

# Family Photographs: Relationships Among the Generations

## FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS: RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE GENERATIONS 1

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### Overview

**I**n our society, as in past societies, the drama of family life frequently centers on the paradox that the family serves both as a source of individual identity and values and as a background from which members struggle to differentiate themselves. The writers in this series explore how family history, traditions, and customs are transmitted (and sometimes not transmitted) from parents to children, bringing both continuity and change. They also help us understand the role ethnic heritage plays in shaping relationships among the generations.

*"Past lives live in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest."*  
---- John Edgar Wideman----

Jane Smiley's novellas *Ordinary Love and Good Will* (1989), set in the rural Middle West, explore the complexities of contemporary family life through the eyes of two parents whose efforts to make "good" choices for themselves and their families have had unpredictable results. At a family reunion, the mother in *Ordinary Love* recalls for her children the long-ago affair that ended her relationship with their father and inevitably changed all of their lives. In *Good Will*, a father's attempt to protect his family from the modern world has surprising consequences for his wife and son.

*Bone*, by Fae Myenne Ng (1993), set in San Francisco's Chinatown, portrays an immigrant family whose members straddle the border between the parents' Chinese culture and the values of the contemporary world in which the three Chinese-American daughters live. At the center of the novel is a tragedy that the family seems unable either to live with or to escape. The story is told from the perspective of Leila, the oldest daughter, and focuses on

her conflicting impulses to respect and to separate herself from family traditions and responsibilities, impulses that are intensified by her need to care for her mother and her sometimes estranged stepfather.

*Betsey Brown* (Ntozake Shange, 1985) is set in the black community of St. Louis in 1959, the year that school integration occurred. Through the experiences and perceptions of thirteen-year-old Betsey, Shange draws a complex portrait of an extended black family at a pivotal point in history. Poised between childhood and the adult world, Betsey looks to the future with anticipation, but also with confusion as she weighs the advice and example of the various adults around her--a father who celebrates the family's heritage, a mother who tries to protect Betsey from parts of that heritage, and a rich supporting cast of grandmothers, housekeepers, and family friends.

In *Bless Me, Ultima* (Rudolfo Anaya, 1972), Antonio, a young Chicano boy, tells of growing up in the cross-currents of two families and two cultures in the American Southwest. His community has been profoundly Catholic for generations, but commingling with its liturgical cycle is the natural cycle of life, represented by the curandera Ultima. Ultima lives in Antonio's home and becomes a grandmother figure to him as he navigates the seemingly conflicting traditions that are his heritage. With the curandera's help, Antonio transforms the elements of his world into a unified vision of self and community.

*A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (Michael Dorris, 1984) starts in the present and moves backward in time, telling the story of three generations of Native American women, 15-year-old Rayona, her mother Christine, and the fierce and mysterious Ida, whose secrets, betrayals, and dreams bind the three lives together. The novel centers on Rayona, who, at its outset, works in a state park, on the land her grandmother's generation owned. Like Leila in *Bone*, Rayona struggles to forge a life-style in which traditional ways and changing values can coexist.

In *Montana 1948* (Larry Watson, 1993), a powerful evocation of a small-town summer, the Hayden family confronts a moral dilemma that forces them to reexamine their relationships with each other. Set in the northeastern Montana town of Bentrock, the novel's events are initiated by the revelations of the Hayden's Sioux housekeeper and come to us through the eyes of twelve-year-old David whose understanding of his family and of life is irrevocably altered by them. As the story unravels, David learns that we are sometimes forced to choose between family loyalty and justice.

### Suggested Further Readings

For further exploration of literature about the family, look for these titles at your local library or bookseller. WCH cannot provide these titles for addition or substitution in the above series.

Ana Castillo, *So Far From God*

Kim Chernin, *In My Mother's House*

Carolyn Chute, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*  
Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*  
Ivan Doig, *This House of Sky*  
Arturo Islas, *Migrant Souls*  
Barbara Kingsolver, *Pigs in Heaven*  
Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*  
Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*  
Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*  
Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*  
Wallace Stegner, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*  
Any Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*  
Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*  
Eudora Welty, *Delta Wedding*  
John Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*  
August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*

## General Commentary on the Series

We just received Peter Anderson's final comments on the series he led this past year. His comments on Family Photographs are particularly interesting since he led that series in Dubois in 1996 and Jackson in 1997 and is able to compare the reactions of the two groups. He offers a number of insights into the series as a whole that may be helpful to scholars just beginning those series. He wrote:

". . . I suggested in a thumbnail lecture at the beginning [of each series] that so-called family literature has received a lot of attention as a soft sub-genre in the last decade, and that several "rules" have consequently emerged:

1. Family literature tends to be about identity.
  - a) It explores the sources of identity;
  - b) It compares nature and nurture as roots of identity;
  - c) It works toward revealing the complexity of identity as opposed to 'single-faceted' identity.
2. Family literature tends to be about changing cultural circumstances.
  - a) It describes the roll-over of generations;
  - b) It tries to pinpoint the location of 'self' within the dynamic culture at large.
3. Family literature tends to be about authority.
  - a) It looks closely at who directs families, including the role of gender in determining family authority;
  - b) It explores sources of authority.
  - c) It tries to define authority.

. . . The Dubois group appreciated Yellow Raft the most, as I recall. The Jackson group liked Bone and Betsey Brown. As with the Dubois group, many members commented again and again that these were books that they would never have read had they not been introduced to them in this series, and they were very glad to have encountered these writers.

Both groups intensely disliked but grudgingly admired Jane Smiley's Ordinary Love and Good Will. People just don't seem to like Jane Smiley, although I think Ordinary Love is probably the most purely and technically 'literary' of all these novels. Just goes to show that literary value doesn't warm up cold characters.

Were I to lead this series again, I would zero in on several sharper questions:

1. How does the novel in question 'reposition' the notion of family? In other words, how does the bare structure of the family depicted in the story differ from what the reader expects, or is expected to expect? How are family forces in the story affecting characters in unanticipated ways?
2. How does the story fracture strong stereotypes (unity, support, safety, nurturing, tradition, deep history, sense of place, good behavior patterns) and weak stereotypes (hegemony, determinism, arbitrariness, abuse, guilt, stress, bad behavior patterns) about families? How does it reinforce them?
3. How does the fictional family mesh or fail to mesh with the culture at large?

Although we always got at these issues obliquely, I don't know that we did them justice overall.

. . . One note: Because the books are written by authors positioned within differing American subcultures, discussion group participants spend a lot of time either complimenting the cultures (Hispanic, Native, Chinese, etc. ) or going into detail about how it's impossible to ever truly comprehend someone else's culture. Many of the discussions, both in Dubois and Jackson, turned into referenda on the supposed mysteriousness, beauty, and ultimate comprehensibility of multicultural literature.

I'm not complaining. I think this is a crucial subject for discussion, and I think literature is an ideal point of departure for such discussions. But I would advise group leaders jumping into this series to study up on the criticism and become as facile as possible at handling those inevitable moments when one participant says, "We white people can never really understand Indian literature," and another says, "That comment is fundamentally racist and divisive." That's a philosophical debate which can leave group participants feeling either enlightened and appreciative or confused and discouraged, depending on how it's finessed. In my experience, the group leader can make or break this series with the handling of those arguments.

I'd like to share a paragraph from Ann Noble's final evaluation of the "Family Photographs" series in Big Piney because it raises at least one issue that future groups might wish to explore throughout the series:

[From Anne] "The choice of books was excellent. Some were enjoyed more than others, as to be expected, but overall they worked well together, given their diversity in experiences. They were easy to compare to one another, because they represented the theme well, yet were all

quite different. At the close of our last discussion one member said, 'I never would have read these books, had it not been for this discussion, and I'm glad that I did.' Several members in the group agreed with this statement. There was one comment I feel may be worth passing on, too. It was in reference to why so much of the literature offered in the book discussion, this one as well as ones in the past, is sad. I didn't have an answer, except to say that much of literature in general is sad. Our only male member also commented that the lead male characters in all the books in this series were "very weak." He added that this made it difficult for him to recruit other males to the group."

The comment I'm referring to above is the last one about "weak" male characters in the series. My first response when I read that comment was "Oh, no--the committee who created the series was made up of three women. We thought we providing a variety of views, but maybe we unconsciously slanted our choices in the way suggested." Immediately, though, I began thinking of the books (which I admittedly haven't reread since we created the series several years ago), and said, "Off the top of my head, I'd think the fathers in *Betsey Brown*, *Montana 1948*, and *Bless Me, Ultima* have as much claim to being "strong" parents as many of the mothers in the series."

It's a question worth asking and discussing, anyway?

Judy

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The fifth session of this series, the discussion of *Bone*, was apparently the final straw for many of the participants. Halfway through the evening, they opened up the artillery on me, in a friendly sort of way. One participant started it off, and I was a trifle taken aback to learn that most all of them felt the same. They felt all the books in the family series were depressing, and depicted families in a bad light. They felt exhausted by reading about so-called dysfunctional families. They wished they could have been reading some upbeat affirmations of the health, joy and beauty of family life, and they wondered (they had actually talked about this among themselves at length) if the WCH had a hidden agenda in mind when these books were selected. What that agenda would have been they were unable to specify, but they wondered nevertheless. It wasn't a mean discussion. They just felt a little let down, a little beaten down, even. Right off, I was swamped with compassion for these well-intended and apparently bewildered complainants. I took some time to explain the book selection process and to reassure them that books are selected only for their likelihood to elicit thought-provoking, insight-producing discussions, not to persuade anyone that family life is inherently unhealthy or something. They accepted this, more or less.

Earlier this year, there was some discussion among WCH book discussion leaders about book groups whose sole judgment criterion seems to lie in determining whether or not they "liked" the book in question. I wrote a tediously long epistle to my colleagues concerning that problem, and my approaches to stimulating deeper discussions. Then I found myself sitting with this group in Afton as they

voiced exactly that argument - that books are to be summed up by their visceral "likable-ness." The first thing across my mind was that I had somehow failed this group. I had in four previous sessions (plus the series last year) failed to "teach" them how to dig deeper into novels and find more material to appreciate.

But I quickly got over that and went home just feeling rather irritated with an American educational system which produces self-limiting readers. So at our final meeting, I broached the subject up front. I told the group I took their complaints very seriously, and would forward their remarks concerning how depressing the family-series novels are to the WCH, which I have done. Then I spent considerable time talking about reading. I spoke about how and why I read, about what it means to me, about all the different reasons I have for opening books. In other words, I spoke from the heart. I have a very good rapport with this group, I think, and they trust me and feel comfortable with me, so I was able to wax philosophical and know that they'd understand that that's the real Peter. Put simply, I didn't talk down to them about reading skills, and I don't believe they felt I was doing so, either.

I talked about looking for deep questions buried in fiction (and I went through each of the novels we'd read reiterating core questions and stylistic strengths). I talked about seeking a personal dialogue with a book, no matter how dissociated the reader feels from it. I talked about reading for the pure linguistic qualities of the writing. I talked about reading as culture study, seeking to brush against worlds of human experience other than our own. I talked about how reading can serve many bigger purposes beyond relaying factual advice and making us feel good. I was left with the impression that, in fact, these readers know all these things in a superficial way, they're just not well-practiced at doing them. They liked that I articulated this stuff with passion. They're highly in favor of reading skills which drink deeply of good fiction. But when all's said and done, I don't think they'll get much beyond liking or disliking books. That's the cynical voice within me. There's another voice, also. It cries out that these book discussions do exactly that: They lend new eyes to willing readers. I'm looking forward to reading with this generally enthusiastic group next year. I want to see which of my internal voices is more accurate. I suspect it's the latter.

Peter Anderson

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I wanted to add that I had a similar experience to yours, Peter, in *Big Piney* after our final book discussion in the series of *Family Photographs*. In my final summary to Judy I shared similar thoughts in my group to the collection of books as a whole: they found them overall depressing, dysfunctional families, and particularly weak male characters (though some felt the "weakest" characters were females.) My response was similar to yours. I feel I left the group somewhat uneasy, because on the one hand they truly appreciated having a book discussion group in their isolated community, but on the other hand, many of them didn't feel very good after reading the books. Hmmm.

Ann Noble

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The issue of the books being depressing were part of the discussion on the Pulitzer Prize series when I was in Meeteetse. I thought the books were so well written, it didn't matter. If people want to read to be cheered up...then they don't fully understand the depth of the humanities! Depression is part of life, maybe by reading about it, a person can learn to identify it in themselves or others, and work to improve the situation!

Sarah Lee

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Sarah suggests, in connection with the question of "cheeriness" in literature, that we may have expectations of the books we read other than entertainment That certainly seems to be true when we talk about the issues, values, cultural contexts, etc. that make up a humanities-focused discussion. While we don't necessarily need to focus on "depression," we do need to focus on what "is," on some level. (Don't you think?)

