truly awful.

Group members also described a sensation of waiting for something to happen in the novel—something that would meet their expectations of a novel of the revolution: a change in conditions, improvement in society, character growth or maturation. Ironically, of course, none of these things happen, which might represent Azuela's cynical view of the revolution. The novel comes full circle, so that the wretched conditions at the beginning of the novel are repeated at the end. No hope.

The novel's style reminded a couple of participants of Hemingway, particularly characterization, prose style, and starkness of mood. One article I've found suggests that Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was influenced by *The Underdogs* (Zivley).

A couple of resources:

Sommers, Joseph. "The Underdogs." *After the Storm: Landmarks of the Modern Mexican Novel*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1968. 6-16.

Zivley, Sherry Lutz. "The Conclusions of Azuela's *The Underdogs* and Hemingway's *For Whom the Tell Tolls*." *Hemingway Review* 17 (1998): 118-24. EbscoHost. Hinckley Lib., Northwest College, Powell, WY. 2 Dec. 2002 <<http://web2.epnet.com/>>.

Deb Koelling

All 20 people who signed up for this discussion series showed up (prepared!) the first meeting perhaps well aware there are 8 people on the waiting list! We took a few minutes to look at the wonderful photographic exhibit at the library featuring two towns in Mexico where most of the migrant workers come especially in summer to work in Jackson. We then introduced ourselves, saying a few words about ourselves. It set a nice tone for this series: the photos put us in the mood to learn more about Mexico

while the introduction time made the group more comfortable for discussion with one another.

I then gave information about the author, Mariano Azuela, especially in reference to his involvement with the Mexican Revolution, given that this book is about his experience with it. I also gave "brief" information about the Mexican Revolution, which resulted in some discussion itself. I'm always so surprised how we know so much more about European history than the history of our southern neighbor.

We then worked in discussion of the authors tone and style, which frustrated most of the group. They found the short chapters too short and didn't flow well. It was frustrating to follow, and too many thoughts were left incomplete. I think everyone would agree they learned something about the Mexican Revolution from this first person account, it just wasn't enough for most of the group, largely due to the books style and structure.

Ann Noble

The Underdogs, Pinedale. What a fun, literate group! I love these spirited noontime gatherings (Peter, your shoes are tough to fill). I like to begin a new series by asking participants to recommend to the group one book they've read recently. What passion for books! The Pinedale group is fortunate to have readers from varied backgrounds, several of whom who have traveled extensively in Mexico, and one of whom had lived there for some time. This enlivened the discussion of the Mexican Revolution. We talked about how The Underdogs might be defined as a lyrical, historically-charged western with its short, action-packed chapters. We discussed the peasant's motivation for war as well as Azuela's eventual disillusionment with war/revolution, and how our reading of the book was colored by the Iraq/Congress discussions on NPR. We discussed landscape and how this affected the narrative, and the book's title—who were "the underdogs"? The Underdogs is an excellent historical start to the Distant Neighbors series, and I think all 14 of us are looking forward to Lovesick next month.

Jon Billman

We had a large and enthusiastic crowd of 14 (I think...several trickled in late) to discuss The Underdogs. I had described it to them last month as rather raw, unpolished, and "from the front" in style. They agreed with my characterization and then a funny thing happened: I shared with them some other translations. I had them read silently the opening paragraphs in our edition while I slowly read aloud the same section from another translation. Suddenly, the raw, unpolished style contrasted with the stilted, Europeanized version I was reading. Mostly the differences caused chuckling and head scratching. However, the last paragraph featuring Demetrio's demise was very different in the two versions, and each left a distinctly different impression upon the reader. In our edition, "...Demetrio Macias, his eyes

leveled in an eternal glance, continues to point the barrel of his gun." In my other translation, "Demetrio Macias, with his eyes forever fixed, continued to aim the barrel of his rifle." No - that's not a typo - there's a tense change, and it sure makes a difference. The first version reminds me of the final scene from Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. The second version makes me think he's been killed. Anyway, translations differences were not all we discussed: we also talked about the character of men and women and how they are corrupted by war and power; the revolution itself and the changes it brought; the biography of Azuela and how it figured into the novel, and lots of other stuff. I found some good sources I'd like to share, starting with the other translation I used.

Three Novels by Mariano Azuela, Translated by Frances Kellam Hendricks and Beatrice Butler, Trinity University Press, San Antonio, 1963. Mariano Azuela by Luis Leal, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1971. Azuela and the Mexican Underdogs by Stanley L. Robe, University of California Press, 1979.

This last book contains lots of information on how/where/when various parts of the novel were composed, and even describes in detail the newspaper in which it was published. I obtained all three sources at UW's Coe Library.

- Julianne

The Baggs discussion got right to the point: how the book is a timeless anatomy of all the ways that human nature degrades in a time of war. We found parallels of this bitter truth in current and recent times. One participant, who was a child in Eastern Europe in World War II, told a poignant story of how a wounded soldier that her family took in and nursed betrayed them—stole their money—in order to improve his own chance of survival.

We talked, too, how the book illustrates the way revolutions so often slide into anarchy—as in the French and Russian Revolutions and the Civil War (in "Bloody Kansas," for instance), and we had an interesting discussion of why the American Revolution was different.

Towards the end, so that we might better appreciate Azuelo's spare style and sharp imagery, we took turns reading the final chapter of the book aloud—an activity that everybody liked.

--Richard Kempa

The Nine Guardians

Ten people gathered in Powell on January 28, 2008 to discuss Rosario Castellanos's novel The Nine Guardians. After we introduced ourselves, I gave the group some background information about the author and her personal experiences that contributed to the novel. We looked at a map of Mexico to get a sense of the physical setting, and

we briefly discussed the social and political situation in Chiapas in the 1930s.

I asked the group what aspects of the novel they wanted to talk about, and the topic that came to the forefront was the presence of social hierarchies. We talked briefly about the power relationship between the patrones and the "Indians" (the novel's term), but I also pointed out that there are other power structures within and between those two, interacting in complex ways. Some readers found the novel to be rather hopeless and depressing, and it seems one reason for this is that none of the "oppressed" characters were able to connect or have solidarity with any of the others.

We spent a good deal of time discussing the role of women in the novel. One reader noticed many parallels between Zoraida and Juana. We also talked about the narrator's recognition that her brother, Mario, is more valued than she because he is the male child. Several participants remarked that many people in contemporary American society seem to value male children over females. We also talked about the women in the novel who seem able to gain power for themselves, sometimes at the cost of being deemed "crazy" by the other characters.

Next, we discussed Castellanos's portrayal of the indigenous people in Chiapas. One participant had some knowledge of more recent conflicts in Chiapas, and we discussed the current situation of native peoples there.

Our discussion then moved to the topic of religion in the novel. We discussed the role Catholicism (which is not portrayed positively) may have played in Mario's death. Most participants agreed that the cause of his death is deliberately left ambiguous, and we discussed why the narrator seemed to have such great feelings of guilt regarding the loss of her brother.

Near the end of the evening, a participant brought up the difference between the Mayans' relationship with the land and that of the whites. The Mayans are portrayed as being able to live more in harmony with the land, and we noticed that Castellanos seems to draw a parallel between the patrones' near-enslavement of the Mayans and their treatment of the land.

We ended with a discussion of what happens to a people after they have been oppressed and controlled for a long period of time and are then given autonomy. One participant recalled her experience in Albania after the fall of communism there. The people she encountered seemed to struggle with developing a sense of ownership for places and for their own lives. This participant wondered how long it could take people in such a situation to develop that ownership. We came to no definitive answer other than "a very long time."

The discussion of the novel was lively and enlightening. Participants found the novel challenging and some found it difficult to get into at first, but overall they seem to have found it a worthwhile read.

Jennifer Sheridan

Six attended the September discussion group held at the Cokeville Community Library on September 23, 2007. As with the previous book, readers voiced a weak to moderate reaction to this Mexican novel.

In contrast to *The Underdogs* by Mariano Azuela, author Rosario Castellanos in this book, gave an additional perspective to the period of the Mexican revolution. This time readers saw how the landowners felt about the local rebellions and loss of property and income.

We began by discussing who the protagonists in the story were – most saw the unnamed girl or Cesar as key figures with the rebellious Indians, magic and superstition, the priest, Ernesto and Cesar as villains. After sampling some of the figurative language, we explored elements of foreshadowing and conflicts among the various characters. The group is getting better at seeing subplots and various level of intrigue and themes.

In the first section of the story, Comitán, several enjoyed the naive voice of the unnamed girl (daughter of Cesar Argüelles) The arrogance and tradition-minded Cesar came to life more in the second section, Chactajal. Horrified best describes the lady's feeling toward at his current and past behavior with the Indians and women, in particular. His inaction and lack of compromise or leadership in the face of a local rebellion led by Felipe revealed a rather insecure, inept Cesar. There was little sympathy for either Cesar or Ernesto, the drunk derelict teacher who was killed in a similar fashion to the way he killed the ghost deer. They felt an appreciation for the elements of prejudice by both the socially wealthy elite and the slave and poverty-burdened Indians. This topic led to a discussion of the way this community treats others who are different – Hispanics, etc. We also discussed how the wealthy can use or disdain others who have little or nothing.

Steve Beck
Cokeville Reading Group Leader

We talked about many subjects related to the book rather than the book itself. I think this disappoints some people, but seems to be ultimate goal of the program. This book was rich in topics including: race relations/class/social status, especially indigenous vs "white" communities; gender issues and the hierarchy of both race and gender, for example., top to bottom - white men, white women, men of color, women of color; Indian customs and rituals compared to non-Indian (the interesting description of the courting process); communication barriers (Ernesto and Matilde); the transmission of knowledge through communication (Ernesto's non-teaching of the Indians, Nana's stories); the value and abuse of power and knowledge; land reform; religion.

Many noticed the unusual inclusion of single women (Amalia, Aunt Francisca, Matilde) and we talked about how each lived and fared under the trying circumstances.

Mario's life and death elicited comments regarding the role of male heirs and the privileges and burdens associated with that role. Mario's death was not really sorted out, but one participant felt it was probably due to his guilt over the key. Zoraida, we decided, was a pitiful character who likely married above her "status" and made her insecure. The relationship between Nana and the unnamed narrator (no one had realized this in reading the book) seemed to strike us all as very special. We didn't understand how Nana could leave without taking the precious gift of pebbles.

Our member from Mexico brought several items and talked about them, including a doll, shawl, and rebozo. She is a new mother and demonstrated how she carries the baby. She also explained that President Cardenas is considered a special president, probably equivalent to our President Lincoln. We saw many parallels between the situation in Chiapas and America during slavery.

Several ideas surfaced as to what the Nine Guardians stood for. The book referred to wind, suggesting the elements. I pointed out that two different sources, one being the introduction to the book, said the guardians were either surrounding villages or mountains of Comitans. Another member of the group thought they indicated the generations listed in the book, coming up with what appeared to be nine generations. Interesting idea. I think we all enjoyed the book. We are certainly all learning more about our neighbors to the south.

Kim Knowlton, Pine Bluffs

I began the discussion by providing background about the author and speculating that *The Nine Guardians* may have autobiographical underpinnings. There is some speculation that Castellanos' death by electrocution in Israel may not have been an accident, but a suicide. We then transitioned into a discussion about the major characters. At first, many participants felt that few of the characters were likeable, but, later, many felt sympathy for their plight. For example, no one really liked Zoraida. However, one participant believed Zoraida was trapped in her marriage and in her class. She was playing a role. We also discussed the novel's structure. Some participants especially like part two because they were able to hear different characters voices and how they understood and processed Cardenas' reforms. Other participants disliked part two because they found it confusing and difficult to follow. I ended the evening asking for participants' final thoughts about the novel and their reaction to this novel as required reading in some high schools. The response to this novel was more favorable than the first in the series, *The Underdogs*.

Tammy Frankland

I began the session telling about the author who was quite active in the feminist movement in Mexico during the 1950's; she died in 1974 in Tel Aviv where she was serving as Mexico's ambassador to Israel. This novel is

considered autobiographical because the narrator's life seems to be drawn from Castellanos's childhood memories of life among indigenous workers on her father's sugar and coffee plantations in southern Mexico. We discussed various themes including: conflicting relationships between Indian and middle-class women, traditional women's roles of Mexico in all classes of society, how power and knowledge can influence relationships depending on time and place, Catholicism and its influence on Mexico's history, and the significance of exported crops to global economy. We ended the evening by discussing the similarities and differences of the combination of faith to the ancient cures by herbs and magic presented in Rudolpo Anaya's book *BLESS ME, ULTIMA* and *THE NINE GUARDIANS*.

Jim Fassler

Ten readers joined in a lengthy discussion of the book. Most readers reacted favorably, although one did recommend the novel as a sure cure for insomnia. While some readers found the book hard to follow in places, most agreed that the description was compelling and the characters interesting. It was agreed that Castellano does a wonderful job of making the characters complex rather than simple and real rather than simply likeable. Some readers had first-hand experience with Chiapas and Yucatan, which they shared with the group. The University of Michigan link on the website provided helpful background information on the book and its author.

The readers were so excited about the book that when the allotted time came to an end, the discussion didn't; in fact, it moved into parts two and three, covering still more ground.