Judy  
WCH

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The Upton group was new this year and the Family Photographs series seemed to work well for it. The books were narratives and their themes were ones familiar to all of us. The overarching questions I tried to keep in front of us were from two sources: Peter Anderson's excellent observations about what he calls the sub-genre of family literature: i.e., it tends to be about identity; it tends to be about the roll-over of generations; it tends to be about authority within the family and who wields it. Another framework we followed was one supplied by group member Sarah Lee, a social scientist who defines family as having "a shared history, a shared future, perhaps a shared biology, and some sort of defined power hierarchy.

The strength of the Family Portraits series is that the themes it explores can be grasped by all readers and applied to their own lives. The only book in the series that really didn't seem to fly with readers was Bone, and it does make me wonder if the old standbys *Woman Warrior* or *Joy Luck Club* might not have been better choices. If Bone is used the scholar must be sure to prepare readers for the non-linear structure of the book, as this seemed to confuse all. The suggestion of another scholar (Norleen?) to reverse the order of reading in the Jane Smiley novellas is a good one too, i.e., read *Good Will* first and then on to *Ordinary Love* (I forgot to suggest this and so had to deal with the non-event many readers felt after reading *Ordinary Love*.)

The room and seating arrangement in Upton was not ideal but all adjusted to it. It reminded me how really effective a circle arrangement is, as opposed to one with corners where many members hide out of view! Two technical things I will do more of and better in future is to give readers a preview of what they will next be reading, and

have myself or a member briefly summarize the story line and main characters at the beginning of each book session. This helps to bring the subject to mind better, I believe.

Based on my own experience with this one group, I feel it's critical for the scholar to bring each session up to speed with some review and reminders of what we're reading for. Most members have exceedingly busy lives, and I, for one, can barely remember what book was read last time unless I'm reminded. I also reflected on my role and whether I should contribute my personal views as a reader. In the several instances where I did, it didn't work too well, as I was generally trying to get the readers to "like" or interpret the book in the way I had (the instances I'm remembering were when I loved the book and the readers didn't--*Bone*, *Ultima*). In one case my intense dislike for the characters in the story (the dad in *Good Will*), caused me to get too personal in my comments, which I wouldn't do again either. The other area I wondered about throughout the series was how much structure to present the group with; how "teacherly" to be. I think I achieved a good balance and helped readers go beyond "personal opinions" by providing some structures from collaborative learning techniques: small group work with reports back to the larger group; mini-lectures; calling on the expertise of group members to make presentations too; some small amount of group debate, etc.

I believe, as many group members do, that the most beneficial result of reading the program's book series is that we are reminded of how much literature and its plots and themes can help us in understanding our own lives. The dialogical approach, where several "texts" talk with each other always seems to shed useful and surprising light on any question poised. By this I mean by reading one text, perhaps reading about that text, hearing other's interpretations of the text, and responding from the text of my own life I can often find plausible answers to the hard questions we must cope with individually and in society right now. So, I guess the BDG program has served to reinforce and remind me that the humanities are really relevant to our lives in the 21st century. Consequently, I give myself permission to do much more reading and writing and pondering and wondering in my own daily life . . . . On a more practical note, I'm still trying to learn how to be a "better reader" in my own projects and how to help group members be better readers too, and want to pursue this subject with other BDG scholars.

Connie Brown (Upton)

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We felt the series a balanced one. Strong mothers and weak, strong fathers and weak, fractured and crazy families, healthy families, poor families and not so poor families, rural, urban, and, above all, multicultural. We were grateful for the opportunity to explore cultures we know so little about.

Barbara Gose

## Bone

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Though troubled and at times confused by the book's structure, the Lusk group slowly began to piece together reflections on grieving, family separations, and the intricacies of multicultural/immigrant family dynamics. For the latter, there was consideration of the difficulty for immigrants themselves, with the rapid Americanization of their U.S. for children. All in this group were children of multigenerational Americans, and the discussion began to draw forth family memories and tales of the immigrant ancestors.

Bob A Brown

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This group found Bone hard to read and rather "pointless". I let them vent and then suggested we take each major complaint to talk about the novel. We began with its structure (which I had tried, but evidently failed, to prepare them for). I read to them from the interview with Ng where she explains what she's doing with the language and what her purpose is in the novel (her "remembering" for the Chinese immigrants). After initial reticence, they were surprisingly willing to delve into the issues in and around the novel. They had all marked passages that alluded to "bones" and were pleased with recognizing different implications of the "bones" symbol. We talked about the difficult history of the Chinese in America. Only two members of the group had been to Chinatown, and both talked about how it is a world of its own and how out of context a "white" person is there. In this area of Northeastern Wyoming,

there are very few Chinese people. However, the group did relate many of the injustices the Chinese faced to that prejudice they are familiar with toward Native Americans. Many are children or grandchildren of immigrants, and could relate to the issues of first and second generation conflicts which were compounded by nature of the vast cultural gap between Asian and American backgrounds. Many also related to the effects of suicide on a family and on a close community. Even though this novel presents some initial difficulties, it lends itself to all the themes we attribute to family literature and it engenders good discussions.

Norleen Healy 0203

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The Web address for NYT Reviews--posted by Rob, I believe--was extremely timely for me. I went there and pulled off a review of Bone, which we were discussing in Douglas last evening. I didn't refer to the review during the discussion, but it did remind me of an angle in the novel that I might not have thought to bring up.

Bob Mittan  
Casper

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I'm curious how the Douglas group responded to Bone. At the time we put the family series together, the obvious choice for an Asian-American perspective on family/generational issues was Amy Tan or Maxine Hong Kingston. We settled on this less familiar work on Diane LeBlanc's recommendation of it. Do you think it generates a good discussion of the topic?

Judy  
WCH

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Both groups--Douglas and Glenrock--had mixed reactions to the book. And both groups had members who compared Ng's work to Tan's: some favorably, some not. But, as usual, several members commented that one reason they do the book discussions is to get exposure to AUTHORS as well as ideas different from their "run-of-the-mill" reading. So, for that reason, I think it was a wise choice.

I also generally favor using an author's first novel in a series like this. They're usually pretty well crafted (all those rejections?) but maybe don't have all the fireworks associated with someone who's been around, established a name, and can afford to be flashy.

Finally, if you read a first novel and there are others later, you have something to look forward to.

I certainly felt that the discussions of BONE were on a par with others in this series. (It's hard to evaluate "good" because that's different for each group.) Many readers, me included, found the ending abrupt and . . . ok, downright annoying on the first read. But several people read it twice (long December break) and found that they liked it a lot better on second reading. I, too, reread opening and closing to refresh my "feel" for it; I agreed: there's something to the way it starts and ends. Families are like that; relationships are like that.

Well, too long a response to such short questions.

bob Mittan

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I can't resist sharing another comment from a scholar's voucher since I think it will be useful to anyone who hasn't discussed Bone yet or who may be leading the Family series next year. Bone is one of those titles that groups have had mixed reactions to. These comments are from Diane Le Blanc, who leads the group in Laramie and was the committee member who suggested Bone for the series.

"Prior to our discussion of Bone, I prefaced the novel with a description of its structure. The backward moving recursive narrative often poses difficulties for readers who are most comfortable or familiar with a linear narrative. My suggestion was that we not be too concerned with time because tense is consistently revealed through Leila's narrative. I chose to focus on this aspect of the novel for

preparation because of the group's initial difficulty with the structure of *Bless Me, Ultima*.

In fact, structure posed little difficulty. (One reader described the narrative as following the motion of a sewing machine, creating unity by pulling one thread backwards into the forward seam. That analogy is perfect!) Most members of the group found the narrative so fluid that they were not concerned with details of time. Like memory, it moves in and out of detail, accumulating images of the past, in the way our minds do. In an interview collected with reviews in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Ng provides insight into her 10-year process of writing *Bone*. Relevant to our discussion was her revelation that, like the bone of the title which Mah picks clean in one scene, she wanted to waste nothing in structure and language. "Sparse?" one reader asked. "What's the difference between 'sparse' and 'underdeveloped'?" Others viewed the language and structure as deliberate and poetic. I cited a critic (CLC) who pointed to specific sentences in the novel that exemplify alliteration and onomatopoeia as evidence that Ng is a poet (The alliteration occurs when the police officer gives her pen, paper, and points to where she must sign to verify Ona's death. The onomatopoeia occurs in her description of the drawers in Mah's baby shop.)

Interestingly, those who liked and disliked the novel were split according to sex; the women were comfortable with the novel and identified as mothers, daughter, and sisters, whereas the men found no central male character to identify with. Mason is a rather shallow Prince Charming, and Leon, with all his idiosyncrasies, is no one that anyone would admit to identifying with. They asked, "Why would anyone want to read this gloom?" We pursued the question of who Ng had in mind as audience. Following this thread, we explored the family relationships in depth, concluding that Ona's suicide is in fact not the sole reason for Leila's confusion and sense of suffocation. In fact, there is no evidence in the novel that Ona's death was suicide. It is "read" as suicide, but no one is certain. More important is the question of what happens to family relationships when children "get out," when they move beyond the family, Chinatown, Chinese heritage through marriage, death, or relocation.

By examining the novel's craft and the impact of culture on generations, we were able to move beyond reading *Bone* as a novel of a sister's grief. All evidence points to its being more than that."

That's rather a long quotation, but, in it, there seem to me to be a lot of good ideas for how to approach a difficult and thought-provoking text. Thanks, Diane.

Judy  
WCH

This discussion was lively enough from the outset, but the room overflowed with negative feelings about this book, and that made for a lame discussion. It always does. I struggled to help them find deeper value in the book, to make them feel they hadn't completely wasted their time

by reading it. With only one exception, the Afton readers detested *Bone*, finding its structure confusing, its plotless approach annoying, its style off-putting. They felt they couldn't understand or even get a clear picture of the characters.

I found this baffling. I think *Bone* is a hip, stylish, powerful story. It doesn't deserve to be loathed. Then the group launched at great length into how all the books in this series were downers. They all seemed to be feeling (and had apparently talked to each other about this over the past couple weeks) that the series depicted an extremely negative view of families. They wished for more upbeat, healthy fictional families. They wondered if the WCH had an agenda in mind when it selected these books, such as the pain and worthlessness of family life, as one person phrased it. We talked about that for half the session. I was taken by surprise by the whole attack and found myself thrusting and parrying on the defensive.

Before we left, we did find a few good issues to discuss in this book, fortunately: the tendency of immigrants to want their children to remain the same; the desire to have your children stay with you forever; the struggle against change; life in a new, strange world.

Peter Anderson

A major problem readers had with *Bone* was its non-linear chronological structure, which confused them and made the story line hard to follow. The story is told by Leila at the point of her marriage, and it recounts her previous family history up to that time, so she begins now and goes back to the beginnings of things. Her primary focus is the recent time and events surrounding her younger sister's suicide. Small incidents trigger large memories in the narrator Leila, and at times I had found it difficult to follow the story line too. The second reason the group seemed uncomfortable with *Bone* was the foreign culture of the first-and-second generation Chinese American family in the story. A third reason, perhaps, was the author's style; no transitions between incidents or paragraphs, matter-of-fact voice, great deal of physical detail, etc.

We began the session with one of two planned "mini-lectures." I had asked group member Sarah Lee, who teaches such subjects for UW distance ed, to present some ideas on family systems theories which might inform our reading of the *Family Portraits* series. She touched on such topics as how families function in a culture, developmental stages, transitions, and life cycles in families. We considered family characteristics too, such as size, cultural background, special challenges such as poverty and disability, etc. We all came to a better understanding of how complicated the concept and reality of "family" really is! The second planned mini-lecture—a bit on Chinese culture—did not take place because I wanted to move on to discussing the specifics of the book. In retrospect, this was a mistake, as the group might have benefited from some background info on Chinese culture.

(Concepts I planned to touch on were animism and polytheism; filial piety or 'ancestor worship;' the

importance of divination and 'luck' within the worldview of Taoist and Confucian culture, etc. I had brought along the I Ching to introduce to them, which might also have been fun.)

We did find much to discuss, however, and by the end of the evening some of the group had begun to revise their assessments of Bone. For instance, we discussed how birth order seems to influence personality development, the code-switching of bilingual people, the relationships within Leila's family: mother to daughters, father to daughters, the three sisters among themselves, etc. We discussed the hows and whys of suicide in the book and in our society. So in the end the book Bone did generate some very good discussion among us.

Connie Brown (Upton group)

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We finished BONE a few months ago, but some of the comments from Connie Brown made me pause. We discussed the book at length, and very few people liked the style of writing. Peter mentioned the length of time it took her to write the book, something like 7 to 10 years.

We discussed cultural differences, and the inability of the first generation to assimilate into the dominate culture. There were several personal recollections of parents wanting their own children to succeed in the settings outside of the home (school, work, etc.). It seems when the children come home the parents then want the children to automatically assume the assigned role within the family structure. As we talked about this facet of the book, we realized most parents are alike.

We also looked at the subject of suicide. How older generations still find a stigma attached to the act. We have in our group two members who are family suicide survivors. They shared their personal struggles which dealt with sorrow, pain, and the feelings of anger, resentment, and the almost never ending need to know why. The act of suicide turns a family inside out and as a result can take years to heal.

Dolores Willis (Afton)

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I began with a brief history of Chinese immigration. I discussed Ng's comments about BONE: why she wrote it, how she saw the book and title, how long it took.

The group loved BONE. We all agreed it is an excellent way to really get a feel for the immigrant experience. Our readers felt Ona's suicide was handled just right; they didn't want to know details. We also discussed the relationship of mother-daughter, sisters, and especially the role of the eldest child. We compared the immigrant experience of the Chinese with European experiences--many stories told here. One reader asked us to consider if the novel would have been different if the gender of the daughter was male. We explored the "paper" experience of the Chinese immigrant, the role of mothers and the work in the garment industry, the metaphor of the ocean,

waves, anchors. We concluded by looking at Chinatown--or any--enclave from the inside out and the outside in. What fun we had! We are enjoying the series.

Barbara Gose (Riverton)

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1. Discuss the following metaphors: bone, sewing and sewing machines, paper, language, blood, food, Salmon Alley
2. Discuss the different ways duty and tradition are explained and acted upon by the various characters.
3. Discuss cultural assimilation, or the lack thereof, among the different characters and between generations.
4. The S words: shame, suicide, sex, silence.
5. How about the business business, its failure and the resulting West Side Story problems?
6. Why is Mason a likeable character?
7. Is Nina a flat or round character? What about Tommie H.?
8. What is the purpose of the Sewing Women?
9. Look at the roles of stepfathers, surrogate fathers.
10. Indirect communication, a cultural difference: the whole wedding business.

We had an excellent, wide ranging discussion about Bone. The following points were made:

- Mah's reaching for the sewing machine, even when there's no fabric, is an attempt to exercise control, and that the repetitious sound of the machine(s) reinforce this idea and the metaphor;
- The Chinese society is Chinatown is like a small town; that the Sewing Women both support and talk about the family problems, that they represent order and tradition—although seeming nosy, they actually keep social norms in place;
- We discussed the emotional believability of the characters, particularly Leila, and found that regardless of our judgment, she is consistent;
- Mason would take the place of the son they never had and was suited to this role;
- The family was, despite their best efforts, a failure for a variety of reasons, and because of that, they engaged our sympathy; on the other hand, there was hope because of Mason, Leila and Nina's forward-looking actions, and some were unwilling to call the family a failure, but rather they were simply in the process of change or adaptation;
- The bone metaphor resonates throughout the book: suicide, a crushing of bones; the cemetery business; the family, blood relations; the pigeons; having a bone to pick, and so on;

- Paradoxically, in America, paper is more important than blood or bone, and we discussed the many ways paper is used in the book;
- We looked at direct and indirect communication and ways they are used in the book.

Overall, Bone provided a lot of material for discussing family and culture.

Jennifer Sorensen/Kevin Holdsworth (WWCC/Rock Springs group)

Two people started by saying they did not understand the book, and others responded. The spareness of the writing, with its referential rather than explanatory method of character development, became a topic. We returned to the theme of mystery in families and the ways in which each of us is a mystery to others, primarily in this book as the family tries to understand/make sense of Ona's suicide. We discussed the meaning of birth order, and the effects of broken families/recombined families on individuals. There was some discussion of Chinese immigrant subculture, and the question of the degrees to which we are defined by the group we belong to and by our individual natures. We discussed problems of shame & guilt in families, and what keeps families together and what breaks them apart. We briefly compared Bone to Yellow Raft, especially in relation to subcultures, family structures, loss and hope.

Stephen Lottridge

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This was also a spare story. The fact that it was not widely accepted in the Chinese community (because of the drugs, alcohol, etc.) lead discussion to Sherman Alexie and Alice Walker, among others--so many faces to a culture, and people too proud or ashamed to accept them all. There was suicide, as in Montana 1948, but the family here cements, not disintegrates. Each girl has a different memory, as family members often do. Once again, we wondered, if these characters had been boys, how would the story have been different? We considered the title and suggested it signified the backbone/strength of the family, or possible settling for the bone. Someone mentioned the sewing machine was a metaphor for their plodding lives.

Carol Deering

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I launched the discussion with some background information about Ng (CLC 1993 is a good source). I read Ng's responses to an interviewer's questions about her goals as a writer and the characters in the novel. Then, we discussed the Chinese Exclusionary Act and miscegenation laws ...what they were and when they were in effect.

Our discussion of the novel itself began with its structure since that is the most unique aspect of the book. Most everyone found it confusing, so we spent some time trying to sort out the actual sequence of events in real time. The

group liked the observation of a critic who described the novel as being put together like a garment being assembled by a seamstress. They found the language very plain, but when I shared Ng's explanation that she intended the language to be spare like the lives of the Chinese immigrants, the group could relate to her intent. That said, we still found several eloquent passages that prompted admiring discussion. We talked about the immigrant experience and agreed that this book gave us greater insight into what Chinese immigrant lives were like. At the same time, we felt that as a book about family, the generation conflicts and sibling issues these characters were struggling with are the same issues all families have.

We talked about each of the characters, going back to the text to find revealing passages. Everyone appreciated the way Ng incorporated the theme of bones in a variety of ways. Talking about the significance of "bones" in the book led us back to the immigration theme of the novel. People thought that Leon's observation that in this country "paper is more precious than blood" rang true for Americans as well as immigrants. When we compared Bone with the previous novels in the series, we noted that like Yellow Raft it explored mother-daughter relationships and that it went into greater depth in exploring sibling relationships than any of the other books in the series we've read so far.

All of us felt somewhat handicapped by our lack of direct experience with Chinese people and the Chinese culture. We shared what we did know. A few members of the group had American friends who had married Chinese women and they had stories of the problems of language and culture those people experienced. We talked about the Chinese in our part of Wyoming who helped build the railroad and then went to work in the coal mines, and about the resulting Chinese Massacre in Rock Springs. As the discussion drew to a close, the consensus seemed to be that while this was the least appealing book we have read so far, we had learned something from it. Since some of the discussion group reports I had read said their groups really disliked this book, I was relieved that we were able to have a thoughtful inquiry into the layers of meaning in Bone and at least a lukewarm appreciation of it.

Marcia Hensley

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The Meeteetse group decided Leila's family is typical in many ways, representing a universal family experience. But we also felt the book provides insights into a particular cultural experience as it describes Chinatown life.

Several participants had read other Chinese-American authors (like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston), so we had a good time tracing similar themes and concerns. One of those themes, of course, is exploration of the immigrant generation and the first generation of American-born children: definition of self, lifestyle changes, loss of cherished traditions, discovery of family stories and connectivity, conflict between generations, food issues, the drive for the children's opportunities and success.

We also spent time discussing birth order, since the book's introduction invites consideration: "I'm Leila, the oldest, Mah's first, from before Leon. Ona came next and then Nina. First, Middle and End Girl" (3). We noted that Leila shows typical first-child behavior with her overwhelming sense of responsibility, her desire to be good, her seriousness, her hard work, and her efforts to appease everyone.

We enjoyed the book's metaphors, particular paper reality and sewing clothes. The book's backwards structure didn't particularly bother or impress most of the readers, although we observed that the way the book delves into the past mirrors Leila's growing appreciation "to look back, to remember" (194). Remembering is an important family function.

Deb Koelling

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We had a big crowd -- between 14 and 17-- Some faces were new, but the entire "old" gang was there, and they were ready to talk about *Bone*, even if they had originally read it for our discussion last November. I began by asking them what seemed familiar about the novel, and the almost all universally chimed in "dysfunctional family." The novel's world may seem alien to a small Wyoming community, so I wanted to see if the connected with the characters on an emotional, as opposed to situational, level. But many of the situations rang too true for them: older women whose children had died, daughters who were either controlling or disrespectful, life-situations that didn't work out, businesses that failed, etc. One excellent observation was made connecting the Chinese to the Navajo community, especially around death and mourning practices. Interestingly, death and mourning seemed to receive the most attention, as the incidents in the book contrasted significantly with death/mourning practices that group knew as familiar. We spent a good deal of time examining the title and the sewing motif, as well as sharing our personal likes and dislikes about the book and the characters. One participant said she found the book "too depressing," but none of the other participants voiced this kind of concern. I brought up the "two steps backward, one step forward" time structure of the novel, and again most of the participants found this confusing, but they allowed the novel to develop at its own pace. I love the open-mindedness of this crowd, as they are always willing to comprehend difference, and the validity of difference. I emphasized a point made by someone on how the mind thinks. The novel seems to try and parallel the memory function with the storytelling function, and leads its readers back from Leila's marriage to when the girls were children. All in all, *Bone* sparked a useful and lively discussion.

Cliff Marks

Laramie: I shared the information I had found about Ng, focusing on the intersections between her family and the one in her book. *Bone* drew mixed reactions. One participant was really frustrated with it, because for her it was a story of an immigrant family given more opportunities than she had received. This led to a discussion of the difficulties between assimilation and

trying to retain some of one's homeland culture. Another participant mentioned that she could understand how people wouldn't learn English. She had grown up in the U.S., in a family in which English wasn't spoken at home. Her family was a farming family, and she said that her parents didn't have time to try and learn a new language. She could relate to Leila, who acted as a translator.

In an interview, Ng mentioned the Exclusion and Miscegenation Laws, so I explained the history behind those. I was also interested in learning more about the history of the Chinese in Wyoming. I brought in a couple of books that were written about the Rock Springs massacre. I also used a couple of clips from a Main Street video recording called *Chinatown, Wyoming*. This led to one participant relating recent experiences of racist remarks directed toward her Asian-American coworkers.

This book brought up many difficult issues. While the other two we have read so far turned more toward discussion of family relationships in general, *Bone* connected in with emotionally charged current political issues because it dealt with an immigrant family.

--Kelly Gove

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Sheridan: I began by giving some background on the author and shared her comments on why she wrote the book. I gave some background on the reasons for Chinese immigration (Opium Wars) on the Chinese Exclusionary Act, Rock Springs Massacre and the impact the San Francisco earthquake had on immigration records. One of the participants mentioned the Joss House. I meant to look that up as I remember (vaguely) that when I served on the WCH there was a grant for preservation of the Joss House.

The discussion was excellent and lively. Some of the themes we discussed included the impact of immigration/assimilation on the first generation (Mah and Leon) and then on the second generation (the girls). We also discussed their birth order and how that related to their roles in the family and relationships amongst family members. This led into a great discussion of immigration in terms of the difficulties of various groups (European and Asian); i.e. is immigration more difficult for one group and why. We discussed the references to "bones" in the book why Ng titled the book *Bone*; as well as the themes of the sewing machine, the sewing ladies and "paper, blood and bones". We also discussed various statements made in the book by Leila and Leon, as to the meaning of family. This took us into a discussion of families and how children must leave, at some point, and the universal difficulties children and parents face during that task.

The group was not particularly bothered by the structure of the book. I explained that part of the structure was influenced by Chinese poetry and the way memories do not always come to us in sequence. They made comparisons between *Bone* and *Betsey Browne* which were really good. At one point we were discussing the meaning of the reference to the ship going one mile forward and eight miles back (yikes I do not have the book with me so can not remember the exact quote!). One

member spoke up saying – well it is an explanation of the structure of the book. Everyone had a good giggle. One thing about this group – they know how to laugh. At the end of the discussion many people commented that they always leave the discussion with new ideas and changed attitudes about the book and that the discussion is the best part of reading the book. One member suggested that we re-read one of the series to see how our discussions and reaction to the book change the second time around. Interesting idea!

Katie Curtiss

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Given the numerous comments in the Archives from other discussion leaders about negative responses to BONE, I decided to set an upbeat tone with a microburst of positive thoughts about this excellent book: its delicate, even exquisite language; its reverse narrative structure being a bit unusual but all that hard to follow; the richness and relevance of its themes; the opportunity it gives us to go outside our usual world and enter the world of the Chinese American community. The fine readers of the Rock Springs group were more than willing to appreciate the book on all these fronts. We discussed, among other things, the effects of suicide on a family, the different ways of grieving, the different ways of loving that these family members showed. We spent time fleshing out the particular challenges of the first American-born generation of immigrant families—how they need to not only find their own way, but help their parents find theirs. Regarding structure, we discussed how the backwards motion of the book was, after all, authentic to the way our minds work, the ways we remember. We read passages out loud, which helped us appreciate both the meanings and the beauty of the language. We were interested to hear about Ng's recently published book, STEER TOWARD ROCK.