Kevin Holdsworth, 02-04

Most participants reacted positively to the book though found the translation difficult. The shifting point of view was generally seen as interesting. We moved to a discussion of class/caste issues and how they affect decisions, attitudes and values. We spent time talking about gods, superstition, faith and how our beliefs direct our understanding of our experiences. Many were interested in the chaos created by a clash in cultures and by major shifts in government policies, especially when not accompanied by planning or explanation. Toward the end, discussion focused on generalizing those issues to personal experience or other countries, including the USA.

At the end one participant said a Mexican friend of hers (a medical doctor) has asked why we were reading these books, when there were much better ones in 20th century Mexican literature. So we discussed the purpose of a general theme, and compared this book to *Lovesick*.

No one was quite sure why it was called *The Nine Guardians*.

Stephen Lottridge, 02-03

The Lander book group engaged in a spirited discussion of our first book in the series, *Distant Neighbors*. I used the history book of the same name to place *Nine Guardians* in context. I began with a map of Chiapas showing the town of Comitan and then moved on to talk about the Mexican Revolution through the presidency of Cardenas (the time of the novel). We spent much of the time discussing the plight of the Indians and drawing comparisons to Native Americans of the United States. A member asked if our sympathies were with the Indians, or at least in part, with the patrons. We talked about the isolation, then and now, of Chiapas. The actions taken against the Catholic Church, and the role of the Church in Mexico was discussed and we enlarged the discussion to look at the role religion has played historically in other nations. The group loved the mysticism and discussed several scenes in the book. We ended by looking at the extent to which the book might be autobiographical, but decided that the 7 year old unnamed narrator (some were disappointed that she does not narrate the entire story) was absorbed into her family's world view, and this was not true of the author. We also felt that Cesar, the father, was the only major character who doesn't tell his story! I concluded our evening by previewed *Lovesick*, our next book. The group is excited about this series.

Barbara Gose

To my complete surprise, Rosario Castellanos's *The Nine Guardians* was a flop in Meeteetse when we discussed it on 07Oct02. I'm still baffled by the book's reception. As I prepared for discussion, I thought I had a gem: a book written by a woman way ahead of her time (1957) that talked frankly about the politics of gender, class, and race.

Wrong.

Participants didn't like the book's language, plot, characters, point of view, tone, setting . . . nothing! One person said she felt as though she were reading something that was assigned in school. (As if that were an insult! :-). Another said reading the book was like wading through an ancient poem. Several questioned whether we were reading a good or bad translation (which led to a discussion on translations and envy for the Jackson group that we hear is reading the books in Spanish).

Reluctantly, the group spent time talking about the ambiguous conclusion of the book, the role and voice of the narrator, the reaction of various characters to land reform, male/female relations, religion, language. But I never managed to win over any of the participants to admiration for the book. In fact, several bitterly referred to the WCH brochure's description of the book as "a hauntingly beautiful evocation of life in rural Chiapas during the early post-revolutionary era." (I swear . . . they snorted at the "hauntingly beautiful" phrase.)

Deborah Spangler Koelling

Nine Guardians reminded some of us of Faulkner; *Nine Guardians*, it could be argued, is the Mexican "Sound and the Fury," the reign of Cardenas the Chiapas version of the Reconstruction. The narration is Faulknerian, the 7-year-old girl who removes herself from the middle of the book, then reappears in the end. We discuss point of view and racism and the demolition derby between the indigenous people and the Mexican landowners. This spun into a great discussion of Chiapas politics--two of the women in the group have extensive travel experience in the Guatemalan-border region of southern Mexico and they shared those experiences (including a wonderful ad-hoc slide show). Very energetic discussion and *Nine Guardians*, it turns out, is the group's favorite book thusfar, which is not to be dismissed when one can so fervently argue what makes a book a favorite.

Jon Billman

We opened the session with some background information about the author, her writing, and her significance in the Mexican cannon. Then the group opened up on the book itself. The discussion was lively and significant, and we could have gone on for another hour or two, I am sure. We structured our opening discussion around the characters, but that took up the entire time. It did lead us, however, into many of the significant elements of the novel: early Mexican feminism, gender roles, cultural viewpoints, style, the interplay of religions, varied responses to the Revolution, and the effect of belief on the characters. We were pleased to have two Spanish teachers from Rock Springs High School join our group over their lunch hour (with special permission).

Karen Love

The reaction to *The Nine Guardians* was mixed. One person thought it was horrible to plod through; another thought it was good; the rest thought it was too depressing but fairly well written. I'm always so disappointed when I really like a book and the group members don't..

A main objection was that they thought none of the characters were good people. They even saw the narrator--with whom I felt affinity--as very selfish. Their comments on characters did lead us to talk about the male/female relationships presented, the Mexican class system, and the feminist viewpoint. We also talked about the land reform issues and the role of religion. Another objection to the book was that there was too much "witchcraft, voodoo kinds of stuff."

We were able to compare and contrast the three books we've read so far in this series especially in regards to the portrayal of males and females, the role of religion, the role of other "spiritual forces," the role of race and class in Mexico. I've given them photocopies of a map of Mexico

so we are able to locate the places about which we're reading.

Incidentally, I read this book aloud to my ill daughter, and it's a wonderful book to read aloud (and she liked the book!). The experience made me even more appreciate the wonderful writing.

Maggie Garner

The last thing we decided at our meeting to discuss "The Nine Guardians" was that we needed to read it again! It was so rich with details, thoughts, and plots, we couldn't begin to grasp them all in one reading!

The discussion was again lively for the Jackson Library group reading the Mexican literature series. In the room next door was a very loud Halloween party, which concerned me at first, for no good reason. This is a serious group of readers who have no problem focusing on the book discussion!

I started our meeting by giving information about the author, which interested the group quite a bit. I also gave a brief history of the time frame in Mexico when the book took place, which again the participants found interesting, in large part because they didn't know anything about it. (It also helped understand the book quite a bit.)

Launching into the meat of the discussion was easy, with this book. We discussed her characters, viewpoints, and especially her feminist viewpoint with the characters. Also included in the discussion was Mexican class structure (which we compared to the last book, *The Underdogs*), the role of the Catholic Church, and race relations, which was briefly compared to the United States (our Native American relations and White/Black conflict.) We were stumped, though, on the title, as we referred back to the book the two times she referred to the the *Nine Guardians*, in the beginning and again at the end. I'm not sure we resolved anything, but we had a great time talking about this book.

Ann Noble

I wanted to let you know I found a very nice web site that might help scholars as they prepare for the *Nine Guardians*. The address is <http://www.wmich.edu/dialogues/texts/nineguardians.html>

Enjoy!

Julianne Couch

Lusk: I provided maps of the Chiapas region of Mexico, as well as biographical information about Castellanos. The latter was particularly interesting due to the many parallels with the story line in the book. With the background of Mexican history that we had discussed in the preceding two meetings, especially of the Revolution,

the reforms of Cardenas that formed the backdrop for this book's story generated spirited discussion. The values and behaviors of the different characters, and the role of family background, were topics considered.

Comparisons were made between Mexican Indians' history and American slavery, and their continuing aftermaths of two-class societies based on ethnicity/race; the group thought this a more fitting analogy versus our history with American Indians. Additionally, the recent exposure to and increased public awareness by hurricane Katrina of the American underclass of poverty allowed a thoughtful consideration of the poverty and disenfranchisement of the Mexican Indians in the book.

I posed hypothetical situations such as: The rebuilding of New Orleans and its future assets and economy are declared by federal fiat to be awarded only to those who were unable, due to poverty and race, to flee the city in advance of the hurricane. All real estate assets in Wyoming are henceforth awarded to American Indians, effective tomorrow. What might be some responses? We are discovering similarities between Mexican history and culture and our own, and in the process also seem to be uncovering and sometimes dispelling our stereotypes regarding Mexico.

--Bob Brown

We were a group of 5, and we had mixed reception of the novel. I was glad that I asked for a basic review from each member before heading into the discussion because I loved the book so much I was glad that I hadn't started gushing about it!

I realized at the beginning of the series that Rosario Castellanos was such a remarkable woman that the readers in our group might want to know about her before hand, so I sent out the attached file immediately after discussing our first book, *Tula Station*. Among the many good leads in that file, compiled largely out of archive resources at Niobrara county library (Thank You!), I really enjoyed Christopher Rollason's review of Dec. 2004.

I also remembered my world atlas, so we had a few good maps to gain a sense of the geography.

We went through structural issues with the book progressing in three parts and how the shifting voices of narration in the second part worked to build the story.

We discussed characters, especially the complexity of the characters in their relationships. Several readers did not like the "stuck-ness" of the characters in their racism, their gender roles, and their ugliness. We teased out the complexity of male and female power, beginning with the missing name for the main narrator. As girl child, her name is unimportant to the dialogue and story. We contrasted this role to the role that the rape of a young woman had in initiating *Tula Station*, and contrasted the way that the reader is let in on machismo culture in both books.

My own writing these days has to do with the relationship between indigenous place names and settler place names, so the sections of the book that describe the consecration of the land with new names was of particular interest to me, and I thought beautifully written.

Questions we wrestled with: Why was Castellano so unsparing in her details (the mules that remained tied to the grinding wheel during the fire), and in her examination of character fault? Who was she writing for? What is the role of the edges in this novel?

Because I am wondering these days about settler landscapes and histories compared to indigenous landscapes and histories in Wyoming, I was struck by the fact that people in the group generally indicated their surprise at the way the Indians in the novel were treated. That is, people were surprised by how racist and brutal the dominant class was. I think their surprise has something to do with the reason that Castellano was unsparing. In the stories we tell ourselves, the key is what we remember and what we forget and she was wasn't about to let us forget. But that's the kind of thing I don't tend to say as a discussion leader.

Mary Keller
Cody, Wyoming

Like Water for Chocolate

Only six people (all women) gathered in Powell on March 31, 2008 to discuss Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate*. This was the third book in our series and the first book that everyone (everyone who showed up, anyway) seems to have enjoyed.

I began this discussion the same way I started the other two: by giving some background information on Esquivel and then asking group members what they wanted to talk about. This caused our discussion to jump around a bit, but I felt more confident that I wasn't "controlling" the discussion that way.

As we talked, we kept coming back to a few themes: the concept of "true love" in the novel, the role of food in the novel and in our culture, and the role of women and Esquivel's concept of womanhood/femininity.

While everyone in the group seemed to find it easy to identify and sympathize with Tita, it was difficult for us to understand her relationship with Pedro (I think readers generally want Tita to end up with the gentle and self-sacrificing John Brown rather than with Pedro, who is passionate but also petty and jealous, even weak). We realized that Esquivel seems to want us to see Tita and Pedro's love as "true love," and one reader pointed out the second to last paragraph of the novel as evidence of this. She suggested that Tita and Pedro's love is physical, passionate, and fertile, and that the novel is a celebration of the body and the senses.

As is probably typical of all discussions of this novel, ours kept coming back to food. (One group member had just

come back from a trip to Mexico, and she brought some Mexican chocolate and other treats to share; the more we talked about food, the more we found ourselves nibbling on these treats.) Several group members were familiar with the amount of work put into preparing traditional Mexican foods, but I also asked them: what is the most work and time you've ever put into preparing a meal? One member shared her experience of preparing an Asian feast a few years ago. She and her husband had spent three days on it, and the food was delicious, but they haven't done anything like that again. We were impressed by the amount of work required to make traditional Mexican foods, but we also understood that some of the characters seem to have a connection to their food, and thus to each other and to the earth, that many modern Americans are missing.

Of course we also talked about the role of women in the novel. One participant pointed out the scene in which Tita holds Roberto to her breast and magically begins producing milk for him. To her, that scene is representative of women's ability to "make something out of nothing." As another participant put it, Esquivel seems to suggest that the women, at home and in the kitchen, are doing the important, life-giving and life-affirming work while the men are out "playing" (i.e. fighting with each other).

We touched on other topics throughout our discussion, including the role of magical realism in the novel, the novel's imitation of 19th century women's literature, and the role of the Mexican Revolution as a backdrop for Tita's story. Overall, it was a great discussion.

Jennifer Sheridan

I gave the usual introductory material on the author and spoke about the film version of the book. I have seen it in both Spanish and English, and recommended the Spanish version with subtitles. The evening literally flew by and required little prompting by me to carry the discussion. The book was accessible on several levels which encouraged some of the readers who felt the previous books were too removed or abstract. This one they could relate to and really get their teeth into, so to speak. Mama Elana was our first topic, and she was fairly well vilified. It was pointed out that she had suffered in her own way, but no one felt she was right or fair with her "family tradition" prohibiting Tita to marry Pedro. Our Mexican member said to her knowledge this is not a Mexican tradition. Most of the evening was spent on the topic of food, its preparation and its place in the center of our lives across cultures. We related many stories of our own regarding food and holidays, etc. and the kitchen being the warm center, almost the heartbeat, of a home. John Brown led us into some talk about the current Mexican/American relations, especially in schools with language instruction. We learned about the Virgin of Guadalupe during our discussion of magical realism. Not much was said about magical realism, but we did talk about how in Latin American literature it seems to be a melding of indigenous myths with formal religion. One member commented on the "steamy" sex, but no discussion of that aspect of

"food" was to follow. Too bad. A fun, lively discussion that left everyone upbeat and hungry.