Rick Kempa

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Including myself, six readers attended the discussion for Bone by Fae Myenne Ng. Most of the conversation centered on Leon, and would drift back to him each time we went on to another character. We began talking about the "updaire" and "backdaire" references and how relevant those concepts were to the many dichotomies of the story such as old world/new world; parents/children; English/Chinese; men/women. Interestingly, very little was said about Ona, although she grounded most everyone's perspective and allowed guilt and sorrow to be expressed. Leon's lack of family and family history really seemed to be the underpinning of the book for these readers. Ancestors, bones, death, struggle, guilt. The sisters and their lives of adaptation in two worlds was explored, as well as their coping methods. Birth order, tradition, community molded the three sisters very differently. Mah, as well as the sewing ladies, were seen as the keepers and enforcers of family and cultural traditions within Chinatown.

Where appropriate, I provided historical information to help us understand the story. A brief sketch of the Chinese

Exclusion Act and amendments was really helpful in understanding the fears, attitudes, actions of Leon. We talked about the role of Chinese immigrants in the West from the gold rushes, railroad building, and mining. We didn't get to the Rock Springs Massacre, but I believe most were aware of that incident as a part of Wyoming history, as well as the nation's.

The book was well received by the readers in attendance and several were interested in following up with the author's novel "Steer Toward Rock."

## **Betsey Brown**

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Everyone really enjoyed reading this novel. It invoked stories of people's own experiences with desegregation efforts in various parts of the country. It also brought about a discussion of what has changed, both for women and for African-Americans. On the positive side, people agreed that there are choices now that didn't used to exist and even the fact that Shange is writing and publishing and that we are reading her works shows positive development. On the other hand, many felt that issues surrounding race presents the proverbial elephant in the room: people are afraid to discuss them openly. We shared experiences of when we've been the minority and how that felt. We also discussed the fact that within particular groups, we tend to remain within our class structure. Betsey's eye-opening experience when she runs away to the hairdresser, of being in a space that she's been in before, but at a different time, made us think about what places within our town we never go to, or that we only go to during the day for particular services.

I found lots of biographical information on Shange. It was interesting for the group to see the many similarities between her life and that of Betsey. One difference is that Shange had tried on several occasions to commit suicide when she was younger. She had turned to her artistic work as a way to handle these feelings, and wanted to pass this knowledge on to help a younger generation. I brought in children's books she's written, as well as some of what she terms her "choreopoems." We took a look at the Dunbar poem "Encouragement" that Betsey recites at school. I also thought that since so much of the book includes music, I wanted to play something. I decided on Bessie Smith, since that is who Betsey is listening to when she decides to run away. Smith does a song called "St. Louis Blues."

Kelly Gove

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Betsey Brown evoked a thoughtful discussion, though many thought Betsy, due to her "privileged" status, complained too much. This allowed the discussion to consider what it might be like to be, by skin color, a minority. Several related their experiences of being the only white in a setting (e.g. nightclub) where all the others were African American. In turn, the group discussed their own memories and experiences vis a vis desegregation,

busing, etc. Few had any awareness of this at the time it occurred. Most thought racism in the U.S. had diminished, but interestingly several expressed awareness of the many ways it is still present.

Bob A Brown 11-5-03

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Comparison: to favorite book in the series Bless Me Ultima -- didn't like Betsey Brown -- want more of above (Ultima, etc.)

Older persons could identify with '57s and '60s political aspects.

Several persons couldn't understand why and if this book had any other broad message; just a family chronicle of "incredibly irresponsible people."

Barbara Sage

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Betsey Brown was difficult for the group to digest and appreciate. We discussed voice and point of view, and readers felt that maybe a 1st person narration would have improved the "telling" of the novel, though not necessarily the message. Everyone got the messages in the book, and learned from it, but no one really had a good time doing it.

Jon Billman 02-03

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Many in the group pounced on Ms Shange's novel as an aren't-we-a-sweet Black family with characters having little or no moral and social redeeming values. Other readers disagreed wholeheartedly by pointing out Greer's work and his unique and successful role as father, husband, and uncle. What about Grandmother and Carrie? What about Betsey? They discussed the family and its social and racial problems and how each family member reacted differently to the new social order and changes outside the home. Racial prejudice was discussed with several sharing personal experiences. Many feel that Wyoming is much less prejudiced toward African Americans than toward Native Americans.

Jim Fassler 0203

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

Judy  
WCH

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I'd like to respond to Judy's question regarding the depth of discussion about Betsey Brown. Of all of the novels in the family series, I was most concerned about what we would talk about regarding Betsey Brown. Her coming of age, various family relationships, and growing political awareness seemed most obvious, but perhaps only substantial enough for brief conversation. However, the group responded to the book's language and structure quite sensitively (in a positive way), which led to discussion of purpose of dialect, "slice of life" fiction, and character development. The novel also encouraged people to share family stories which involved realizations of culture and ethnicity. It was one of the more exciting discussions we've had.

What I didn't anticipate was that Montana 1948 did not generate much discussion beyond the mystery that comprises the plot. I read the prequel Justice, as many of you may have, so that I was able to suggest how justice appeared as only a glimpsed theme in Montana 1948 but may actually be the heart of the novel. This didn't seem so obvious to readers. Once on the table, the issue of justice enabled us to delve into the touchier subject of law and Native American rights, etc.

We are reading Bone next week, which coincides with its reading in my Introduction to Literature class at the U. I'm anxious to see if the two groups respond differently.

Diane LeBlanc

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For this final meeting, we met at a participant's house for dinner and discussion. I opened the talk with a long discourse on the subject brought up at the previous meeting, namely, the negative atmosphere this group seemed to have culled from this selection of novels. I'll cover this more specifically in my concluding report.

The group seemed to appreciate my lecture, but I don't know how many cracks of light opened up. The discussion of Betsey Brown was fairly decent, although short. By the time we'd finished dinner and talked about the series overall, there wasn't much energy left. Still, people liked this book more than any other we'd read this year. They commented on how snobbery doesn't follow color lines. They discussed at length the grandmother's misunderstanding both of her own background and of the lives of her children. One reader even said she identified with the grandmother more than any character encountered in the entire series.

Fruitful topics: personal identification with characters in the novel; the differences between being raised in the city and in the country; civil rights history; black women in relation to white women in society; intra-racial prejudice.

Peter Anderson

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The Betsey Brown discussion was wonderful. . . . I introduced some of the biographical information on Ntozake Shange, and the interesting fact that she was the

daughter of the black elite, with a doctor father and a social worker mother. The family did live briefly in St. Louis, where Ntozake (born Paulette Williams) was bused to an integrated school. Her consciousness raising about gender and racism came primarily in college. My introduction included a list of the various ways in which we could view the novel: coming-of-age portrait; family portrait; racial portrait showing the classism in Black society (Nigahs & Negroes); slice-of-life-and-time portrait; segregation/integration portrait from the Black point of view.

The novel can also be viewed as a relationship portrait: i.e., father/mother; grandmother/mother/daughter; father Greer as socially involved doctor; young girls and their mentors (their housekeepers, their teachers); girls (both black and white) in adolescence.

We opened discussion at the widest angle: what were our own experiences of the 50s and 60s and the black civil rights movement. One member's family had been living in Nashville, Tennessee, where they achieved court ordered integration by bussing entire classes of black students to different schools. Her family supported the concept of integration but found the school bussing, etc. too disruptive to their children's lives, so moved West to Wyoming. Another member's father was a minister in Birmingham at the time of the church bombing that left the 4 little girls dead. While our member was not yet born, she knew much about the times from family stories: hatred and threats against her father, continual phone calling and threats to the family, his stand for integration with his congregation and how the church membership opposed it. Our member spoke with awe and respect of her father and we were all mesmerized by the personal story. To think someone with that close a tie to the civil rights movement had ended up in Upton, Wyoming!

Another member who is an English teacher talked about the difficulties she encounters teaching multi-cultural lit at the local school. Some students are so racist as to still be calling blacks 'niggers' and refusing to put effort into reading multi-cultural literature. There were references to the Japanese/Chinese cultures of our own reading list in BDG. Another language arts teacher shared her more positive experiences in teaching a book entitled *Will the Thunder Hear My Cry* [Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry?], which she recommends as a wonderful and informative read. I asked the group if they believed reading this kind of literature was a useful way to learn about other American groups. Answers were mixed-some saying yes and others saying no--it was too hard to understand all the customs in another culture (references back to *Bone* by Ng, specifically, which many readers had trouble with).

We began approaching the Betsey Brown novel more specifically by this time, with our sole male member asking if Betsey's experience of adolescence rang true to ours. Members said absolutely! and we discussed issues of peer pressure, popularity, sexuality, etc. We continued looking more closely at the characters in the book. The mother Jane was a mystery to us and not well liked; some believed her to be a spoiled brat in the manner of her own mother, others believed she was having a nervous

breakdown at the time, others believed she was going to come around. The group seemed to agree that the difficulty for her as a mother was a real dilemma: how to protect her children from the raging social forces around them. Group members liked and respected the father much more than the mother. We spent considerable time discussing the string of housekeepers and how they influenced Betsey. We talked about Carrie, in particular, and how she influenced Betsey's sexuality. We liked her but felt that her life had dark secrets! We felt the pivotal incident in the book was Betsey's running away to the hairdresser, where she found a brothel and a pregnant Regina. Discussion continued on nonstop for the entire evening, with members reflecting on some of these issues. The tone of the discussion that evening was much more thoughtful/critical than some of our other discussions. As the project director said, "it was a thought-provoking discussion." Betsey Brown seemed to be a book that we could relate to well because we all had some personal connections to the events and the types portrayed.

Connie Brown

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It was a cold and bitter night and twelve souls had a great time. What a perfect size group! I started with a biographical sketch of Shange. Then the group just exploded. Everybody wanted to talk and did. We spent a lot of time on politics. There were many stories of being a minority--white with black roommate, Native American in white culture, homosexual in heterosexual cultures. This stressed Betsey, her mother, etc. We talked of adolescence, of being the caretaker, of mentors in Betsey's life and ours. We compared the parenting of Jane and Greer. Language, in this case Shange's use of dialect, we debated. We agreed that we got used to it and accepted the importance of it in the book. We disagreed over the style of writing--some loved it, others found it too choppy. We carried on over tea and cookies. We left when the library closed!

Barbara Gose (Riverton group)

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We discussed the structure of the novel and how it felt like a play because of all the dialogue and the inconsistent transitions. A major part of our time was spent imagining what it might have been like to be young, black, and female in St. Louis in 1957. Some elder members of our group shared their memories of integration during the late 50s and early 60s. Their memories also reminded them that very few people they knew had televisions so the ways they learned about racial tensions and integration were limited. Some mentioned that they never seen black people until they were young adults. Overall, our group liked the characters, especially Jane, Vida, and the women who helped with the childcare and housework. The group liked the father-daughter bond of Greer and Betsey and their shared love of music. We also discussed the author, Ntozake Shange's name change and the similarities between her life and Betsey Brown.

**Study Questions**

Do you think of *Betsey Brown* as "slice of life" fiction?

What role does Vida, Betsey's grandmother, play?

What does the dialogue add to the story?

What does the tree symbolize to Betsey?

Kevin Holdsworth/Jennifer Sorensen

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This book was not as popular as some others have been. Some felt the style was unnecessarily choppy, with obtrusive and disjointed use of dialect and inexplicably abrupt transitions. All the same, we discussed the issues of racial segregation as they affected and were expressed through the Brown family. We discussed the theme of coming of age, and compared the vision of that process through several of the books in this series. We also returned to the issue of "running away" and the balance between leaving the family and retaining the family as we [become individuals?]. We discussed the relationship between structure/boundaries and freedom in this family--in families generally. We also observed that this relatively affluent, intact (though extended) black family varied from cultural and literary stereotypes. The discussion was good but not as lively as some have been because of the doubts about the book itself and because of the small number of participants [8].

Stephen Lottridge

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After the bleak mood of *Bone*, everyone found this novel refreshing. Although the novel was almost comical in places, it led us to some very serious discussion of our experience with black people and our attitudes toward them, a deep discussion of family relationships in the novel, and the sharing of many personal stories. I had found so much information about Ntosake Shange, that I decided to let the group make their own discoveries about her. I gave a page or two of an interview or commentary to pairs of people, asked them to read it and decide what the rest of the group should know from it. Then each pair shared what they thought was relevant and we discussed the implications of what the critic or Shange had said. I would use this technique again to take the place of lecturing when a large amount of easily read information is available on an author or work. I found Connie Brown's (Upton group) suggestion about looking at the novel from various perspectives to be a helpful way to organize our discussion. (as *Coming of Age Story*, as *Family Portrait*, as *Racial Portrait* showing classicism in Black society and the effects of the civil rights movement, as a story of young girls and their mentors, as a story of family relationships/dynamics). The group was particularly interested in the housekeepers' roles and the behavior of the mother, Jane. The commentary on Shange, had made it clear that she has been accused of "male bashing" in her work, yet the group felt that in *Betsy Brown* she had created sympathetic males in Greer and Mr. Jeff. Only Roscoe who abandoned the pregnant Regina could be faulted and even he was not villainized. As the discussion began to wind down, one member of the group asked if we

thought that "things" had improved since the civil rights movement. People then gave their opinions on the pros and cons of affirmative action, the role of cultural differences in shaping a person and shared more personal stories. I felt that the evening was an especially good example of how the WCH book/discussions can cause us to reflect on and assess our thoughts and feelings about issues and ideas.

Marcia Hensley

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The Meeteetse group spent quite a while talking about their individual experiences of segregation and integration in *Betsey Brown*. We focused on Betsey's anger about being hauled out of the school she loved to one she hated and on how hard it was on the family to have their children bus to many different schools. One group member had experienced the integration of Los Angeles high schools, and she told us how carefully certain students were chosen by School Boards for the first desegregation efforts. Another participant noted that *Betsey Brown* put "a human face on a historic problem." We spent time talking about how groups judge each other by gradations of skin color, social class, and income. And we digressed into a comparison of Betsey's family to the family of the old "Bill Cosby Show."

The series of nannies/housekeepers intrigued us, too: Bernice, Regina, and Carrie--each a different type of black woman. The children's mother and grandmother expanded the circle of female role models. Consideration of how the children treated (responded to) each woman led us to a discussion of process of maturation that Betsey undergoes in the novel and necessary "home trainin" (168). As Shange has said, "Being alive, being a woman and being colored is a metaphysical dilemma I haven't yet solved" (*Contemporary Authors*). Betsey is facing the same challenge in her life, but the novel ends with an affirmation, "Betsey lingered over her city making decisions and discoveries about herself that would change the world" (207).

Finally, group members had varying reactions to the narrative style. While it threw off most participants at the beginning (causing confusion about speaker, voice, and time), one grew used to it during the novel. The narrative style, we noted, seems to reinforce Shange's political ideas about reclaiming language.

Deb Koelling

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We had a smallish group of about ten attending on a cold, snowy, and windy night in Encampment. I structured the discussion around the theme of change, focusing the group on the parallels between an adolescent girl coming of age and a society coming of age (St. Louis during the Civil rights movement). Some excellent observations were made. One person said that when our bodies are going through change, we really have no control over them, but they physically progress to adulthood nonetheless. And when we resemble adults physically, we still have a long

way to go mentally to mature, so body and mind are out of step. Moreover, as we change we really do not understand what's happening. We likened this to the Civil Rights Movement, and saw the 1950s and 1960s as inevitable for the growth of our nation, but psychologically and emotionally it has and will take a long time to come to grips with the changes that Civil Rights foisted upon us. The group also picked up on the benign nature of the exterior events: Betsey goes to a white school, but does not suffer overt abuse; Greer takes the children to the rally, but no stones get thrown, and no one gets hurt; the Mother leaves the family, but Carrie comes and helps everyone grow up and mature. In all cases, some good results from something that is initially viewed with fear or distrust. This was a nice complement to Civil Rights stories that are inevitably about struggle and violence. I made the observation that there were probably plenty of places where the changes were accepted, albeit begrudgingly. Here are some general discussion questions:

1. How is puberty like the Civil Rights movement?
2. How are the major events of the novel connected to this larger theme?
3. What kind of family is depicted here? How does it compare to the other families we've read about?
4. What are the roles of the housekeepers? Why are they important?
5. Why does it take so long to learn that Greer is a doctor?
6. Who would you describe as stable or unstable in this novel? What is the role of stability in the book?

Clifford J. Marks

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Sheridan: I began with some background on the author and then a review of the themes for the series. The group felt that the book was a good book to include in the series. In addition to discussing the Brown family we also discussed the book as a "coming of age portrait". We talked about the fact that both Betsey and Jane were "coming of age".

Although the group really enjoyed the book they spoke about some of their frustrations with the book. Several mentioned that there was little background in the book that prepared the reader for the jump into Betsey and her siblings being bused to new schools. Several found the book a little disjointed and 'jumpy'. This led to a rich discussion when one of the members suggested that she felt that the disjointedness of the story reflected well how integration and busing seemed to Betsey and the Brown family. Some of the group commented that they could not understand why the children were all getting on different buses and why Betsey was bused to a new school, while none of her classmates seemed to be bused. While discussing this theme several people shared their own memories of the civil rights era.

We discussed Jane and made some comparisons to the mother in Jane Smiley's story, *Ordinary Love*. The group

was quite critical of Jane and not very sympathetic to her character. Everyone in the group really liked Greer and found him to be authentic and a positive presence in the children's lives. Many found the view into a successful middle class African American family an interesting and refreshing perspective on the family and they liked reading a story about segregation/integration from an African American viewpoint. Many agreed that the book showed how all families deal with some very basic challenges: 2 working parents; kids finding their place/role in the family; and family dynamics in a society that is often chaotic and always changing.

--Katie Curtiss

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I anticipated difficulty with this discussion. I felt pretty strongly that the book was clumsily written, and expected others might think the same. I thought as well that it might be hard for us to connect to the book--or to connect to it wrongly--given Shange's comment in an earlier interview that excluded us from her intended audience: "I write for young girls of color, for girls who don't even exist yet, so that there is something there for them when they arrive."

I ought not have worried. The six readers who came to this session overlooked its technical problems and all found much to like in the book. Among our many points: We appreciated how it was an authentic record of segregation and desegregation from the "black" perspective. We felt a great sympathy for the family, and especially for Betsy, and related to her "coming of age" struggle. We explored at length the mother's and the daughter's running away, making the interesting contrast of how Jane was running FROM her "blackness," while Betsey was running TOWARDS it. We made a connection over to Ng, how the younger generation often needs to shield or lead the older one, and over to Watson, how the housekeepers are an integral part of a family. We made plans to make as many thematic connections as we can amongst the four books in the series in our next and final meeting.

I was delighted to experience for myself what group members so often report: to leave the discussion with a more positive perspective on the book than what I entered with.

Rick Kempa

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Our third session brought only three readers, although the book was checked out by 6 or 7 others. Still, we had a good discussion as the book certainly contains a wealth of material to fill our time.

We talked about the author, her life, writings, etc. No one was really familiar with her, which I found surprising as this group as a whole is well read. We talked about some of her other works (*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide...the play, catchy titles, etc.*) and were really quite amazed at our lack of exposure to someone of her caliber and importance in the black community.

Everyone agreed, after hearing biographical facts, that the story read virtually as an autobiography. Themes of family

struggles, race issues and the dilemmas imposed by segregation, generations transmitting values, knowledge and survival strategies (running away, facing up, supporting others) and the importance of outsiders in our lives, but especially in the lives of the Brown family.

We touched on all of the characters from *Betsey*, the child coming of age alongside a country coming of age; the parents (work, relationship, skills); the siblings (who had prominence and why); the caretakers and each one's purpose in the story; the dynamics between Grandma and Jane as well as Jane and *Betsey*.

Everyone shared some experience of desegregation - from Florida, LA, New Mexico, and Wyoming. They were all very different, depending on location. We also compared what living in the 50s was like compared to today and in what ways the 80s (when the book was written) mirrored some of the tensions and struggles of the 50s.

Although the writing style was not a problem for anyone, it was disconcerting initially. The author cleverly uses eloquent, descriptive, proper language and out of page pops language from *Betsey's* mouth. We also felt she asked the reader to make large leaps without much direction in places, but, again, all for a purpose-to reflect the inner turmoil and outer pressures of being a thirteen year old black girl in St. Louis in the late 50s.

## **Bless Me, Ultima**

The reaction to this book was positive overall. One person thought it was too weird. I had prepared the group for the book by introducing the concept of magical realism (without using the term) and proposing that they accept that the characters saw all the events as real (even if they, the readers, don't).

We talked a lot about spirituality and religion and the idea that it is through people that goodness can occur. We discussed the struggle that Tony and all of us have about the idea of forgiveness. We speculated about Tony's future. We looked at the dynamics of Tony's family.

We compared this book to others that we have read, especially commenting on the ethnic differences among the families portrayed.

Maggie Garner

To a person, this group claimed this was their least favorite novel in the series. They talked at length about why they had trouble connecting with this novel. It wasn't because of the magical realism; they said they understood and could accept that. They found the dream sequences confusing and disruptive, so talked about the characteristics of the dreams. They didn't find the narrator very believable (too young to be so analytical), so we looked closely at the point of view. (Like *Montana 1948*,

the story is told through the eyes of an adult looking back at a significant (coming of age) period in his life and telling the story through the eyes of the child that he was, but with the added perspective of an adult.) We talked about the influences and conflicts affecting Antonio and agreed that the questions he ponders about the nature of good and evil are universal. We also agreed that the author clearly questions and criticizes the merits of dogmatic Catholicism, though he shows it as one element that holds these people together, along with their ancient traditions and myths.

Some weren't sure what the "point" of the novel was, so we asked each person to point out something, if pressed, she would say the author intended in the novel, and by the time we got around the group, they had covered most of the major themes in the novel and had had animated discussion about them.

Norleen Healy

A much smaller, more intimate group than that which showed up for the first session made for a very different discussion. This is often a fairly difficult book for people to unpack, I've found, so I prepare a lot of material and deliver a collection of mini-lectures, each about five minutes long, covering various aspects of (a) the novel and its place in the literary firmament, (b) the history of that particular area of New Mexico, including the Luna clan and El Puerto de Luna, (c) the history of Spanish and Indian witchcraft and sorcery, and (d) the layers of symbolism woven into the story.

Conversation seemed to turn mostly on a desire to "interpret" the book, and relate it to the life of the author. The general consensus among the Afton readers was that *Bless Me, Ultima* confused them as to its intent. Several readers found it impenetrable, which I haven't run into before. A few were delighted with the book, which is most often the reaction among reading group participants. No one hated the book, as they have with others, but all in all a rather lackluster response.

Peter Anderson

We had a spirited discussion with questions that went to school with me today for an Hispanic colleague, who had been invited to the discussion, but was unable to attend. We wanted to know whether or not "animism" is still important in the Latino culture, as there people how believe in witches and the supernatural, and it the term "Hispanic," a politically laden and perhaps offensive term? My friend's answers, which I'll pass on to the individuals asking, were yes, yes, and it depends on to whom you address the term, "Chicano." We were fascinated by Antonio's perception, but also his typical 7 year old reactions (why doesn't the bread turn into Christ?). We applauded his strong family, able to endure despite all, We spent a lot of time on what *Ultima* did and did not do for Antonio. And universally we loved the beauty of the language and the writing of the book. I gave a fairly long

introduction to the book, focusing on Anaya's autobiography. I commented on his childhood and his role in the Latino writing community. And I summarized a chapter on "Bless Me, Ultima" from a book on Anaya that is owned by the Central Wyoming College Library and would be an invaluable source for a humanities scholar leading a discussion of the book. Scholars could interlibrary loan the book.

Barbara Gose

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I wonder if Barbara could share the title of the book she recommended on Anaya.

Thanks, Marcia

Here's the reference from Barbara Gose: J.

Fernández Olmos, Margarite. Rudolfo A. Anaya : A Critical Companion. Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 1999.

Participants liked the book. At least two members, neither of them Hispanic, identified strongly with the Catholic, close-knit world of the novel. Some felt the point of view was too adult for a 6-8 year old, but we discussed the literary tradition of the seer/visionary who shows his/her gifts early. We discussed family values and how they are transmitted and the inevitable betrayal of parents' dreams by children. We discussed the damage done to children when families are not intact and the accommodations members of families make to each other, and the conflicts among them. Toward the end we had a lively, engrossing conversation about ways of experiencing and viewing the world and our lives and discussed the difference between a dichotomous (good/evil) and a unified (love, e.g.) vision of human, and universal, life.