Kim Knowlton, Pine Bluffs

I began the discussion with biographical information about Esquivel and read a portion of her Mexico's Woman of the Year Acceptance speech. I obtained this idea from the archives. I, for the first time, also explored the world of blogs (robotlaugh.blogspot.com) and read some postings regarding this novel. It was interesting to explore the similarities and contrasts to blogs and reviews. This novel and film were financially successful and we explored why that might be the case. One participant cited Claude Levi-Strauss who said that food may be transformed into culture. Everyone has a basic need for nourishment through food, but what else does food mean to us as humans? We spent a lot of time exploring answers to this question and shared stories about what food has meant to us in our own lives. We had a great discussion about structure, character development, symbolism (particularly Tita's blanket), mythological allusions, metaphors, and similes. Most participants did not have a great deal of experience with the genre—magical realism--, but they were able to suspend belief once they read a few chapters. Overall, the reaction to this novel was positive and some participants may be interested in reading Esquivel's other work.

Tammy Frankland, Casper

I began the evening with a short introduction of the author, and then the tempo of the discussion was set after I read two book reviews to the group. The second review mentioned that "matriarchal dominance" was a theme of the novel, and we never slowed down.

Almost the entire evening was spent comparing, contrasting, attacking, praising, or questioning the dominance of Mama Elena, Rosaura, Tita, Gertrudis, and even Nacha. The love/hate relationship between mother and daughter was shredded and analyzed. Remarkably, the group found both positive and negative results from the various relationships between and among the women. Everyone agreed that Esquivel had written a realistic view of life during the Mexican revolution.

The supernatural/magic realism included in the book seemed appropriate within the culture as has been shown in other books in this series. Discovering that a granddaughter is the true narrator of the novel helps to explain many events and actions of her older relatives because the stories probably came from recipes and the notes included with those recipes. Maybe Laura Esquivel was telling us about her characters when she wrote, "Only the pan knows how the boiling soup feels . . ."

Jim Fassler

Seven of us braved a snow squall to discuss the book. We spent most of our time discussing the characters and plot and less time with the cooking. We seemed to agree that it's Tita's book, and that while the other female characters were certainly interesting, the men were unimportant. We touched on some of the racism implicit in Tita's view of Mama Elena and Gertrudis, and we had a spirited discussion of the world's oldest profession. That the book is representative of magic realism was deemed less important than the ways in which it dealt with tradition and cultural topics. While we enjoyed the recipes, we tended to agree that we wished we had the time and patience to prepare food the way Tita does in the book. Peeling walnuts in particular seemed beyond anything we could sanely contemplate.

Kevin Holdsworth, 2-25-04

Nine participants arrived to the sounds of Mexican Music, Salsa and Black bean dips as well as, of course, several kinds of chocolate. Settling down contentedly we discovered that all had enjoyed the book very much, although some were a little bemused by the journey. Jumping right into the characters it was felt that the book showed the fragility

and complications of mother/daughter relationships. One perhaps less sensitive remark called it the "Mexican Mommy Dearest". The question immediately arose as to whether the tradition surrounding the youngest daughter was one true to Mexico. It was felt that it was more common for the mother to move in with a married daughter. Tradition versus

Expectation was discussed, in our country as well, with personal stories from several members of the group concerning care for elder parents. Stories of amazing things found out about parents after their deaths were also shared, growing out of having known them in the role of parent rather than as person, as in this book. Our Mexican traveler remarked about the "tradition" in Mexico of one son going into the priesthood. It was decided that Mami was a controlling personality - passing that rather than "tradition" on to Rosaura.

Magic Realism/Surrealism was discussed and seen here as a definite Mexican literary device. The concept of the Fairy Tale quality also rang true. It was felt that we have learned through all these books how closely the Mexican people live with superstitions, other-worldliness and spiritual beliefs. And that they, even the more "sophisticated", would accept the occurrences in this book with much less surprise, and with much more sense of them being "real", than we in our culture. Magic Realism was a natural offshoot of their lives. In the discussion, as people brought up the many metaphorical, strange things (such as sweeping up salt of tears, chicken tornados, etc.) some found that in contrast to their ability to know and speak of the characters as "real" in the midst of so much "magic" while reading the book. The magic had not prevailed. We easily compared this book to "Lovesick". One man had found "Lovesick" rather silly, and not a serious love story. But he was intrigued by the uniqueness

of "Like Water for Chocolate". We talked about Gertrudis in relation to the "Freedom for women during war" theme set out by Mastretta. Although it was agreed that the Revolution went on very far "off scene" and even the one attack at the ranch did not intrude for long. But it had to be there somewhere - background music to Mexican life always. There was more connection to North Americans in this book - cross border ties. Many had seen the movie and compared it favorably to the book. After the fun time watching "Tortilla soup" together two weeks ago we decided that we will watch this movie together soon - with food - as well. Nourishment was a central theme, of course. And Mami and Rosaura literally died from not being able to receive it - or give it. The extreme, heated passion consumed everything. The comforting thread of recipes kept us as readers coming back to the table and being nourished to go on. Times with John also comforted, and the scene with matches was well loved. Destiny was another point of discussion and, as one reader put it, "If you wait long enough it will happen" and the group added "and be short-lived"! Our Mexican traveler brought in photographs of her two dinners there this Fall of "Chilies in Walnut Sauce", her favorite. We all salivated off into the night!

Mary Ellen Honsaker, February 2004

Three of the evening's five participants had read *Like Water for Chocolate* at some previous time. All liked it much better this time around with a context in which to place it. Discussion of the food/emotion metaphors was of course inevitable. The series theme of rebellion and its causes continues with this book, though the role of the Mexican Revolution itself is almost peripheral this time. Male characterization is much flatter than female, the doctor becoming essentially one-dimensional. The contrasting, intricately portrayed interaction of the women with each other underscores the societally repressed roles they're allowed to play and the ways in which they can express themselves - in the kitchen or in the bedroom. This was a ladies-only night and a good book to initiate discussion of feminist topics, though Sundance's laudable ladies never resorted to male bashing. A fun and thoughtful discussion, as it's always been here.

Carol Jones, Sundance group, 12-03

Our discussion went in a million ways. To recap: most couldn't figure out from the text what the big deal was about Pedro, but we figured people fall in love/lust for all kinds of undefinable reasons. (Most of us preferred John!) I talked about oral traditions vs. the male-dominated literary canon, which often emphasizes public events over domestic activity. I used Kristine Ibsen's collection *The Other Mirror: Women's Narratives in Mexico, 1980-1995* as a key resource (I used it for *Lovesick*, too). We didn't all agree about whether Tita was happy with her role as chief cook. We all agreed that Gertrudis was one of the most entertaining in the book.

Julianne Couch 02-03

The group liked the book especially the imagery. No one seemed bothered by the combination of real and unreal occurrences, accepting the "magic" as metaphorical realization of figurative images, e.g. "burning with passion." Most didn't find "magical realism" to be a particularly useful term. We discussed food as nourishment, tradition, connection, and contrasted its traditional function with today's fast foods and social disconnection. We discussed nourishment generally, and its importance in defining cultures and a sense of home. People remarked on the force of passion in the books we have read so far, comparing *Lovesick* and this book in the power of initial attraction and sexual passion to direct decisions that affect the course of life. While people noted the strength of female characters, they spoke more of the issue of breaking out of gender roles generally, and of controlling and being controlled by destiny. We contrasted the marginal role of the outside revolution in this book to the central role in others, but, as one person said, there is enough revolution going on in the family itself. Another theme was rigidity and its contribution to the breakdown of traditional structure.

Stephen Lottridge 02-03

I began with an "intro to magical realism," citing such writers as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Milan Kundera. We discussed the importance of food in our culture and how some authors tend to ignore it altogether. We talked about how magical realism applied to the narrative and the "fairy tale" tone of the book. We agreed that it works. The polarity between males/females came up, as did the motivation for the "wicked mother." We discussed how Esquivel is a screenwriter and how this book made such a seamless transition to film, ending with a Roger Ebert review. One participant brought in a Frida documentary and we found a link between surrealist art and literary magical realism.

Jon Billman (Pinedale) 0203

We discussed magical realism, Esquivel's background, the beauty of the film made from this novel, the intersection of the book with the Mexican Revolution, and, of course, the role of food and its preparation in the novel. We examined family relationships, feminism, and the two men in Tita's life. One participant recommended the film, "Viva Zapata," which he had just viewed to get a sense of the Revolution. While I did a timeline and discussed the Revolution in broad terms early in this series, it is still hard for us to keep events straight. Maybe that is part of the point; even Mexico is still trying to make sense out of its revolution. I spent about 10 minutes at the end of the evening providing information on the status of women in Mexico, with an emphasis on relationships within the family and feminism among young women.

Barbara Gose 0203

The Meeteetse group's discussion of Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (04Nov02) was a feast . . . literally! One enthusiast had previously collected all the recipes from the novel and suggested we cook for this discussion. So we did. We had three dishes from the book—Kings' Day Bread, Christmas Rolls, and Chocolate—and the rest of the food was Mexican or Mexican-inspired. It was an amazing feast.

. . . which gave us an opportunity to muse upon the relationship between recipes and familial history. WilsonWeb's biographical article on Esquivel (available from public libraries via WYLDcat) begins with a quotation from her acceptance speech for Mexico's 1992 Woman of the Year Award:

"I spent the first years of my life in front of the fire in my mother's and grandmother's kitchen, watching how, when they entered those hallowed precincts, these two wise women turned into priestesses, noble alchemists playing with the four elements of water, air, fire, and earth that compose the universe [. . .]. What is most surprising is that they did so with total humility, as if what they were doing was not important at all, as if they were not transforming the world through the purifying power of the fire, as if they didn't know that the food they were preparing, and we were eating, remained in our bodies for many hours, chemically altering our organism, nurturing soul and spirit, giving us identity, language, motherland."

Even though our mouths were full, we talked about family, family traditions, the tension between tradition and innovation, women's traditional roles, magical realism, and—most interestingly—our society's attitude toward food. One participant commented that our culture seems to have lost its reverence for food, with resulting distortions. We agreed that the book both made us want to cook, yet reminded us of why more of us don't take the time to make the elaborate, time consuming, beautiful dishes like those described in the novel.

We noted several similarities between *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Lovesick* . . . right down to the understanding, loving doctor waiting in the wings for our impetuous female protagonist. We also talked about the centrality of the Mexican Revolution in the books we've read so far—it seems to form a convenient background for plots and characters that are experiencing tension between tradition and innovation.

One source I used talked about the book's initial poor critical reception in Mexico, contrasted with an immediate embrace from audiences in the United States. The same article talks about Mexico's 19th c. domestic literature. This included cookbooks as well as monthly periodicals that published "calendars for young ladies," which included recipes, advice, remedies, and sentimental fiction—all aimed at instructing young ladies in their proper role. Tita, of course, subverts the traditional role for young ladies in a revolutionary way.

Moss, Joyce, and Lorraine Valestuk. "Like Water for Chocolate." *Latin American Literature and Its Times*.

Vol. 1 of *World Literature and Its Times*. Detroit: Gale, 1999. 335-343.

Deborah Spangler Koelling

It wasn't a stormy or particularly cold night, but only 10 participants came to the Jackson Hole Library book discussion on "Like Water for Chocolate." Too bad, for the half that missed not only didn't get to participate in a great discussion, they missed some wonderful Mexican hot chocolate.

By default, really, we launched into a discussion about how the book made us feel about cooking and food. This naturally worked its way around to a cultural and food discussion, and then a discussion about the feminist movement in the 1960s, and its impact on food and food production for the family.

Fortunately, after we got too far off track I was able to bring the discussion around to more specifics on the book. We discussed the writer, her delightful style in putting together this book, and of course, the genre of magical realism. We also discussed her characters, particularly how the females were the main focus. Several felt the characters were not well developed, and they never got to know them well. I also tried to bring in analysis, particularly how Tita's story perhaps was the same struggle as the Mexican Revolution. Some went for it, others didn't. Finally, we discussed Esquivel's use of images, such as heat and fire. This was interesting, and a good way to bring in the title of the book, and how water must be brought to the brink of boiling several times before it is ready to be used in making chocolate, but not so with the heat of emotions.

Ann Noble

Everyone in the group liked this book, especially the food. We talked a lot about food. We would talk about something else and then get back to food. I felt like I should have brought enchiladas. One participant lives in Mexico during the winter (she used to be a regular group member) so she talked a lot about Mexican food and Mexican markets

But we did talk about some other issues: the female-centered "cast," the structure of the book, the emphasis on heat and fire. We discussed Mama Elina as antagonist and Tita as protagonist as well as the power of tradition. Everyone was disappointed that Tita chose Pedro because he's so immature and self-centered.

As I expected, members of the group had difficulty accepting the magical realism part. We've dealt with magical realism in past series, and it's always a stopping point for some people. They want straight-forward realism. But they managed to enjoy this book and get something out of it despite the magical realism.

Because this was our first meeting of the season, we could not compare the book with others. However, I did begin talking with them about warfare in Mexico and the place of males and females in Mexico in anticipation of orthcoming books.