Stephen Lottridge

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We tended to focus on several areas: religion and the supernatural, family relations, outlining Antonio's character, folklore and the type of novel Ultima is. We tended to agree that the novel was perhaps an allegory. Antonio's family is, of course, central to his development. We imagined him as a taxi driver with a PhD in philosophy somewhere down the road, not as a priest. Antonio is a combination of his parents; while he may have enjoyed farming, we couldn't see him as a farmer, and also we figured he could keep his Marez side from too much wandering. The family names are significant: Luna, of course means moon, but it also means, the one. Marez suggests the sea but also war. He has the power, or "the force" within him if he chooses to use it. The people of the village tended to have a mishmash of beliefs, a combination of diverse influences and cultures. We also tended to read the novel as, at least partly autobiographical, and there seems to be some scholarship to back up that point. The novel has historical significance, and it seemed to be enjoyed by all participants.

### Study Questions

- In what ways does this book compare with other coming-of-age novels?
- What are the fundamental differences between the Lunas and the Marez? How are these differences explained? Which sangre flows in Antonio's veins?
- Is Ultima a witch? Explain the ways witchcraft, magic and the Catholic church are embedded in the culture.
- Discuss some of the conflicts within the book.
- Show the different ways nature and the Earth is represented.
- What will Antonio do with his life?
- Antonio wrestles with the Problem of Evil. What solutions does he come up with?
- Although the novel is set in the WW2 period, in many ways it is a nineteenth century novel, in some ways even a medieval novel. Explain.
- Discuss the symbolism of the golden carp, Ultima's owl, the Church, the Church's building, the llano, the presence of the river, etc.
- What influence does the "gang" have on Antonio?
- What influence does Maria have on her son?

Kevin Holdsworth/Jennifer Sorensen

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The group decided that the telling of this coming-of-age novel was emotionally true to a six-to-eight-year-old. His impatience with God upon swallowing the wafer showed his youth, while his understanding was translated through adult eyes. Possibly, this book could be described as an extended flashback. The bridge was an important location for violence and was a symbol of connection. Ultima bridges the cultures, as Antonio will do someday. The river's name, Rito, means "rite" or "ceremony" in Spanish--therefore the significance of the "presence" of the river. Ultima was not fully fleshed out but seemed sympathy personified. Antonio's parents were as different as night and day (sun and moon, wind and rain, etc.), but the family was not dysfunctional as much as on the border. This was a good book to end on; everyone seemed to like it (it was my favorite) because it was cheerful overall.

Carol Deering

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I started the discussion by giving background on Anaya's life because I thought it was important for the group to know how closely Anaya's life parallels Antonio's. I also mentioned his importance in the Chicano literary movement. Then we discussed the novel as part of the tradition of "coming of age" stories, identifying what we thought were the events which tested and strengthened the protagonist and what evidence we found that he had made a rite of passage by the end of the novel. The "magic" in the novel led us into a wonderful exchange of

ideas. Some in the group had found it difficult to accept the supernatural happenings in the book, but others pointed out that religious faith generally includes some "faith" in things that cannot be logically explained and that because the narrator is child-like, he is understandably more open to seeing the magic in life than we are as adults. The many conflicts within the novel and Antonio were discussed (Luna vs Marez, good vs evil, church vs native spirituality, church vs. nature, etc.). We decided that the function of the dream sequences was to reflect Antonio's interior emotional life and to anticipate events that were about to happen. Another topic we spent time on was comparing and contrasting Bless Me Ultima with Montana 1948. Finally, our discussion centered on the lessons Antonio had learned about life from the church, from his friends in the "gang", from his mother and uncles, from his father's example of courage and his advice late in the book and of course, how Ultima helped him see that these seemingly contradictory lessons could be integrated into the life he creates for himself. We went back to the text to reread some of the passages we felt showed all this. We felt that although the cultural context of the story was not our own, the novel was true to our own experiences in a number of ways, certainly in dealing with the universal question of good and evil in the world which are so much on everyone's mind these days. We ended on a light note, speculating on what path in life the adult Antonio would actually choose to follow.

Marcia Hensley (Farson group)

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Some questions to think about as you read family literature:

- How does the structure of the family depicted in the story differ from what the reader expects, or is expected to expect?
- How are family forces in the story affecting characters in unanticipated ways?
- How does the story fracture or reinforce positive stereotypes about family (unity, support, safety, nurturing, tradition, deep history, sense of place, good behavior patterns and negative stereotypes about family (dominance, determinism, arbitrariness, abuse, guilt, stress, bad behavior patterns)?
- How does the fictional family mesh or fail to mesh with the culture at large?
- In what ways does the story seem true to your experience?

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**Questions:**

There are many "coming of age" novels which follow a pattern similar to this novel: a young person experiences doubts about his childhood beliefs and experiences a "testing" of character before becoming an adult.

- What are Antonio's doubts, how is his character tested? What shows that he has become an adult?

- Compare Bless me Ultima with Montana 1948 as coming-of-age novels.
- Describe the point of view from which the novel is narrated. Antonio the child? Antonio as an adult?
- What difference does it make?

**Conflicts:**

- Mother and father's views of life and aspirations for Tony
- Religion (Catholic church) vs. native spirituality (Ultima) - the natural world (the golden carp)
- Good (the Church, Ultima,) and evil (Tenorio & his daughters)
- Old and new (Tony's brothers - Tony's father)
- Violence - Peacefulness
- Antonio witnesses murder of Lupito, Narcisco, drowning of Florence, is attacked by Tenorio
- The curses on Lucas and on Tellez family, he is beaten up by the other children
- His dreams are often violent
- Why is his relationship with Ultima so important to Antonio?
- What is the function of the dream sequences of the novel?
- Anticipate events to come
- Reflect Antonio's emotional and psychological development
- Antonio interprets their significance in the narratives that follow them. (ex: 2nd dream Chap 2)
- Discuss the symbolism of the golden carp, Ultima's owl, the Church, the llano, the presence of the river, the bridges
- What path will Antonio take as an adult?

**Additional Questions:**

- How did you feel about the use of Spanish in the novel? (compare to McCarthy's use of Spanish in All the Pretty Horses)

**How essential is the setting in this novel?**

- Like a character in its influence on people
- The river encircles the town
- The openness of the llano

Several Meeteetse participants had read Bless Me, Ultima when it first came out in the '70s, and they reported that it holds up well over the decades. A couple others said it is their favorite book of the series thus far, and only one said that she got a little tired of our religiously-tinged narrator's voice by the end of the book. We all enjoyed the elements of magical realism in the book.

Much of our discussion focused on the book's fusion of Catholicism, magic, and witchcraft. The Protestants of the group were skeptical about Antonio's obsession with religion at such a tender age. But for two participants who had been raised rigorously as Catholics (both lapsed—or maybe not "lapsed" so much as "runaways"), Antonio's concerns, catechism, and confession rang true, especially his anxiety about sin.

We concluded that Antonio's coming of age climaxes in his loss of innocence (in so many ways). A sign of his dawning maturity occurs when he decides that the answers to all his BIG questions exist in the wholeness he discovers—a wholeness that encompasses all the dichotomies and tensions of his life: mother's values/father's values, Luna/Mártez, God/Golden Carp, Catholicism/magic, the Virgin/the girls at Rosie's, etc. Ultima, of course, is the midwife of this realization, as she was of his physical birth.

When we considered the book as a portrait of family, we admired Antonio's family. Despite all the tensions and problems of their lives, the family creates an atmosphere in their home that's loving, supportive, inclusive, and whole.

I made good use of the study materials which previous discussion leaders had posted on *Bless Me, Ultima*—thanks to them all!

Deb Koelling

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I began by teasing out the group's response to the book, as I have heard that Chicano/Chicana issues were a bit sensitive in the town. These sensitivities had been exacerbated by a recent local shooting involving a Chicano man and his girlfriend, the details of which were unclear to the group (and hence me) at the time, but given the intense containment of the novel within its Hispanic cultural milieu, the issues seemed raw to the group. In any case, about three members intensely disliked the novel, but the other ten seemed to enjoy the spirituality, the easy prose, and the sustained action of the book. We spent most of our time on three major topics: spirituality, the nature of good and evil, and literary allusion. I asked them about the competing spiritualities of paganism, Catholicism, and "land worship" (Pantheism? Someone contended -- accurately, I thought -- that Gabriel really worshipped the land), and this led us to analyze how spirituality constantly addressed the questions of good and evil. I argued that it seemed to me that Anaya was attempting to write a novel about the power of goodness. Although evil occurs throughout, it always seems to be powerfully countered by some force of goodness in the form of a person or a belief. Finally, this was easily the most allusive novel that we have tackled. While the allusions to the Bible were fairly obvious, the subtler allusions to things like Greek myth and *Paradise Lost* were more difficult to discern. In any case, the group engaged in a lively and thoughtful exchange.

Cliff Marks

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I began by giving information on Anaya and then reviewed the themes we are following in terms of the series. During our discussion we talked about connections to other books; families and generational conflicts; parental expectations and traditions; and how characters redefine themselves as people and members of family in the course of the story. Four of the books in this series are

told through the voices of children (or adults reflecting on their childhood) so we have been following which voices seems to work and which don't.

I talked a little bit about magical realism. It did not seem to bother anyone in this group and they were ready to accept it as "what is" in the book. We discussed conflict, religion, families, and the novel as a coming of age story.

Katie Curtiss  
Sheridan County Fulmer Library

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We talked about *Bless Me, Ultima*, and about the series generally. It was a fun discussion, as always, and it's been a great group. I gave Anaya's background, especially since he has said that Antonio is, in some ways, an autobiographical figure. For the most part, people really enjoyed the book. It certainly raised issues for a couple of people of their own upbringing in the Catholic Church, and the same sorts of questionings they had (or have) about why bad things happen to good people. This book led to other personal stories as well: one woman started school at age six knowing no English. We talked a lot about the sorts of choices one makes in a family, and about fitting in generally. There was curiosity about Tenorio's character: people didn't think he was evil, but wondered what had happened to him to make him live as he did. We also talked about several books (a couple from this series, and from another) in which the narrator tells the story from an adult perspective. I think we agreed that kids know more than we often give them credit for. The whole *Family Photographs* series was well-received. One participant asked if each character had grown because of the hardships they had been through and, for the most part, we thought they had. Everyone responded well to the characters because even though they may have a different racial identity or live in a very different part of the US, participants could still relate to some of the struggles they saw played out in the books.

Kelly Gove, Laramie

## Montana 1948

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Overall, participants liked this book although it was not their favorite.

Central to the book discussion was the idea of doing the "right thing." We discussed some of the moral complexities of this issue and the characters involved.

In addition, we talked about the view of American Indians, the family structure, and the life in a small town. Of course, people living in Rock River can well relate to life in Bentrock.

I tried to introduce the correspondence between landscape and characters, but people had trouble seeing the correspondence.

At the end of the discussion we reviewed the various books we read in this series. The general consensus was that families of different sorts have similarities.

Maggie Garner, 3-27-04

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Several said it was their favorite because it was "easy to follow" and "so real," and, when I asked them why, they said that it could be set in Rancho, Wyoming as well as the little town in Montana. Everything was familiar to them, including the attitude about Native Americans and the idea of the status of a "leading" family in a community. Our discussion covered the themes in the novel such as conflicting loyalties, different views of justice, authority in families, the role of the women in the novel, and the idea that there really are no paragons in this novel. We argued about whether or not there could be any question about Frank's motive for suicide - most of the group thought it was a totally selfish act. I played devil's advocate and suggested other possibilities but they would have none of it. We talked about the generational differences and about whether or not David's family was affirmed in the end. We had an interesting discussion about whether times have changed that much in small Western times since 1948. They all wanted to borrow my copy of *Justice* so they could learn more about the characters.

Norleen Healy

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After I made a short introduction to the novel and to the author, the group took off on their own about how stupid Wes was for locking up his brother in the basement of Wes's own house. And then to pick the room stocked with home-canned fruits and vegetables IN GLASS JARS added to his bad choice. Broken glass would soon be available for Frank to end his confinement and his problems. The conflict of loyalty to family versus duty as sheriff emerged as a predominant factor in Wes's decision to hide his brother's arrest. One reader was as upset about the broken canning jars as she was about Frank's use of the broken glass to commit suicide.

As usual in literature, the wife was deeply admired by the group for her role in the family during the entire conflict between her husband and brother-in-law; her unending support and understanding of the situation met with everyone's approval.

The series' theme of Family Photographs was discussed through the various relationships which existed between parents and sons (both sets), brothers, and then between Marie and David. An interesting observation by one reader was the tremendous insight Marie had of the family and its various members during the novel. Did Mother know of Frank's activities on the reservation? Did Wes know of Frank's problems? Did Gloria know of Frank's transgressions? Marie may very well have been speaking of the family when she said to David after an unsuccessful coyote hunt, "He's hard to see when you look for him."