Maggie Garner

I started the discussion with a list of topics that might be of interest to cover because last time I had a long list of topics which I did not share at the beginning, and we only got through the first one. This time I wanted them to think about all the different ways of approaching the book first and then take on the topics that interested them most, right at the beginning. Of course we talked about the magical realism in the book, and almost everyone admitted they simply went along with it without question, "suspending belief." We talked about "ways of knowing" in the book, looking at the spectrum from Tita's Native American nanny and the doctor's grandmother who measured the world through senses and nature and food to the doctor himself who represented the practical world of science. Tita's choice of men at the end of the book bothered almost everyone, but that choice seemed logical for her based on the way she looked at the world. We talked about the focus on the women characters and the women's world while the men's world of the revolutions occurs in the background and is of little interest to Tita. The strong characters are the women, whether they are strong positive figures or strong negative figures. We traced Tita's growing strength and faith in herself throughout the story, culminating in the scene where she denounces the ghost of her mother. We could have gone on much longer because it is a great book to talk about.

Karen Love

As we were to consider Like Water for Chocolate, the program director Debbie Sturman had arranged for a Mexican buffet and, after the discussion, the movie based on the book. We spent some time reflecting on the series as a whole, and whether we were able to gain an expanded sense of the history, culture and literature of Mexico. Comparisons were made with these aspects of our own country, and I was pleased with the sense the group gave of seeing fascinating and worthwhile differences.

The wonderful depictions of the magical and its concomitant passions were noted, especially in their many forms in Chocolate. Similarly, the time we had spent on the history of the Mexican Revolution allowed an expanded context for this book's characters and actions. In the manner of the book, the evening became a celebration of Mexican cuisine and entertainment.

Bob Brown, Lusk

With temperatures in the single digits, our fearless leader received cancellations from all the members of our group.

Nevertheless, she arrived with a chocolate chili cake and we marveled at the power of the fantasy of this book in our respective lives. For both of us, food preparation, food presentation, and meals took on an added dimension of attention. With tea and cake, and having acknowledged the power of the book to impact our lives, we then delved into the story.

We began briefly with background on Esquivel, and both noted how her later work does not get the attention that this huge success gets. The 30 translations, film that won international film prizes. This is one powerful little book in the world of international literature.

We were both surprised by the blunt, corporeal violence of the magical realism in the book, like the wedding dress covered in vomit. We had both seen the movie previously, and while it provides memorable images of the absurd, such as the blanket trailing behind the buggy, the film images are spare you from the visceral and searing images of the book. It wasn't brutal like Hectic Ethics, but neither was its magical realism pretty or nice.

We then traced the characteristics of each of the women characters, comparing the gynocentric circle of this book to the more brutal beginnings of Tula Station, for instance, that was initiated with a rape.

We walked around the daughters first, and then tackled that mother figure, in itself perhaps a testimony to the power of the mother in the story.

Rosaura--propriety and property, she made the compromises that assured her social status as inheritor of the property. Her fleshy and flatulent demise plays a nearly cruel role, taken down as she was by the compulcense of her proprietary status.

Gertrudis--warrior of the revolution, makes her a foil to Rosaura's proper-ty. In fantasy, a woman at a brothel is not killed by STDs and so can burn her passions for a year of sex. Who doesn't love the attraction between her and Juan? As General, she assumes the male leadership position.

Nevertheless, though she's disowned property, she comes home to feed the troops (with Chench's entire being turned into female service industry), and to recall childhood food pleasures. She cannot cook them, but orders the man to do so.

Tita--the breast, the heart of the home and the story. Her genuine confusion between her love of John and Pedro written so convincingly--female desire confused by its capacity to want two very different men.

John--not Juan. John. Who grows in stature in her eyes when he speaks truth and asks from her only her truth.

I realize we didn't talk about Pedro. Funny that.

Mother Elena--dictator, matriarch, capable of cruelty, bends the world to her will, builds her world to suit her will, including her family. While savvy in the ways of love and life she'll never the less bend her daughters and their

loves to her service, knowing that it will create devastating tensions. But she could crack a bag of nuts. And then another. And enjoy doing so. Re-appearing as the persistent ghost/conscience. Even Gertrudis wanted the opportunity to say "See what I have made of myself" knowing that Mother Elena would have only criticism.

We talked about the knowledge in the book. Things that consumer people don't know, from medicinal properties of plants, to how to make toothpaste, to twelve different ways egg whites can be used in a recipe.

We talked about time. Each step of the cooking taken forward with anticipation, like water for chocolate indeed. The time and knowledge it would take to cook like this.

That evening as my men-folk returned from the ice rink filling bowls of cereal, I figured the book I would write would be "Like wine from a box.
Like food from a box."

Tula Station

Nine people gathered in Powell on March 3, 2008 to discuss David Toscana's Tula Station. At the beginning of the session, some participants expressed confusion regarding the novel's purpose. They wanted to know: What are we supposed to get out of reading this?

I talked to the group a little about postmodernism in an attempt to give them some context for the novel. This led to a discussion of humor in Tula Station. We discussed some of the humorous dialogue between Juan and Froylán and the outrageous attempts of the Tultecos to make their town greater than it really was and to try to fit into the increasingly modernized Mexico.

Our discussion then naturally moved to the characters. We are an all-female reading group, and one member expressed her desire for a male perspective on the novel and its characters, particularly Carmen. We discussed—but perhaps did not resolve—the role of Carmen. Does she represent a common male fantasy? Could either of the Carmens ever actually live up to her idealized image in her admirer's mind? I suggested that the women weren't the only idealized characters—the Carmens also seemed to idealize and to fictionalize Juan and Froylán.

We also talked about the novel's multiple endings. One reader was interested in the idea that Juan seemed to need Froylán to rewrite his life for him so that he could have peace. This moved us to a discussion of the novel as metafiction. I pointed out many parts of the novel in which Toscana plays with reality vs. fiction. We also discussed parts of the novel in which Toscana relies on—and often seems to mock—our knowledge of narrative conventions. Several group members seemed rather unimpressed with this aspect of the novel. They felt that their inability to trust any of the characters also compromised their ability to get meaning from the novel.

By the end, I realized that the majority of participants had not enjoyed the novel, and I don't think I successfully

convinced them of its enjoyable and meaningful components. However, most participants agreed that one reason to join a reading group is to "expand one's horizons."

Jennifer Sheridan

We had a grand time discussing this fine book. Beginning with the premise that "Tula Station" is an example of post-modernism, we went on a wild and stimulating journey into the problems of narrative—subjectivity, trustworthiness, deceit, and our discussion was also filled with glittering allusions to the Euro-centrism of the book: Bizet's "Carmen," Stendhal's "The Charterhouse of Parma," Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and Kurosawa's "Rashomon." In the end we concluded that whether or not it made sense, or whether or not any of the narrators could be trusted, "Tula Station" is a delightful and provocative book.

Kevin Holdsworth, 3-24-04

I like the book Tula Station so much I'm afraid I might be a bit heavy handed "forcing" my group to enjoy it too, but after five years together this group is very indulgent of me. I'd alerted them to the structure just a bit at the end of our last meeting. I didn't want to give anything away, but I encouraged them not to be put off or concerned if they felt lost while reading. I assured them the story would come together. During discussion most of the readers said they felt "relieved" when they finally understood the pieces. That seemed like a great moment to talk about postmodernism, which I did briefly, after having found great resources on the discussion achieves. Before it was over we'd talked about biography, the "real", superstition and culture, and of course, ideal love.

Julianne Couch, 3-17-04

Sundance readers' reactions to Tula Station were mixed. One found characters annoyingly artificial, one-dimensional, almost robotic. Another found the characters fully-rounded, but the plot structure unnecessarily confusing. A third was bothered by neither characters nor interwoven plot lines, but found the story-as-metaphor-of-art theme artificial. Two couldn't finish the book at all. As reactions were shared, everyone became more comfortable with structure, characters, and themes and derived more meaning from what she'd read - a very successful discussion.

Carol Jones, March 2004

Thirteen people attended this third discussion in the Series. Most commented that when they first started "Tula Station" they were confused by the jumping between story lines. The fact that chapters are so short (as they have been in all three books) made it even harder to get a hold

of each character before moving on. But then it started to fit together like pieces of a puzzle and no one ended up feeling the same confusion at the end. One commented that it was like reading a screenplay with many scenes. Several had gone back and reread the book, finding it then easy to “jump in” and stay afloat with the stories. Most felt that the easiest and most entertaining part of the book was the story of Tula itself. We then moved on, with the help of one reader, to look at the levels beyond just realism. He felt that this book was mythological - a Hero Quest for the Divine (Carmen). A very spiritual book, where the priest and church are some of the least spiritual elements (reflecting Mexico’s history with the Church?). I brought in material about the post-modernism, metafiction elements, taken from the excellent essays posted in the WCH Scholar on-line information. I had found very little about the author beyond the basics, but that did not seem to be as important as the book itself. My favorite quote about Toscana led us back into more discovery about the content of Tula Station. “Toscana supplies the story’s cords, but it’s up to the reader to elevate them into chords.” This brought into question Toscana as a postmodernist. Fragmentation use in style, yes, but “The world is meaningless? Lets not pretend that art can make meaning then, lets just play with nonsense.” Some strongly disagreed that this was present. I mentioned that contrast between the two Jackson groups, with those reading in Spanish taking the book in a much more light-hearted (playful) way. That did not deter most of our group going on to look for the meaningful elements! We elevated our discussion in many directions. One comment was that Tula, in its isolation and attitude, was like a “threshold” to cross between two worlds - a “Star Trek” teleporting station. Juan, being “reborn” in the cave passes into the real world as Domenico, then retruns to become Juan once again in Tula’s world. The old Juan was seen as a “Trickster” figure, luring in Froylan to “rewrite” (the four endings) his life so he could move on. One person asked if this was “passing on a curse” to Froylan, sending him on the Carmen quest. No, said some, not if this was a true quest for the Divine. The curse might be to stay with Patricia, and the soap operas. A parallel was suggested with Jacob’s wrestling with the angel from scripture. Some said that their practical minds struggled with the book, but that seeing it at these different levels made it easier to accept. Naming of characters was again discussed. The most interesting to consider was the absent daughter that only returned when dead. Tete is perhaps linked to “head” or the rational that never shows up “alive”. The Gringo,

Juan’s biological father, was the maker of strong spirits. When raped, Fernanda was first “baptized” by this man. Did either man ever finish the Quest? It was felt that there was no “Carmen” to be gotten, as the Divine can only be experienced - and is that enough? We have an amazing group of thinkers that find following many different possible paths exciting! We ended with the quote “...men lead lives of quiet desperation” and felt that, even so, they don’t go willingly on their quests. Tricksters and Passions lead them. We are finding in these books by Mexican authors that things are not always what they at first seem to be.

Mary Ellen Honsaker, Dubois group, 12-9-03

We had a good discussion in Meeteetse about David Toscana’s Tula Station (13Jan03)although the group is always suspicious that it’s missing essential information because of faulty translation or our limited knowledge of Mexican culture.

Because of the novels we’ve previously discussed in this series, we found ourselves identifying character types within the book: the controlling, stultifying mother (Doña Esperanza), the blighted daughter (Fernanda), the hopeless, flawed romantic (Froylán), the unattainable ideal (Carmen). And “Patricia” became an epithet among group members (as in, “You are such a Patricia!”).

A couple of the participants inspired each other into discovering the novel’s religious motifs: Christ-figures (Juan Capistrán–JC), “stations” of the Cross, and resurrections.

During discussion, group members noted the following:

- the four different endings of the novel (238, 251, 258, 278)
- the random acts which affect the whole course of one’s life
- the way everything in the narrative is a made up story, a lie—no way to tell what’s real and what’s not
- the unconnected characters
- the depiction of empty lives
- the elaborate narrative structure in which one of the protagonists writes the novel itself

When summed up, these observations led to a useful discussion of postmodernist metafiction. I’m not well-versed in postmodernist theory, so I depended upon a couple of online lectures: “Postmodernism,” by Mary Klages, University of Colorado, and “Metafiction,” by Victoria Orlowski, Emory University.

Tula Station trivia:

“Vulnerant omnes, ultima necat” (Toscana 3).

All of them wound, the last one kills.

A reference to the hours, a common inscription on early clocks.

Deb Koelling

Everyone liked Tula Station, and discussion began about modernism and the idea of subjective truth and the relation of “fact” vs. “fiction” in modern literature and in life. That led to a discussion of self-awareness and self-consciousness and the difficulty of being fully in the

present. People told stories from their own lives about being, briefly, in the zone. We also discussed more traditional thematic issues such as the treatment of rape, the concept of "illegitimacy" in the book and in life generally, the uses of political power, the sources and effects of corruption in the church and in society, and the concept of "Carmen" (with due reference to Prosper Merimee and to the opera) and the devotional and liberating romantic ideal in life.

We compared/contrasted this book with others in the series, especially in regard to passion, political and social power and geographical specificity.

Stephen Lottridge

I began with background comments on the critical acceptance of the book and mentioned some of the great Latin American authors Toscana has been compared to. Two critics described Toscana this way: worthy to "enter the pantheon of great Latin American writers" and "among the best in contemporary Mexican literature." I came up with a list of 21 adjectives critics have used to describe the book and asked the group to choose two that matched their response. Then I asked each participant to make some opening comments about their initial response to the book. Some of the adjectives they chose were "inventive," "minimalist," "brilliant," "intriguing," and "intricate."