James Fassler 0203

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We just got a voucher from Diane Le Blanc with some interesting comments on the Watson novel and the Laramie group's discussion of it. I know some of you still have this book to discuss, so I thought you might find her observations useful.

"We explored the multi-generational father/son relationship, which led to interesting discussion of how fathers' roles have been evolving since W.W. II. Julian's hero worship of Frank and his oppressive power over Wesley spoke to the old model of the father as patriarch. Viewing Julian in this way enabled readers to revisit the Hayden clan as a mini community experiencing the power politics of changing governance. Certainly Wesley would never treat David the way his father had treated him. Or would he? We discussed the classic scene during which Wesley tells David that they will need to paint the house, a gesture in itself an apology, a plea for forgiveness, a shout of love in the only tortured way Wesley knew.

The larger issue that intrigued me in the novel. . . was the relationship, if any, between law and justice. Obviously the three generations of Haydens viewed it differently. The theme of justice, not surprisingly, is more obvious in Watson's prequel *Justice*. I read this subsequent novel out of curiosity and the hopes that its character revelation might add depth to our discussion. In fact it did, as well as inspiring one mighty tangent about a parallel between Frank's suicide and Ted the Unibomber's confession--both acts which denied "the people" a chance to determine guilt. This tangent raised questions about public vs. private justice, and whether or not either was achieved in the novel. Some believed yes, others no. A related question was whether or not the Native American community found justice. Again, we were split on this as we reminded ourselves of the dangers of articulating the intentions for a group and of treating all Native Americans as a single-minded collective. . . ."

Judy

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Just read Judy's post of Diane's comments on Montana 1948 and want to echo them. I think it's especially important to have read *Justice*, the prequel, as it gives quite a bit of insight into the father of the clan. I recounted--albeit not as well as the book--the story from *Justice* about the father's trip back to Iowa to "take care of business" for his sister. That, alone, is worth providing to readers of Montana 1948.

I also think that discussions of this book hit really close to home--not merely because of the location of the book. The incredible ties between families and the land make for a really good discussion. I'm still curious, though, why Watson published *Justice* afterward. I haven't had the time or energy to try emailing him (he teaches in Wisconsin) to ask. But members of both my discussion groups were curious, too. It might be worth pursuing.

bob Mittan  
Douglas/Glenrock BDP

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Regarding Bob Mittan's question about why Larry Watson published *Justice* after *Montana 1948*: I was wondering the same thing.

A January 23, 1995 interview in *Publishers Weekly* reported Watson's admission: "And Watson did have another book in mind. He'd found that his characters--unlike those in his previous fiction--wouldn't escape his subconscious, 'and in fact started accumulating stories.'" I find that interesting because my first reaction was that the two could be one novel. However, as the interview emphasizes, *Montana 1948* is plot driven, while *Justice* is character centered. I highly recommend the interview for anyone reading the book with a group.

Diane LeBlanc

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We began by comparing *Montana 1948* to *Bless Me, Ultima* because of the narrative voice. This book is told by an adult looking back on his childhood while *Ultima* is told from a child's perspective as a child. One participant commented that the adult perspective "takes the sting out by making everything a memory. The pain isn't so immediate." For this reason, some participants thought the book was easier to read even though it was a tragic story. The pain was made less immediate for the readers, too.

This led us into who we consider the moral center of the story. Some readers thought it was Wesley Hayden since he was the sheriff and everything evolved around him as the authority in the town. Others thought it was Marie Little Soldier. We never came to a definite agreement on the moral center, but solid support was given in either case. Most tended to lean toward Marie Little Soldier.

Landscape and location play an important role in this book, as in the other books in the series. A participant thought *Bentrock* "typifies small town America." It could be any small town in the west." The setting is after the war and there is a lot of repressed prejudice along with post war problems. When Wesley Hayden doesn't want anyone to "blame Montana," the group decided he means the story could have happened anywhere.

The theme of *Montana 1948* is the abuse of power. Examples of this are obviously Frank abusing his patients and also Wesley abusing his role as sheriff by taking matters into his own hands and holding Frank in his cellar. We decided that David might have thought his uncle committed suicide to save the family and bring them back together. This is evident when he is mad at his grandparents and aunt at the burial when they divide the family even more by standing on the other side of the grave. The participants, however, think Frank Hayden's suicide was a selfish act because he was trying to get himself out of trouble rather than save the family.

In comparing this book to others in the series, the participants decided this family relationship was more strained than the other books. David seemed to be more worried about his horse at times than his relationship with his grandparents. He is fiercely loyal to his parents, even though they are not his ideal. The theme of breaking with the tradition of the family is a major shared theme with all of the books. David does not become a sheriff of *Bentrock*. Instead he becomes a teacher. All of the books so far have been about children breaking with the traditions set by parents and grandparents.

Hilary Barton Billman (Kemmerer group)

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*Montana 1948* was well-liked by most readers. A few found it rough going (perhaps because of subject matter) and a few complained about what they felt were plot puzzles (like, Why did Frank kill Marie when it seems he didn't need to?) In general, we found a lot to like in this simple-reading but deeply-layered story. Among other topics, we found fruitful areas for exploration in (a) family issues, (b) loyalty, (c) the telling of history, (d) authority and morality, (e) racism (a little bit), (f) heroism and (g) the relativity of truth.

Peter Anderson

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This book "moved" the group quite a bit--it was a lively discussion about family dynamics, patriarchs, and racism. All agreed that family and business are always complicated--especially when small town politics are thrown in, as was all in place in this book. Among the many issues discussed was the author's choice of *Montana* as place (rural--Indian reservation) and 1948 (post W.W.II & war hero.) The author's choice of having the story told from the child's perspective was also discussed. And, the role of patriarchs and women in this story was discussed at length, especially as they define "family portraits."

Ann Noble

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I had taken other scholars' suggestions and read *Justice*, so I fleshed out the characters. One criticism was the shallow nature of the characters. Another big one for discussion was the weakness of the women characters (I didn't agree). We spent a lot of time on David and what it's like to be an only child. Several participants shared their generational stories of grandparents, parents, and their own lives and how small towns change. Several people felt the book ended abruptly. All of us were challenged to think and share our views of generations and loyalty and change. Great book to start our fall-spring series.

Barbara Gose (Riverton)

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**Discussion Questions:**

How do the characters Frank and Wesley abuse or not abuse their public power?

In what ways is or is not the central crime of the story a type of metaphor for Anglo-Native-American relations in the west?

How does Wesley imagine justice? Is it the same as duty, loyalty, the law, or taboo?

How are family duties presented in the book?

What establishes David as a reliable narrator? How important is his voice to the book?

In what ways does *Montana 1948* resemble a screenplay? In what ways does it resemble a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy?

What is the function of nature and landscape in the story?

What are some nagging questions that linger after the book is finished?

Our discussion centered around three main areas: 1) Did Wesley make the right choice, or indeed, did he have any choices. We discussed different ways in which this plot-driven novel led to inevitable conclusions, and how it resembled other literary works, such as *Antigone* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We also discussed the ways in which the conflict of the book is largely archetypal—that is, it is an old story, found in many different places. 2) How western the book was. There was a great deal of discussion about this one, and we could come to no clear conclusion. Some people believed that the book could have taken place anywhere, while others steadfastly held to the idea that everything in the book was western. 3) The metaphorical aspects of the book included the Anglo-Native-American conflicts, but also man against woman, individual versus society, and the conflicts within a person, in this case, within Wesley and David. The conflicts are not resolved to everyone's satisfaction, but are resolved within the story in-itself.

Jennifer Sorensen/Kevin Holdsworth (WWCC, Rock Springs group)

Many identified with the world of the novel. We discussed the issue of competing loyalties in families, and competing values. We returned to the question of how much our actions and characters are defined by the families we come from and how much by our individual characters and fortunes. We discussed what binds families together and what splits them apart. We discussed the view of Indians in the book and the various kinds of prejudice that were portrayed. We returned to the idea of mystery and how much people in a family really know each other. We compared the 3 novels as coming-of-age stories, and as studies of intergenerational attachments and struggles. (P.S.—I was 12 years old, living in a very small town in northern Idaho, in 1948.)

Stephen Lottridge

This was a good book to begin the series since the family (as well as the landscape) was a bit stark, and therefore easy to pull out and consider. The story certainly captures what it was like to be 12 and an only child. The group wondered how the story would have changed had David's character been a girl. We talked about privilege and abusive power (the doctor, the grandfather), the Wild West and individual rights, public and private justice, prejudice, family name, etc. Frank throwing jars of preserves in the basement (with their sound of gunshots) was a kind of metaphor for the breaking up of the foundations of the Hayden family.

Carol Deering

Since this group did the Community and Western Landscape series last year, *Montana 1948* was a good way to transition into the new series on Family Photographs. After group introductions, I started the session with reminding the group of the council's mission for the reading/discussion groups and a description of the theme for this series. Then I gave them a little biographical information about Larry Watson and other books he has written. I borrowed from a number of the scholar reports from previous discussions ( thanks everyone!) to develop a hand out listing the characteristics of family literature and five general questions that applied to any book in the series, plus a list of five questions about *Montana 1948*. I found these lists of characteristics and questions a good way to get discussion off the ground. I didn't even try to go down the list answering each question, although at the end of the discussion I noted that we had touched on every question on the list just by following the group's interests in the novel.

Naturally the group identified strongly with the small western town setting of the novel. However, most of the group felt that what happened in the novel was not entirely dependent on its western setting since misuse of authority and similar family tensions could occur in other communities as well as small western ones. However, we did have an in depth discussion of tolerance/intolerance in small towns. Another topic that especially interested this group was the idea of authority in families and the irony that in this book the male authority figures are flawed and a woman (working behind the scenes) assumes authority for justice being done. This led us to consider how authority in families is established. The group felt that many families today have no one in authority and we discussed the cultural forces that tend to work against authority in families. The group also discussed how Frank's suicide should be interpreted and whether or not it "solved" anything, whether justice was served by it even if the law was not followed. The group was also interested in the tensions in the relationships between fathers and sons in the novel as well as the complexity of the relationship between Wesley and Frank. David as a reliable narrator in spite of his youth was another topic we discussed. The group appreciated the way Watson

showed that children often understand more than adults give them credit for. Frank's abuse of the Indian women led to a discussion of the novel as a metaphor for how whites have treated Indians in the West and one person reminded us of the Lovell, Wyoming doctor who was revealed to have abused his white female patients not too many years ago.

Overall I felt our discussion of the novel's various issues and themes was thorough. I was also pleased that each group member contributed frequently to the discussion and that only one person evaluated the book in terms of the "L" word. She said she didn't "like" it at first, but could see its value for discussion.

Marcia Hensley (Farson group)

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This was the first meeting of the year, and it followed the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. The group was clearly happy to be together to talk about literature.

Montana 1948 was an excellent book to begin with. We talked about the West, the role of the father, the idea of a moral center, the question of law and justice, the relationship between appearance and reality, among other things. The group was particularly engaged in the question of place, and while a few members found some of the scenarios or characterizations inauthentic (they didn't think the Native American aspect rang true), they thought the book was well crafted, easy to read, and quite compelling.

Cliff Marks (Encampment/Riverside group)

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Everyone present for the Meeteetse book discussion (11Feb02) enjoyed Montana 1948's plot, its narrator's voice, and the fast-paced narrative. We talked about many predictable topics: the nature of small towns, abuse of power, moral choices of authority figures, professional ethics, Cain/Abel relationships, the child as observer, rites of passage, good marriages and bad marriages, the role of women (then and now), sexual assault (then and now), Indian rights (then and now), the effects of guilt/conflict on health, suicide, what to do in no-win situations, the odds of getting justice in this life.

Yet what was really fascinating were the parallels the participants drew between Uncle Frank and Dr. Story of Lovell. As it happens, one of our number was helping start the Crisis Intervention Services in Cody when the Dr. Story scandal and trial erupted. Because of the delicacy of the problem and the modesty of the victims, the CIS staff ended up taking testimony for the court, housing witnesses, and conducting a study that compared victims and non-victims within the effected communities (primarily Lovell, but also other Big Horn Basin towns). Like Frank, Dr. Story chose his victims from among the most powerless, oppressed, and naive. Like Bentrock, Lovell remains split over what really happened. Like the narrator claims of Bentrock, much of the real story in Lovell didn't come out (not even in Doc). Suddenly, the events of

Montana 1948 carried a narrative authenticity that allowed us to talk about current events (well . . . "current" as small communities define current).