I told them about the interaction between Ann Noble's two discussion groups in Jackson, where the group reading the book in English took it very seriously and the Spanish-speaking group saw it as light-hearted. We opened the general discussion with what members found funny. The more we shared ideas, the more we saw to laugh at. Most of the humor seemed to be poking fun at the small town of Tula. Tula Station itself is the ultimate in absurdity when the tracks go nowhere and no one arrives or leaves from the station, but the people are very proud of it.

We branched off into a discussion of cultural differences in what we find funny. I shared experiences from my travels in South America and from my year living on Easter Island that showed me how different cultures find humor in completely different things. Then we took up the topic of what made this book was distinctly Latin American and what was universal about it. We talked at length about the Latin male point of view about Carmen and Patricia, the difference between the ideal and the real, and their response to the rape fantasy. The intricacy and the overlapping stories intrigued our group, and we talked about how we create our own truth, our own story, depending on our point of view. In fact, Toscana gives us several endings to choose from and ends his book with "and." We found it ironic that [as the New York Times critic wrote] "Patricia asks Toscana to publish the manuscript as a novel so that 'Froylan would be able to read his own diary and texts as if they were someone else's,' like a work of fiction that, in Patricia's words, 'will make him realize that he is living a lie, and then he will want to come back to me and to the life he had before.'" The irony we found was that he has actually heard Juan's story, which has made him realize what a lie his life with Patricia has been,

and he longs to run off with Carmen. Then Froylan writes about passing the story on to another writer, and is that writer David Toscana himself? In the end we feel like we have walked through a fun house of mirrors.

Karen Love

Just wanted to let you know that we had a great get together with the Spanish-speaking members. They brought a Mexican rice pudding and hot chocolate that were incredibly delicious. I also got a whole new view on Tula Station after discussing it with one of the Latino members. They found the book quite humorous, whereas our group took it much more seriously. They also felt that the book relied on many "dichos" or sayings that are known to Mexicans but may not be apparent in a translation to U.S. readers.

Kristen Corbett

This series has turned out to be my favorite to lead so far, because the participants always have plenty to say about the books. They are accessible enough to be understood on one read-through, and engaging enough to invite the interest of all sorts of readers. Unlike the participants, I of course read Tula Station twice and I got even more an understanding of the structure and its complexities the second time through. After our discussion last night I feel the urge to read it through again! Our groups' way in to the book was to try to unravel the plot as it was revealed through the three separate stories. Rather than broadly discussing themes, gender roles and other thematic issues to start, as we've done with some books, this inspection of plot seemed to really be the way to go. With every action we discussed, we were able then to analyze reactions, relationships, and repercussions through the three stories. Then we were able to move into thematic issues, and the nature of the "ideal." Finally, we considered what the connection was between the story of the town, the story of the train station (which though brief is dominant enough to create the novel's title), and the story of the people. We saw that the town's inability to connect to the outside world, no matter what method they used, was a metaphor for the two Juans to connect to the two Carmens. I envy other discussion leaders who still have this book ahead in the series - I could talk about it again and again!

Julianne Couch

We had a very spirited conversation about this book. One person disliked it intensely. Another person thought it was fabulous. All others fell somewhere in between.

I had forewarned the group about the structure and suggested that they keep on reading even when they can't make connections with the chapters at first. They kept on reading but some were still unhappy that the book wasn't linear in structure.

They thought none of the characters had any redeeming qualities. They thought Patricia was stupid, and they could not understand why anyone would pursue the young Carmen. We talked about Carmen representing the search for the ideal. We also talked about the influence of money in the church, the perception of how men were supposed to behave, and the concepts of truth mentioned in the book.

The historical aspects of the book interested the group the most. We found Tula on a map and saw that building a railroad line to Tula would have been very much out of the way. We then talked about the title and how Tula Station represents unrealistic dreams pursued and lost.

Maggie Garner

The evening opened with a heated discussion about the presentation in Mexican literature of men as no-good, domineering, and hopeless creatures, who seem to have no role in society except to make babies.

Then I steered the discussion toward this novel and its men who are likeable underdogs, oddball characters, and a quixotic adventurer.

Eventually, we were drawn to Toscano's inventive writing style, and how he successfully wove three compelling stories into this novel: the writing of Juan Capstan's "biography", the story of doomed Tula, and Froylan's obsession with Carmen. After we discussed the three intertwined strands of this ball of yarn, the group seemed pretty pleased about the conclusions which just might be found in the introduction.

Then, two of the readers asked how with three stories could there be four conclusions? They identified their four conclusions, but some would not agree and see the conclusions as they did. I had to end the evening's discussion so I pointed out that three strands of yarn required three ends. Right? Or, maybe not!

--Jim Fassler

The small Lusk group of eight began their discussion with predictable comments and questions about the book. Who's who? Was a dominant theme. I reframed the discussion by asking questions and offering some Mexican historical information, which allowed us to approach the book as if trying to unravel a complex and urgently important mystery.

When is the "book" written? We tried to date the time period in which Froylan and Juan are talking with each other. We ended up estimating the 1990s, based on clues such as the tape recorder and the Datsun and David Toscana's comments (he was born in 1961). How old is Juan Capistran? 150? Is there more than one of him? Is he real?

Fact: Tula (approximately 48 mi. N. of Mexico City) was the capital of the Toltec civilization but was abandoned by

them, apparently as a result of Aztec encroachments, in 1125.

Fact: The French invaded Mexico in 1861 and 1862. Juan says he participated in the Mexican resistance during this war.

Fact: Porfirio Diaz (president/dictator from 1876 – 1911) had the railroads built. The first one, from Mexico City to Veracruz, opened 1/1/1873. They were completed by 1908. Tula was indeed bypassed.

Fact: The telegraph lines were run in the 1870s.

Fact: Hidalgo (the stamps) was a firebrand priest and the hero of the war for Mexican independence (1872), and remains a symbol of Mexican independence.

Does Froylan survive the hurricane? And, is he with Carmen?

I noted the structure of the tale. It begins with three distinct voices, divided by the chapters: Froylan's "bio" material about his exchanges with Juan; Juan's tape-recorded voice (his "bio"); the novel that Froylan is drafting. Additionally, there are the sotto voce comments of David Toscana. By late in the book, the voices are so intermingled that it is difficult to know who is speaking.

Juan, apparently a 19th Century Mexican man, makes a commitment to a woman (Carmen) in his teens and lives it for the rest of his life (although he tries an abortive effort to influence her with the name Domenico). Froylan, a late 20th Century Mexican man, can't stick with his commitments, and seems a more typical (at least in the U.S.) provisional man engaged in a provisional life.

We also had fun with the many humorous exchanges (e.g., Father Nicanor and Dona Esperanza, p. 62; or, Father Nicanor and Juan, p. 235; or, Tula's efforts to become the state capital by increasing its population, p. 95ff). The historical references also opened up additional humorous themes, as did the names (translate some of them) as did the many ironies.

The group with interesting thoughts and additional questions of a more rhetorical nature processed all of this information. The book's seeming confusions became for the group a probable comment on our late 20th and early 21st Centuries world, and the boundaries with Mexico seemed more porous than before we began.

Bob Brown

Cody had 4 attendees plus our visitor Jenny Ingram. This group has been as large as 12 in the past, and our leader knew of 4 people who couldn't attend this first discussion, so perhaps we'll grow.

We began around the table with a general feel for whether people had enjoyed reading the book. Given previous responses from the archives I was concerned that there would be resistance to the book's movement backwards

and forwards in time and in narrators. But everyone in this crowd was happy to have worked their way through the transitions and figured out what was going on.

I set the stage with a favorite line from the NYTimes book review that is listed in the archives pages regarding "two Juans, two Carmens, two frustrated writers, and two disappearances" and from there we never quit peeling the onion.

We started with the beginning, which of course is tricky with this book.

"The book develops out of a rape," began a discussion of Fernanda and Buenaventura, but then we stepped back to Patricia and the premise of Toscana writing the book that Patricia asked him to write. The discussion was so fun because each time we would expand on characters or plot element, we would then confront the fact that those characters or that part of the plot was wrapped up in a meta-plot.

We fleshed out the quirks of Tula, comparing their quirks with small town quirks in Wyoming. We ultimately ended up at the deserted railroad station with its tracks waiting for connection. Idealism as a central theme of the book, with Domenico as an idealized person, Carmen and Carmen as idealized persons, Patricia as the foil of mundane person, Tula Station

We really enjoyed reading our favorite, funny exchanges. Toscana is a great writer of wit and dialogue and we'd read a page at a time, laughing at the calculated repartee between Catholic Priest and Dona Esperanza "You're looking for the theater--it's down the street," "I had always considered her a pious woman" or between Juan and Froylan. As Froylan's life becomes more and more of a story that Juan is writing, the dialogue is so layered "Why did I tell her my name was Juan?" Froylan asks, the writer who has become the written character.

Violence against women, a re-written ending that includes killing Carmen, the thoughtless treatment of Buenaventura in her grief . . . Neighborliness is difficult in the face of a cultural difference like machismo. It's a right onion of a book.

I was so impressed with our next author, Rosario Castellano, hailed as one of the founding forces of Mexican feminism, that I prepared a 5 page bio and book context from the archive resources that I'm sending out as an e-mail attachment. I brought a copy to the meeting in case anyone was not e-attached and indeed one member did not have easy access to a computer.

Lovesick

We began with a short presentation by our Mexican member on the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Aztec calendar. She told us again the story of the Virgin and brought a video showing the celebration of the Virgin's appearance where the image is kept. We were also treated to depictions of the Aztec calendar, which is very

beautiful, and apparently more accurate than the Gregorian calendar.

I began our discussion as usual, by giving a brief biography of the author. The interview recommended from the archives contained useful information for the book's background, so I presented some of that. Not everyone was able to finish the book, either because of time constraints or inability to engage in the story. Most readers liked the book, however. Most of our discussion revolved around Emilia. We decided she had it all - great parents, great house, great sex, great loves, great friends, great education, great travels, and two men willing to share her. Her character seemed to be an idealized female of her time.

Female sexuality was a main topic. It was hard to fathom how parents in Mexico during the revolution (or even now) could or would tolerate the open sex of the daughter at all, let alone under their roof. The sacredness of a daughter's virginity in respect to family honor in contrast to Emilia's behavior seemed irreconcilable. Her parent's permissiveness didn't make sense even in the context of war and the "anything goes" attitude during that time and in that place. Most readers felt that it was too implausible to expect us to believe that two men would willingly share one woman, even though both loved her in different ways and for different reasons, and she, them. The culture of machismo certainly would suggest its impossibility. And Emilia's coyness regarding the parentage of her children was commented upon, as well as her ability to avoid pregnancy earlier. This woman was in total control of her sexuality.

Emilia's friend Sol appeared to be the "other side of the coin" to Emilia's unique lifestyle. We agreed she represented the traditional female role and pathway to womanhood and motherhood. We talked about Daniel and his apparent addiction to war and war-making intrigues. Some who had not read *The Underdogs* thought the revolution seemed like a pitiful affair with such small and fractured groups. Most agreed it was the best representation of the revolution in the four books we read. We all got more of a sense Mexico at that time - it seemed more real to us, for example, the train trip.

We all agreed we learned much about Mexico and Mexican culture from this series. This series seems especially relevant to us here in Pine Bluffs as we have quite a few neighbors from Mexico. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn more about our "distant" and "not so distant" neighbors to the South. Like *Water for Chocolate* seemed to be the favorite and we are gathering on November 30th to share finger food and watch the DVD.

We ended the evening by reviewing our book choices for next season and discussing which books to read this spring from the available book kits. This group loves books and has decided to carry on into the spring with reading and meeting. Can't ask for more than that, can you?

Kim Knowlton, Pine Bluffs

My first response upon finishing Angeles Mastretta's *LOVESICK* was "Geez, I'm glad I'm getting paid to read this." It seemed like such a slapdash, carelessly written affair that the English teacher in me went into rebellion. Fortunately, the comments by fellow scholars posted in the archives almost immediately began mellowing me out, showing me the possibilities for fruitful discussion, pointing out how the book-whatever else one thinks about it-explores in a useful way many of the characteristic tensions of Mexican literature and culture: between men and women, rich and poor, war and peace, indigenous culture and European culture, church and state, realism and surrealism. These paired tensions proved to be a fruitful framework for discussion.

There are a great many interesting reviews of the book-some mentioned by other scholars, others readily available with an online search, which encompass the entire spectrum of response. This was our first meeting, and the group appreciated a quick exposition of Mexican history prior to and during the revolution/anarchy period. Good old Encyclopedia Britannica gave me that!

Richard Kempa

The first part of our discussion focused on whether it was possible to take this entertaining bit of fluff seriously. We discussed at length how the characters were idealizations rather than realistic portrayals—a kind of projected wish fulfillment rather than real people. Once we were able to agree to put that aside, we had quite a bit of fun with analyzing each character's traits, particularly with Emilia, who can do no wrong except in conjugal matters, with Daniel, a kind of Antonio Banderas type, and the good and patient doctor. Our discussion veered into polygamy and polyandry and the special advantages and pitfalls of each. We speculated about the lack of traditional morality with Mastretta's characters, but were brought back to earth with cogent references to Rousseau's "Emile", the belief in a state of nature and natural law, as well as the history of anti-clerical Liberalism. Fluffy though it was, silly to an extreme, we were able to conclude that "Lovesick" is an example of the reason why young gentlemen and gentlewomen of the past were forbidden to read novels, as they are often repositories of sinfulness and lewd activities.

Kevin Holdsworth, 4-6-04

Although everyone in the Sundance discussion group found Angeles Mastretta's *Lovesick* an easy read, no one intends ever to read it again. One member's choice of adjective was "vapid," and no one argued the point.

The ease with which Emilia leaps not just from lover to lover, but from country to country, from language to language, from home schooling to elite American college (at a time when even American women wouldn't have found easy acceptance) seems completely improbable. Other characters appear and disappear without literary

reason, as do entire biographies. The Mexican Revolution itself gets thorough coverage, to the author's credit.

Taken as a whole, however, *Lovesick* emerges as a soap opera, interesting mostly as a Mexican representative of a familiar genre.

Carol Jones, March 2004

Twelve persons attended the discussion on "Lovesick", enjoying it more than most of the others in the series (which have all been pretty positive reads). We always jump right in with a general "Like-Dislike" discussion of the reading experience. "Likes" included the strength of the women, and we discussed women during and after Revolution with Mastretta's words about freedom in mind. We felt that women in America went through this process in WW II, and one woman stated that she didn't believe that a woman could ever truly go back to the way she was before in the home. Another said that this goes on today in military homes when the husband is deployed for a long time. Both man and woman are changed.

Some found it hard to find depth in the characters, and then others strongly disagreed. They saw the "Latin passion" as depth. It was felt that the difference in cultures played a part in our views. It was also annoying to some that there were characters that appeared (such as Daniel's brother), started a possible plot line, and then were never heard from again. The group agreed that this was more like life than like most novels. This was also seen by some in the ending of the book.

A few wanted Emilia to "make a decision, a choice" and thought that she showed immaturity. Others felt that she showed great maturity in understanding that she could have two great loves. We discussed "self-centered" vs. "self-aware" - seeing even in the Bible that we must "love our neighbors as ourselves" or we cannot love at all. All agreed that Daniel did not grow, but remained "stuck" in his idealistic and adventurous sense of "War". Some wondered what he did in all that time spent away from Emilia, and wondered that she didn't seem to need to know. Doctor Zavalza was seen as very mature in his acceptance of the situation. Some identified more with the parents than other characters. The men were seen as wonderfully supportive, and others, including our men, pointed out that they had no choice! All disliked the Title "Lovesick" - but that is what the Spanish is as well. Maybe there is a different, subtle cultural meaning there. The 1997 interview of Mastretta mentioned by the Meeteetse scholar was a wonderful help. I printed it out and made a numbered list of paragraphs and the subject of each so that when something came up I could say "do you want to hear what Mastretta said about that?" The long explanation close to the end about how she conceived the book and grew characters, as she researched facts they led her to, was particularly enjoyed by the group. I also brought along profiles of Porfirio Diaz and Francisco Madero, but we never got into politics! The fascinating event of the evening was when Jim asked what we thought of the Rousseau connection. We could remember that the name was mentioned when Diego named his

daughter, Emilia, but it never came up again. Some, including me, had thought that it was the artist, Henri, but Jim proceeded to remind us about the philosopher, Jean-Jacques, and the novel he wrote called "Emile", 1762, on the raising and education of a "natural" child. It is called "the most significant book on education since Plato's Republic". Rousseau was also greatly involved in the idea and carrying out of Revolutions. Of course Diego would know of him. And Emilia in her "perfection" and acceptance of her natural self in her love choices, had grown into Rousseau's child/woman. It left us much to think about. (I since have looked up Rousseau and fallen in love with quotes from his work. www.infed.org/thinkers/et-rous.htm is a great site - and ties his philosophy into the lifestyle of the family in our novel. His own life almost seems like the intelligence and illness seen recently in the film "A Brilliant Mind") Religion was different in this book, more back to Nature with no principles", no dogma (Rousseau!). Catholicism was dismissed in the possible Bishop's visit. But that christian God existed along with the others, and we all loved the repeated family line about "which god...?" Milagros was seen as a goddess figure - and she was a favorite character. All found the book poetic and full of visual descriptions, almost like viewing a film (a good chance to mention our next book, "Like Water for Chocolate", which was first conceived as a screenplay. We will watch for comparisons). Mastretta's work has been considered for films, but I hadn't followed up to see if they were done and are available. We are going to meet a week before our next book and view the film "Tortilla Soup" together, with Mexican refreshments (and popcorn). A light, but realistic and contemporary, look at a Mexican family. "Frida" came up, and the real woman/artist, known now from the movie, was compared to both Milagros and Emilia. That led us into "casting" Lovesick as a movie - Tom Cruise as Daniel, maybe Brad Pitt - JayLo, no; Penelope Cruz, maybe; ah but Salma Hayek, who played Frida, yes, as Emilia. Perhaps Queen Latifa as Milagros?; and Olympia Dukaukis as Josefa seemed right; and Diego, dark and Hispanic for sure, we couldn't remember actor's names, just faces. We discovered that casting is a hard job! Sorry to go on so long (and there was more!) - it helps me enjoy the evening all over again. What a good series of books, and wonderful readers!

Mary Ellen Honsaker, Jan. 2004

We talked about the novel Lovesick by coming in the back door, so to speak. The group got a slow start as we waited for participants to arrive, so we filled some time with talking about individual experiences of Mexico and Mexican American/Anglo life. Really, it was even more fascinating than the book itself to hear about life in the New Mexico of the 1940s and 1950, compared to life there today. Eventually, we tied these ideas back to the book, and talked about the various Mexican cultures represented in this and other novels in the series. I think we all got a better grip about the causes and events of the Revolution from reading this book. We also talked about how it'd be to live life with two men madly in love with us! (This was a group of all women.) One of the most interesting avenues of discovery was the notion of how society valorizes the

deeds of men in times of war at the expense of acknowledging the roles of women. Both this novel, and Like Water for Chocolate, do a good job of addressing that discrepancy, in our view. We compared the political and cultural implications of places such as Mexico with places such as Iraq. Even though men still have most of the power and are in charge of the "big doin's" in Mexico, women have a very important and strong role to play in the society. Our impression of life in Iraq is that few women have important behind the scenes roles to play in the culture. We wondered if the conflicts there are in part due to the shortage of women's voices and influence in the public sphere.

Julianne M. Couch, Jan. 2004

Everyone agreed that this was the weakest book in the series Distant Neighbors. To decide why, we made comparisons to melodrama, soap opera, and Danielle Steel's trashy romance. Lovesick was the thickest book but the biggest piece of fluff. No one liked or sympathized with the main character, Emilia, claiming she was too perfect—the perfect doctor, the perfect lover, the perfect student, daughter, colleague, you name it, and besides all that, she can drink the men under the table and really decorate a room. Mastretta's excuse was merely to say, "Yes, she is too perfect because she's a dream." Most came to the book expecting to like it and did like the beginning, but it did not hold their interest. All felt that Mastretta never let Emilia grow up and never created a real woman who could maintain our curiosity or interest. The book's redeeming characteristic was detailed information about the Mexican Revolution.

The book was stylistically weak. Some of the worst examples of style: "Two tears like enigmas trickled down her scrubbed face" (311). "Emilia licked the two salty drops that ran down her face from dark eyes..." (298). "Josefa Veytia nodded, and two large tears trickled down her face" (182). "Just from feeling him close, Emilia let two tears typical of her Sauri blood fall that her Veytia blood hated with all her heart" (80). [So it's hereditary, is it? Too bad.] "Josefa drowned in the salt of two enormous tears" (36).

Mastretta also creates some bad metaphors and similes. "She, too, was terrified by the war, the ripped feather pillow of their democratic dreams" (205). Dr. Cuenca had come upstairs behind her, as valiant and noble as a fine wine" (182). "Your eyes are like a celebration" (79).

The fact that all the men seemed to be prisoners of their love for one woman was a bit unrealistic, at least judging from our experiences with men. "He met, once and for all time, the eyes of Josefa Veytia" (7). "The poet Rivadeneira, a man with the features of a finely bred animal, a prisoner of his love for Milagros Veytia" (28). We objected to Emilia's getting both guys in the end and their both tolerating it. We were bothered by the inclusion of an uncanny skill at interior decorating that both Milagros and Emilia displayed (18, 292), and the emphasis on people being beautifully dressed. "Her richly embroidered

elegance seemed to calm even Senor Garcia" (97). "The poet Rivadeneira always dressed like an elegant Frenchman in suits cut in Mexico City by a very exacting tailor on Alcalceria. His shirts were from Levy and Martin, and they all bore a small, intricately initialed monogram over the heart" (138).

Some thought that several of the characters did not have any purpose in the novel, for instance, Sol and Salvador. It seems like they might have become a subplot, but it never materialized. All in all, we agreed with critic George R. McMurray writing in *World Literature Today*: "It should appeal to the unsophisticated reader who enjoys a good plot sprinkled with action and replete with dialogue."

Karen Love

After a brief background on the author, we recapped the book - a wonderful story of a family during a critical time in Mexican history. Our group felt the characters were very well developed - which resulted in a lot of discussion about them - young, old, male, female, professional, non-professional, etc. Through the strong characters one also was drawn to a deeper appreciation of the Revolution, something not accomplished in other books in the series

Ann Noble 02-03

This book was a winner: members liked its action, romance, lack of magical realism and lack of spiritual matters. They enjoyed the characters and appreciated that this book (in contrast with the others) had some "good men" in it (note: all the group members present were female). They wondered how Emilia could captivate so many men, and they were impressed with the constancy of the men (although I'm not sure I would use the word "constancy" for Daniel). We talked about the strength of the women in the book and how less suppressed they are than the women in the books previously read (acknowledging, however, that the poor were still very suppressed). Participants said the revolution was more real in this book because they were brought into scenes. This led us into a general discussion of war and politics and how neither seems to solve problems. We also discussed how religion had little influence in the story of this book.

--Maggie Garner 0203

The group was a bit underwhelmed by this book, it seemed. We talked in general terms about the characters, their actions, the plot of the novel, and the revolution itself which the book did not present in a "realistic" way. We considered what effect the non-realistic style had on us as readers, and what the author wanted to convey through the style she chose. We talked about "women's writing" as a genre that concerns itself less with the grand events of a time and more with the everyday experiences of ordinary life. Some admired Emilia's practice of medicine

but felt she went through life, and the revolution, in a detached, "touristy" sort of way. Many enjoyed the story of the parents, the aunt, and the community better than the story of Emilia and Daniel. I found two good resources I'd like to pass on to future discussion leaders:

The Mexican Revolution in Puebla, 1908-1913, by David G. LaFrance, SR Imprint Books, 1989

Villa and Zapata: A Biography of the Mexican Revolution, by Frank McLynn, Jonathan Cape, 2000

Julianne Couch

I began with excerpts from an interview with the author in 1997 in which she discusses a wide range of topics. Asked if she is a feminist, Mastretta answered that she is if that means equal opportunities for women and men. She admits that Josefa and Milagros are based loosely on family, as is Diego. The fact that the Mexican Revolution interests foreign readers amazes her. And finally she talked at length about her writing style; she inhabits the characters and does both plot writing and research (this book required a lot) at the same time. By this time the group was ready to jump into the book. We looked at the strong women in *LOVESICK*, comparing them to the less well defined men (with the exception of Diego). A few participants didn't find Emilia realistic; she was too perfect and spoiled as she allowed everyone to do for her. We spent a great deal of time on medicine (and the compassion shown by practitioners) and Emilia's freedom during this period of Mexican history. As a group it was felt that the history was confusing and took a back seat to the love story. At this point I spent a good 20 minutes on the history of the time. Other comments of note: what is the meaning of the title (was Emilia sick with love, dominated by love), several felt that *Lovesick* is no *Gone with the Wind* (Scarlet suffers, Emilia never does), why do some revolutions work and some don't, what is the role of the middle class in inciting a revolt, and, of course, what is the future of Mexico. We ended by drawing some comparisons to our first read, *The Nine Guardians*. Most felt that *Guardians* was a more powerful book in depicting the hardships of both peasants and landowners as a result of government edicts. We are greatly enjoying the series, and when I commented that I now find myself paying more attention to news from and about Mexico, several in the group agreed.

Barbara Gose

Another good discussion from the crew in Pinedale. We discussed the lyrical language *Lovesick* is written with, which brought up questions about the novel's translation. The readers enjoyed the love story, but wanted more "facts" and historical background about the revolution. Native readers, we decided, would have been more equipped with this information. We discussed symbol in the novel and the motif of birds. Mastretta's writing is spirited and lyrical and this is a book, I think, that should be enjoyed for that in itself. I'm becoming aware that I

need to bring in a Mexican Revolutionist Big Gun, so am in search of a Mexican-history scholar that I may drag into the our next meeting for a minicourse on Mexico's last 150 years.

-Jon Billman

The Meeteetse discussion group enjoyed Angeles Mastretta's *Lovesick* when we met on 09Sep02. Since this was the first of several novels we would discuss that involved the Mexican Revolution, we spent some time pouring over maps and discussing early 20th c. Mexican history.

I recommend a wonderful web site called Mexico: From Empire to Revolution (<http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/digital/mexico/> supported by the J. Paul Getty Trust). It's a good source for narrative, analysis, and photographs. I also brought some pictures I'd printed from *The South Texas Border, 1900-1920: Photographs from the Robert Runyon Collection at the University of Texas at Austin* (<http://runyon.lib.utexas.edu/>). Through these pictures, we could outline nearly all the major events of the book and identify the historical places and figures.

I also brought along a large map of Mexico and handed out a time line of the Mexican Revolution from Moss, Joyce, and Lorraine Valestuk. *Latin American Literature and Its Times. Vol. 1 of World Literature and Its Times.* Detroit: Gale, 1999. xxvii-xxviii.

These resources helped locate us in another culture, but the heart of the evening was discussing the female characters and events of *Lovesick*. In an article by Barbara Mujica (<http://www.lasmujeres.com/angelesmastretta/women.shtml>), Mastretta is quoted as saying,

"I think that the Mexican Revolution is a period that initiated things, I [sic] ideas," says Mexico's best-selling author Angeles Mastretta. "All revolutions do that. That's why people make revolutions, to I change things. Lots of times revolutions change very little. But during a revolutionary period, people dare incredible things. They enjoy an enormous amount of freedom. I can tell you that there's no way that during the forties and fifties Mexican women had as much freedom as during the twenties. Because when a war is going on, people don't care who you make love with, if you get married or you don't, if you're living with someone with or without papers. Those things become absolutely secondary. The most important thing is life."

Most of our discussion examined this idea as we talked about women in society, women in Mexican culture, women during revolutionary times, women and careers, and women's role models. Our discussion split along two lines: admiration and enjoyment of the characters and plot devices, and an unwillingness to suspend disbelief at what we were reading. But generally, participants enjoyed Mastretta's mixture of historical realism with melodrama.

Deborah Spangler Koelling

Lusk: The discussion's main theme was the book's love relationships, and their background in Mexican history. We discussed the parallel between the behaviors of Daniel and Emilia and the Revolution. I had wondered if there was an (unintentional?) allegorical motif to the book, so the consideration of this idea was interesting. Daniel's behavior was compared to the almost addictive nature of the progression of the Revolution, from the initial armed rebellions around relatively well-defined ideals to the more chaotic bloodletting as it continued. Emilia's infatuation with Daniel was compared to the fascination and passion of the Mexican populace with the ideals and subsequent violence of the Revolution. Zavalza could be the more stable and mature(?) aspect of the country during this period in its history. An allegorical motif was a fruitful theme with which to discuss the values and behaviors of the book's principal characters. The discussion ended with a humorous debate as to the identity of the actual father(s?) of Emilia's children.

--Bob Brown

Worland: After a short introduction of Mastretta's works, especially *COLORFUL BIRD*, a collection of her poetry, and *TEAR THIS HEART OUT*, a novel, we delved into "the best historical novel I have ever read," as declared by one regular reader who confessed that he really finds novel-reading a chore. He, along with others, agreed that the blend of various late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century histories--medical education and care, pharmacology, politics, ongoing revolutions, and Mexico's instability--and Emilia's torrid love story resulted in an excellent novel. Emilia's complex life between two lovers and the tremendous love and admiration she held for her father provides enjoyable reading. The final analysis seems to prove that love and war seldom end neatly.

--Jim Fassler

Hectic Ethics

Only five people gathered in Powell on Monday, April 28 to discuss Francisco Hinojosa's short story collection *Hectic Ethics*.

I started the discussion by suggesting that we situate the stories in the tradition of postmodern literature, and we briefly discussed similarities between Hinojosa's book and Toscana's *Tula Station*, which we'd talked about two months ago. We also briefly discussed the book as satire and not something to be taken with total seriousness.

I also said that I understood the book a bit better once I determined a significance behind the order of the stories. The first story, about an artist who sets out to paint something objectively beautiful but ends up painting rotten produce and commercializing his "art," provides an interesting preface for the stories that follow. While some

readers found *Hectic Ethics* to be as pretentious as the narrator of that first story, others decided the book as a whole was satirizing pretentiousness.

The book then moves from a story about violent children to one about violent adults. The story “the creation” ends with the idea of “self-determination” and is followed by two stories whose narrators seem to utterly lack self-determination. The final story focuses on “two hollow human beings” whose physical deterioration reflects their ethical and spiritual void and that of all the characters in the book. I asked if there was anything significant or even hopeful about the final story ending with reincarnation, but the other participants all seemed to agree that the book left them with a rather hopeless vision of the world.

When the conversation began to slow down, I pulled out a discussion question borrowed from Bob Brown (I’ll quote it here):

You are the humanities scholar selected to participate in putting together this series, *Distant Neighbors*. You are determined to have *Hectic Ethics* included. What arguments will you use to convince the other two members of the committee...?

We struggled a bit with the answer to this. We decided that the book may have been thrown in to “shake things up a bit.” As readers in rural Wyoming, we agreed that these tales of amoral, violent, modern urban life feel very “distant” from us, and that there may be value just in reading about a life that seems so foreign.

This led naturally to a discussion of how *Hectic Ethics* fits into the series as a whole. Throughout our talk, group members had expressed confusion about what was “Mexican” about Hinojosa’s book. I pointed out that corruption, war, and political instability are present in the background of many of the stories, just as these were themes in the other books we’d read. We also discussed the prominent role of Catholicism in Mexican culture and, thus, in Mexican literature. We decided that all the books we’d read also dealt with “the male ego” (I think that’s how one participant put it).

I will be totally honest: I did not particularly like this book, and it was my impression that no one else who came to the discussion had liked it much. However, this group of readers is wonderful because they don’t read literature simply for entertainment or even enjoyment—they read to expose themselves to new ideas and new experiences, and one thing we could all agree on was that reading *Hectic Ethics* was a new and mind-opening experience. It made us uncomfortable, but I think we at least came to an understanding of how valuable and important that discomfort can be.

Jennifer Sheridan

I began the discussion with some background about Hinojosa; I particularly reflected on his status as a children’s author. We delved into the stories and the discussion didn’t necessarily follow a logical path. I shared a brief description of Kant’s categorical imperative, which is his basis for ethical behavior. We discussed why the

editor chose these eight stories from three collections. The connection was style, first person, and life span. Some felt these stories could be a legacy from the Mexican Revolution. One participant claimed “the author must be on drugs”, which received a hearty laugh from everyone. Some participants did not think these stories were hilarious as suggested on the book’s cover, whereas others found a dark, sardonic humor in the selections. We also compared these stories to *Like Water For Chocolate* and determined that Hinojosa may have invoked magical realism as well. Participants thought the subjects chosen by Hinojosa were quite weighty and that his creative style made them reflect on the current times. A participant helped close the night with a performance of a Mexican song. I admit this was the most difficult series I have led because of my lack of familiarity with Mexican literature and Mexican history. I appreciated my group who often led me through this series.

Tammy Frankland, Casper

Although the discussion leader was prepared to spend the evening listing the sixteen reasons why he didn’t like this annoying little book, group members rallied to point out some instances of irony and humor to express gratitude that *Hectic Ethics* wasn’t any longer. The first story, clearly based on the rock star painter, Basquait, received some kudos for being an interesting recreation of the cultural swamp of the 80s art scene in NYC, and “damn kids,” also clearly based on the film, “Kids” was seen as somewhat harrowing. Fortunately, our discussion soon moved on to the more promising ground of prejudice and ethnicity. We decided that all the books in the series shared concerns with religion or folk faith versus rationalism, a tendency toward surrealism, and dealt with issues of tradition versus modernity.

Kevin Holdsworth, 4-28-04

Group reaction to *Hectic Ethics* was strong and mixed. Like most satire, *Ethics* is frequently painful to read. Most of the group understood its humor, but some felt that the humor did little to mitigate the discomfort of the social commentary. As previous books in the series deal with the concept of how a mindless love of violence is an unfortunate accompaniment to an ideals-based revolution, this one shows a continuing brutality in modern culture – and not just Mexican culture. While American literature focuses on romantic love, this series seems to indicate that Mexican literature’s focus is on passion, displayed in *Ethics* as something that leaves humans literally empty shells. The literary, creative cycles apparent in *Tula Station* are reiterated in that same short story. And the machismo that prevents many women depicted in this series from being more than witless cheerleaders for Mexico’s men is displayed in *Ethics* through the medium of a one-sided “conversation.” An excellent wrap-up for the series, *Ethics* demonstrates the modern expression of Mexican revolutionary and literary life.

Carol Jones, 3-18-04

Twelve participants gathered to discuss this, the last book in our series. "Hectic Ethics" probably brought out the strongest feelings of all the books we read. We were told that Ethos in Greek meant "habit". Hectic Habits made more sense to this gentleman. The collection of stories had reminded me of stepping into a weird amusement park. Each story was a different kind of ride. The momentum of the writing and creativity kept one swept up on them all until each ride halted. But on disembarking feelings differed. There were those who loved the whole book and found it the most interesting and creative of the series, while others were very put off by the "strangeness" and pushed themselves to finish. But everyone had finished the book (and we had messages from several that could not be there about their opinions!) By the end of the evening almost everyone agreed that they were glad to have been stretched and challenged in this way.

I began with a little of the life of Hinojosa, nicknamed the "Mexican Brother Grimm". We could see echoes of his children's writing (first person is common) and YA audience appeal in these stories. Later in the Discussion someone wondered what teens might think of these stories and I could pull out a series of "customer reviews" from Amazon.com, (especially one titled "Wonga! This dude rocks!"), all by teens. We felt they somehow seemed more attuned to these "rides".

Opening up the discussion as to what stories spoke to the participants there were varied answers. The Opening one concerning the Artist and the Decaying Papaya was enjoyed by most for its dark humor and irony. A professional realistic artist felt it spoke to her thoughts on the "NY" modern art scene perfectly. One member noted that the capitalization of nouns came from Greek and German writings on Rationalism. Plato's metaphysics and Kant were discussed. It was noted that Plato's concept of Beauty was seen by St. Paul as God being a part of everything.

We jumped to the "broken down life of a dead man". Someone noted that they wondered if they could "break down" their life into a numbered sequence. It made it rational, flat, and yet also unpredictable. Surrealism, and stream-of-consciousness were also recognized in his style.

Along with modern art, atonal music was discussed. In art Georgia O'Keefe was brought up. She wished, in her abstract style, for the viewer to add the meaning. She sometimes did things upside down. Experiences with Art Installations were shared. I told of singing Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms with Robert Shaw and the Pittsburgh Symphony. Shaw had the choir meet the night before the performance because we were just singing "perfect notes". He compared modern music to a clown's makeup, distilling human emotions. It transformed that concert for us, and the piece for me forever. Easy listening music carries you along. You must take charge of the journey in dissonance. There are no easy resolutions. And we seek resolution in art because life does not often give it to us. We decided that the viewer-performer-reader, has a

responsibility to find the meaning in these modern arts. It was felt that the artists don't care as long as they get it right for themselves. It was also felt that we really don't have to know what it all means. But something is missed if you never listen to modern composers, or examine a Jackson Pollack painting. (Or read this book!)

"Damn kids" was powerful for most. One felt that all Middle School teachers should be required to read it. We discussed the evolution of children into what was "expected" of them. The rational, calm, almost sleepy tone of the storytelling by the boy was frightening, and somehow also understandable. It evoked comparison to the TV show "the Sopranos" about the Mafia for one reader. "The war, this time, was getting serious" brought strong discussion of the absurdity of humanity engaging in war of any kind. The significance of "Bolero" being played was seen to be the repetitive phrase and escalating volume mirroring the actions and tension of war. In "the creation" our ordained deacon found nothing offensive, but felt that God would chuckle. It was one to not take seriously. One person was brought back to reality in all the stories every time an animal was abused or discounted, due to her experiences of seeing companion animals abandoned on the streets in Mexico. Once again, different cultures.

The critique at http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/vol18/issue22/books_VSBR.html by David Garza was really helpful with quotes to insert in discussions as well as quotes to promote discussion. Our group did not agree that magical realism fit Hinojosa, nor was he a minimalist. The thought that each story was a "novel in story clothing" worked well for most. Our resident philosopher felt that Hinojosa's wellspring is rationality. One last comment that came out was "Thank God the stories were short!" (Sort of how I feel at the end of a roller coaster ride as I get older!).

This group has been a delight!

Mary Ellen Honsaker, 3-9-04

Our group is shrinking but not our interest in the books in this series. I'd given the group some suggestions about how to approach Hectic Ethics at the end of our last session. I prompted them to think of the collection as a novel, with a beginning, middle and end. I found that approach helped me get a sense of the world view of self-determination and Kant's categorical imperative discussed in the book. Group members said it helped them to think in that way as they read. They were better able to appreciate the dark humor and the sense of ironic detachment present in the stories and so well described by other scholars in previous posts. As usual, all were in agreement that talking through the book helped us understand it better, and more importantly, understand the thematic issues behind the book.

Julianne Couch

Everyone liked the book; several found it humorous and outlined some of the characteristics of modernist and post-modernist fiction. We discussed how features of distance, irony, lack of inherent meaning are to be found in modern life. The theme of random violence and situational ethics piqued interest as did the themes of human longing and angst behind the undifferentiated recounting of events. We contrasted that vision with the more grounded (traditional?) perspective of books like *Lovesick* or *The Nine Guardians*. People observed the almost mechanical presentation of sexual passion, in contrast to its animal power in earlier books. For several, this was clearly the least "Mexican" book, which seemed to be related to the rootless and cosmopolitan nature of modern life. We returned to the war in Iraq and the pain and uses of violence in human existence.

Stephen Lottridge 02-03

An article in *The New York Times* (page three) Sunday, April 6, 2003, describes the new generation of novelists in Colombia. The content pertains to the type of book *Hectic Ethics* is and for which it is maligned by many of our readers. The article talks about a new generation of urban writers who "are publishing straightforward, darkly realistic urban novels."

Spring Break week in Pinedale, so all participants with kids were in warmer places. Had a lot of fun discussing *Hectic Ethics*. We met at the Fremont Peak Restaurant, so discussion oscillated between the book, war, and food, but it all seemed to make sense. Those who professed a dislike for postmodern literature, and the book, left with at least an appreciation for it. "Damn Kids" seemed to be the story that reverberated most with everyone. This led to a discussion of *A Clockwork Orange* and public education!

Jon Billman

To start Meeteetse's discussion of Francisco Hinojosa's *Hectic Ethics* (10Feb03) I read from the transcript of an *All Things Considered* book review by Alan Cheuse in 1998:

... These are some of the clever and charming stories that Francisco Hinojosa presents in his North American debut collection—stories culled from three books of his in Spanish. You can probably tell just from these little summaries that he's a rather whimsical and at the same time cunning writer, with roots in 20th century Spanish short fiction, particularly Borges and Julio Cortazar and ties to the short fiction of the Italian writer Italo Calvino and the work of our own Donald Barthelme.

The group could accept "clever," "whimsical," and "cunning," but balked at "charming." In fact, one participant admitted she chose not to finish the book because of its grotesqueries and another skimmed to get through the text. When I told folks that Hinojosa is an acclaimed author of children's books, they agreed they could detect a shared sensibility with Roald Dahl. (Dahl started his career with short stories for adults, stories with

macabre details and unexpected twists at the end—sound familiar?)

Despite participants' admiration for individual stories in the collection and for Hinojosa's dark, sarcastic humor, everyone had particular stories that they just couldn't stomach . . . stories with details beyond the pale.

My thanks to Barbara Gose for the idea of drawing analogies between this book and modern art—it was an exercise that resonated with the group. I also made good use of Karen Love's dichotomies: ". . . the rural vs. urban settings, the deep feelings vs. the lack of feeling, the violence of men involved in political struggles vs. the purposeless violence of individuals against individuals, a cultural nostalgia vs. cultural horror and satire, distinctly Mexican literature vs. literature of the predicament of modern society."

Cheuse, Alan. "Hectic Ethics." Rev. *All Things Considered*. Host Robert Siegel. Nat'l Public Radio. 31 Dec. 1998. 3 Feb. 2003
<<http://discover.npr.org/features/feature.jhtml?wflid=1048186>>.

When we began the discussion, all group members said the book was a piece of trash. But at the end, they said they enjoyed discussing the book and saw some good points in it.

We looked at humor in the book. "Creation" was a favorite. When we discussed the author's intent, it helped to compare the writing to contemporary art. We agreed that the stories more portray contemporary life than Mexican life; that is, the stories could be told by a city dweller most anywhere. After we discussed most of the stories, we talked about the author's view of life and agreed that he saw life without meaning.

At first, participants thought the book didn't fit into the Mexican series at all, but then they saw that it had elements that could be compared with other books in the series. For example, warfare was part of all the books and certainly other common themes—the relationship of the genders, revenge, love.

Maggie Garner 02-03

I was thankful for the comments from other leaders on this book. I wasn't successful in turning up a lot of research material for the author or book, so depended a lot on others' comments.

Our discussion was great! Like other groups – several liked the book while others disliked the book, but all like the discussion. I tried to go through each story individually (having made lots of notes for this book) but only got half way through. The group jumped around too much. Several times I tried to extract "higher purposes in his mad writing" – as was said – which led to lots of disagreement and lots of ideas.

This led into a discussion about the series in general, which overall everyone has enjoyed. I was also asked

how the books were chosen and was thankful for having read this discussion in the past on "book talk" list serve. Thanks.

Ann Noble 02-03

Never having lead a discussion of a story collection, I spent time planning how to organize a discussion of Hectic Ethics. I presented the notion that we might take the stories one at a time, then look at the work as a whole, to which everyone agreed. Then we plunged in willy-nilly. Readers were mixed in their reactions to the book, with one person expressing major anger - the book was trash, had no place in a WCH series. We tried to see how the stories expressed a part of Hinojosa's world view, and what that view was. A few lines in the story about God's creation of the world, at the very end, describe the world created by God as one where creatures are self directed, which seemed to supply a clue to the rest of the stories. I found that reading the book through the first time was to read a series of short stories. To read it a second time was to read it holistically, discovering a story arc, narrative voice, and world view. The first story established the tone and the relationship between artist, art, and audience. The last story blurred the lines between life and death and, when taken as part of the whole, was incredibly life affirming.

- Julianne Couch 02-03

I had no idea how to prepare to discuss this book of post modern (one of our participants shared her findings on what this term means) short stories. I read them twice, searched for reviews (very few), thought about how this book pertained to the Mexico series, and "padded" my presentation with comments about Sandra Cisneros' new novel, on the history and role of literature in Mexico (thanks to the book, *Distant Neighbors*) and found and made notes on the Chronicle article on translators. As it turned out, I should never have doubted this Lander group's ability to read and think about what they've read. Most people didn't much like the stories, thinking them too weird and bizarre. One participant loved the book and came prepared to win the rest of us over, at least to the extent that the book had merit. So in the midst of cross talking, I put my prepared remarks on hold and we jumped into a discussion of the book. I eventually made my comments, as they seemed appropriate, but this was definitely the readers leading the scholar! Here, in no particular order, is a summary of topics we discussed. The stories are satirical: what is satire? We differed on meaning of the term. There are multiple levels of meaning in the stories. The stories present life without feeling in an urban environment (mainly Mexico City). This enriches the series in that with our first two books we have viewed peasant/rural/idealized life of revolutionary Mexico. Most participants agreed that the stories could have been written by a New Yorker or a resident of Paris just as easily. In fact, one woman stated that she believed the first story sounded like it was right out of *The New Yorker*. We spent a good amount of time on the "Kant" story,

debating the meaning of the title. We split on this; some readers believed that the narrator was urging his wife to think, rather than feel, with others saying he was simply pretentious and was using every philosopher he'd ever heard of in order to make his points. The last story in the book was compared by one reader to a Salvador Dali painting! In the end, our lone proponent of the book had certainly convinced the rest of us that the stories were worth reading, that the book enriched our understanding of Mexico, and that the value of book discussion with others is what we learn when we share. Is there any doubt why I love this group and why Riverton people drive to Lander with me occasionally to participate?

Barbara Gose

We had an excellent discussion of this very unusual book. As other discussion leaders have noted, people either loved it or hated it. I gave a little background information about Hinojosa himself, his awards, his other books, and his reputation as the Brother Grimm of Mexico based on the fairy tales he writes. Among our group was an artist who made us see clear connections to modern art, and that connection guided our conversation and our analysis for the first part of the discussion. We noted that if *Like Water for Chocolate* was the Diego Rivera of Mexican literature, *Hectic Ethics* is the Salvador Dali or the Pablo Picasso. This author is not trying to for representational art; he is trying to get us to see life from unsettling perspectives that are not necessarily pleasant or entertaining. But then we wondered what the purpose of literature is—to give us pleasure and entertainment or the challenge our thinking. I recall the wonderful quote of Franz Kafka prominently displayed in our college library: "A book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us. Not the Band-Aid, not the comforter, not the down quilt." We also made some comparisons with the other books we have read in this series: the rural vs. urban settings, the deep feelings vs. the lack of feeling, the violence of men involved in political struggles vs. the purposeless violence of individuals against individuals, a cultural nostalgia vs. cultural horror and satire, distinctly Mexican literature vs. literature of the predicament of modern society. Everyone enjoyed the discussion even if they did not "enjoy" the book.

Karen Love

Worland: This selection turned out to be the least favorite of this group, but eight readers came, many to discuss the flaws of this book. First, they didn't find too many references of the Mexican revolution; they couldn't understand the need of the uncontrollable sex and/or violence; and, finally, short stories are not their favorite genre for discussion groups.

I began with a short presentation of the author's method of generating ideas for his works by just sitting around with friends to list the weirdness of people, or what God might think about a variety of things from His point of view, or is any suggested idea as bad as it seems.

We talked about Hinojosa's tendency to drift from the traditional magical realism, apparitions of the Virgin Mary, ghosts, and recipes of Latin American literature. Along with other guerilla writers, he actually attacks these sacred traditions by implying that early Mexican writers are taking themselves and these traditions too seriously.

With the final story in the book does Hinojosa provide a reprieve from senseless and horrible suffering? Does Reincarnation "save" the natives of Mexico City, or is Hinojosa describing Mexico itself?

This discussion was one of the liveliest and most interesting of the session, an excellent salute to our "Distant Neighbors."

--Jim Fassler

Interestingly, those present, usually among the quieter during the Lusk BDG's larger group gatherings, became outspoken and involved during this consideration of Hinojosa's Hectic Ethics. I began by handing out sheets with the following questions:

1. Did any of the stories upset you? Which one the most?
2. Did any of the stories seem relevant to situations in the United States today? Which one(s)?
3. You are the humanities scholar selected to participate in putting together this series, *Distant Neighbors*. You are determined to have Hectic Ethics included. What arguments will you use to convince the other two members of the committee (the WCH Program Director and a WCH Board of Directors member)?
4. Was the book worth a few laughs at any time?

Beyond this, the invaluable notes from others of you who have led discussions of this strange book provided all the additional background ideas I needed. One participant spoke of the relevance of these stories to what we have been learning about Mexican history, most notably the Revolution with its grand ideals and passions and eventual indifferent brutality, contributing to the late 20th Century's Mexican (and American) machismo and Machiavellian behavior. In turn, the book seemed a robust counterpoint to the other books in the series and their magic realism and passions.

As the discussion proceeded, I began to sense more of a linkage between the stories and the collection's title. That is, the ethics in each story seemed to be almost entirely situational (hence, hectic). The *Kant* story, with its reference to Plato and Kant, formed in the demanding and unrelated masculine voice, seemed particularly useful. I suggested that Plato, with his use of Socratic dialogue, superficially suggested relationship in pursuit of truth, while in the background the dialogue controller, i.e. Plato/Socrates, presupposed his own possession of the goal of the dialogue, and hence the expectation of, and insistence on, controlling it. Then, with the speaker

suggesting Kant, it seemed the perfect escalation: It's all right for me to act in the way I choose (however immoral/controlling/ rude), as long as everyone else (the unvoiced other in this story) conforms to more polite and responsive and non-confrontational rules. This seemed to provide a motif that in one way or another ran throughout all the stories.

-Bob Brown

[With apologies to all unless you have read this book in which case you will either grimace while preparing a birthday party under siege or understand.]

1. The Author was Born in 1954 in Mexico City
2. Today there is great rejoicing among the Mexican literati, enhanced by the music of the Mariachi band.
3. Taught a workshop in children's literature for the International Book Board for Young People.
4. What! Save the Children! What can it mean that a man who delights in language at the most absurd edges of violence began by writing books for children! I want to read those books. Before I let my children read them.
5. Considered one of the most important writers of Spanish language literature for children and young adults. Especially damn kids.
6. Three determined and potentially twisted women gathered in the dark of the Parish Hall/Perish Hall? Shortly after Halloween. Shortly before Thanksgiving. There they discussed Hectic Ethics and ate tartar sauce.
7. The tartar sauce was not good and appeared to wriggle, so they packed up and went to the home of the Discussion Leader where they found a high quality Box OO Wine that helped ease them into their discussion of Serious, Literary Matters.
8. Sam Western, Percival Everett, and Miss Rodeo Wyoming joined them.
9. Overarching themes were discussed:
10. Art: Pretentiousness of Pretentiousness, U.S. Name Dropping<why Shirley Temple and not Rosario Castellano? What does it mean? Commodification and surface relationships.
11. Gun violence: Surface relationships of characters to murders they committed related to recent acts of violence in the U.S. where kids filmed rapes and beatings and never called for help. Which is more absurd? His story or our reality?
12. Origin stories: Everybody needs a good origin story. Evolution and self-determination as theology.
13. Every paragraph with its zingers, bizarre lists of details, absurd counterpoints. We read aloud to each other

and laughed like we did when we watched Mr. Bill. In younger days.

14. The twisted ladies played Bolero in order to enter more deeply into the condominium war. One twisted her ankle, writhed in pain, and the other two winked.

15. Of empty picture frames and monologue dialogues they laughed. This writer was so damn clever.

16. When the guineau pig whistled for a carrot, the readers contemplated whether to feed or eat the animal.

17. Darkness fell, the stars sparkled brilliantly, they dispersed, forever changed by Hectic Ethics.

18. On the second day, they began anew, one with toast, one with cereal, and one burned her hand when the Mr. Coffee machine began to melt across the counter. Damn Mr. Coffee

Mary Keller