I can recommend two additional Internet links for Montana 1948:

Watson, Larry: Montana 1948 from the Literature, Arts, and Medicine Database—  
[http://endeavor.med.nyu.edu/lit\\_med/lit\\_med\\_db/webdocs/webdescrips/watson484\\_des.html](http://endeavor.med.nyu.edu/lit_med/lit_med_db/webdocs/webdescrips/watson484_des.html)

Montana 1948 Essay Topics (\*.pdf format, requires free download of Adobe Acrobat Reader) from the Victorian Association of TESOL and Multicultural Education –  
[http://www.vatme.vic.edu.au/pd/VCE\\_ESL\\_2000/Montana\\_1948.pdf](http://www.vatme.vic.edu.au/pd/VCE_ESL_2000/Montana_1948.pdf)

Deb Koelling

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Nine of us met at the Albany County Public Library last night to discuss Larry Watson's *Montana 1948*. I started the discussion with a description of the author, as well as the stories behind the difficulty he had in getting the book published and the things that were changed about it for publication. I brought up *Justice*, which I also read and found helpful for character background. Being interested by ideas of landscape and how they affect people, I asked about the bookmarking of the novel with the paragraph in the beginning about how the land was so harsh that no one had time to get into trouble, and Wes's pronouncement at the end to not blame the incidents on Montana. This led into personal talk of the how the Wyoming landscape has affected all of us.

We talked about the ideas of public and private justice. Most agreed that Wes took the only course of action that he could by putting his brother in the basement (which led to a brief reference to the show *Desperate Housewives*, which I haven't seen, but apparently someone is also put in the basement). People felt that because of the way Native Americans were treated and the power of the family that Frank would never have been convicted.

One person was amazed that, even though the narrator was writing in retrospect, this twelve year old was so mature. Another had a hard time understanding why he was so emotionally unaffected in his response to the realization that his Uncle had killed Marie, someone he obviously cared for.

I brought up the time that David was out at his grandparent's ranch and shot every bullet he had, and his mixed reaction to the killing of the mockingbird. There were differing responses to this incident: some found it very violent, and others thought it was typical of Western culture. We discussed how difficult it can be to make sense of the values of one's family and town while also trying to find one's way in the world, and that this would cause quite conflicting emotions.

Everyone enjoyed the book, found it surprising that Watson had a hard time getting it published, and felt that it was a really useful book for young adults in order to get them talking about issues of power, sexual assault, and race relations.

Kelly Gove, Laramie

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Everyone thought that David's voice, for the most part, was very authentic and believable. Additionally most believed the authenticity of the place, family and unfolding story. Several members commented that they were frustrated by the fact that Wes put Frank in the basement (they would never have allowed him in their home). They were also appalled by Frank's destruction of the canning jars while Wes stood by and did nothing to stop the smashing of the carefully preserved food. Many thought that was stretching it a bit. Many of these women have canned their summer gardens and would not stand idly by while it was smashed to smithereens.

Following off those comments I threw out questions about the theme of abuse of power in the novel. We talked about the dynamics of the family and Wes in terms of his role as father, sheriff, husband, son, brother and Marie's employer. We discussed how Wes evolved from protecting his brother and the family name, to protecting his family and finally coming to terms with Frank's abuse of Marie and why he finally decided to turn Frank over to the jail (though too late). Would Wes have reacted differently if Frank had shown remorse?

In tying the book into the series we talked about the damage done by family secrets and lack of communication (or inability to communicate) within families and the changes in expectations and family relations when comparing generations. We discussed the changes within families over generations in terms of family expectations of each other; the expectations father's place on sons; and the role of women within families over time. Everyone very much admired Gail. We had a good discussion about justice, both private and public, and who was most damaged by the events and if justice was indeed served at all. Would there have been justice if there was a trial? An autopsy? This led into a discussion about the question of justice and Marie. As an historian I was intrigued by David's attitude about history and asked the group their thoughts on David's comments on pg 170, about history. In wrapping up the discussion we discussed Wes' outburst about "not blaming Montana". This led us to a discussion of what Gail thought about Montana and the family she married into and her concerns for David as he grew up in Montana and within the Hayden family.

Katie Curtiss, Sheridan

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About fifteen readers braved a very cold January night to kick off the Family Photographs series in Rock Springs. After a friendly round of intros and some earnest thank yous to the WCH and some first remarks on the universal

nature of this series' theme, we were off and running in a lively conversation that lasted more than an hour. We explored, among other things, the Fall of the House of Hayden, the complicated dynamics of the family relationships, the breakdown of the male line of succession (thanks to the actions of Gail), the question of "who is the moral center of the book?", whether justice is done or not done, and whether Frank's suicide is a believable event. (I happen to think it's not.) Several of these threads of thought came from the indispensable WCH archives, others from the lively minds of the group-members. This is, I think, the best book with which to start this series: readily accessible and easy to talk about. Everyone, in fact, had something to say which is one good measure of success.

Rick Kempa

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We were up to five attendees for our final book of the Family Photographs series. We were divided in our perceptions regarding the information provided by the author. Some felt his presentation was so carefully crafted that one could vividly experience the story. For example, the jar smashing scene could be heard, felt, smelled. Others felt that his skill in this area was not brilliant enough to overcome critical gaps in the story. It was a great and productive discussion on the dynamics of families, small communities, responsibilities, cultural roles, the law, morals, justice, death, gender roles, youthful transitions, dysfunction, secrets, all of the core underpinnings of humanity.

We focused on the cast and why each person would be included in the story as they were (as much as time would allow - lots of material here). I asked the group to consider that some of the dissatisfaction with the direction of the story, (for example, why did he have Frank commit suicide when other options may have worked just as well, or why did Wes lock him up in the basement and put his family through that experience) might be the author's attempt to reflect the story of the larger culture and history between the "white men" and Indians.

I also asked the group how likely it seemed that this horrendous abuse of power by a Dr. in a position of authority could happen here and now. That led into a discussion of Dr. Story from Lovell who molested many women for many years and was only released from prison in 2001. Incredibly, no one remembered that happening and only one of the group was aware of it at all, only because his wife had read the book about it. That discussion provided a sobering perspective of real life mirroring the reality for Wes and his family and the communities involved.

We finished up the evening reviewing our readings. Overall, it wasn't a disappointing series, but also not anyone's favorite. Bone was the best read for a few, Montana 1948 for others. We did express our admiration for Jane Smiley again and were grateful for the "Betsey Brown" experience. No regrets.

We are going to continue reading as a group in January with the book kits. We picked Mark Spragg's Where

Rivers Change Direction. I think it will be a good book to start with as we head out on our own. Many thanks to WHC and staff for providing this wonderful program.

## **Ordinary Love/Good Will**

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We first discussed the ways in which we define family. There were lots of ideas here and we ranged in definitions from the traditional family to group homes. One member mentioned the ways in which Katrina will redefine and structure families. Other themes to consider:

- Challenges faced by families.
- Family literature explores sources of identify and the complexity of identity.
- Family literature tends to be about changing cultural circumstance.
- The way in which generations roll over.
- Family literature tends to be about authority.

The group liked both stories but had some good critical comments. They found Ordinary Love to have too many themes which did not see to be collected well, nor reach a satisfying conclusion. They did however like Michael; his return and time in India rang true to all. We discussed Rachel's punishment for her infidelity and this brought up a round robin about generational changes in attitudes about adultery. Everyone really like the line at the end of the book about the two cruelest gifts Rachel gave her children.

The group liked Goodwill a little more because it was linear and was a very well contained story. There are several teachers in this group and they did not think the way in which the school handled the situation with Tom was realistic. In discussing the meaning of the title one member of the group offered that he thought it implied the way in which Bob lived - with goodwill; meaning goodwill as exchange in a barter society.

We finished the evening with a discussion of the similarities in the two stories. This led us into a discussion of power roles within families. We talked about how much we listen to each other, and if we always want to hear what others are saying.

Katie Curtiss

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Wyoming Women's Center, Lusk

The participants in the WWC group approached both novellas from the viewpoint of women familiar with co-dependency and dysfunctional relationship issues. They reacted to Rachel with a mixture of empathy for her situation as the powerless wife of Pat, and disgust with her for her general weakness.

About 95% of these readers saw Bob Miller as a cruel, dominating man. They had a hard time separating their experiences with controlling men from the evidence found in the story.

The group did not particularly like the book, but it did evoke discussion on male/female roles in the family. They also made connections with the "abandoned" or manipulated children in the stories.

Sharlyn Peterson June 2004

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As Lusk's last book for the year, the group found it easier to relate the dynamics and characters in Smiley's book to the others in the series versus discussing directly the two novellas themselves (which they disliked). Themes reviewed were power dynamics in families, and the difficulty of intergenerational objectivity.

Bob A Brown 2-4-04

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Most thought the book "extraordinarily" well written – especially the English majors! All rural people, including the scholar, commented that urban people would enjoy the book more since it is about urban living and urban family units.

Barbara Sage, December 2003

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We started our general discussion with Good Will and the central character, Bob. One sympathetic person felt that he was probably reacting to his Viet Nam experience with his need to distance himself from the values of the broader culture, not uncharacteristic of a lot of people who chose to "drop out" during that period. Most in the group were not sympathetic to him however. They characterized him as totally self-centered to the absolute detriment of the rest of his family. I asked them to let that go for a minute and think of some positive facets of his character. They admitted to his talents, to his joy in nature, and, reluctantly, to his love for his wife and son. We talked about how oblivious he was to the signs of reluctance in his wife and son to the world he created, but noted that the reluctance was not clear even to Liz and Tom themselves. Someone made an interesting point about how both Bob and Liz responded so strongly to color (the little girl's purple coat for Liz and the colors in the woman's house for Bob) which was an indication that they both felt the lack of it in their lives. We really disliked Tom's teacher, a discussion that got us into the pros and cons of home schooling.

They weren't nearly as enthused over Ordinary Love. Our lone male feels put upon by Jane Smiley (we read 1000 Acres previously), insisting that she clearly has a problem with men. When I told him a little about her background, including her 3 problem marriages, he said ah ha!

Someone read the passage about how our children always remain a mystery to us and said that was the essence of both the novellas. The group said they found Ordinary Love difficult because it seemed so plotless. I read them the quote from Smiley about what she was doing in these two novellas with the narration. This did

provide a way to look at and discuss (and compare) them. We talked a lot about the mother (narrator) in *Ordinary Love*, about parenting, about guilts all parents feel for whatever reasons, and about the shifting role of parents and children as the children become adults.

Norleen Healy

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Afer I read the quote from Smiley about the structure of the two novellas, we started with *Ordinary Love*. I expected some reticence toward this novella, and, indeed, one person said she found it hard to believe that "people really analyze and think like that." However, most of the group wanted to talk. One participant who had been in the Peace Corps in India for several years, read the novella from that frame of reference and spoke to the difficulties of reconnecting that the family in the novel experiences. An interesting discussion of the mother's desire to have her grown children think of her as something more than their mother, as an adult woman separate from that role. The group was sympathetic to the mother and agreed that she had been punished too much for her affair and continues to be punished both by herself and by her daughter, Ellen. We agreed that it's hard, if not impossible, to bring up children without feeling like you've done some things wrong.

When we started talking about *Good Will*, I was surprised at the negative reaction. They disliked Bob. I tried defending him, for the sake of argument, but most were adamantly critical of him. The most critical of him and the entire novella was a man in the group who has chosen a life style for himself and his family that has some similarities. This highly educated, intelligent, and gentle soul has, over the years, built his own log home outside Story, home schools his children, refuses to have TV, and lives as self sufficient a life style as is possible. He is not, however, as self absorbed and complacent as is the character in the novella. His perspective on the novella is that it is weak: poorly written, unbelievable, full of holes, melodramatic and manipulative. This view led to an animated and stimulating discussion.

Norleen Healy 0203

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Groups have had quite varied reactions to the Smiley novella. Here's a few comments from Carol Bell (Cody group), who said this selection (#5 for them) was "the best-received so far" and that they had a lively discussion about it.

Some of the members of the group really disliked Smiley's *Ordinary Love*. They found it dull. Those of us who liked it really were taken by the depiction of the relationship between mothers and grown children. We talked about how difficult it is for family members to see one another. Do we want/need to see each other clearly? Is honesty a good thing always?

The other story, *Good Will*, was very well received. The group couldn't wait to talk about it. We discussed

subtleties of abuse--many felt that Bob was an abusive husband and father. Most liked him, but were angered by his desire for power and control.

We talked about how our children (Tom in this novella) force us out of family isolation or help us out of isolation--you can see this especially in *Bone* and *Betsey Brown*. We compared masculine and feminine voices in the two novellas and parent/son or daughter perspectives in all the novels.

The group did not like this book. Participants said it was too mundane; they complained that nothing happened. Some did not read "*Good Will*" because they were so disappointed in "*Ordinary Love*," Despite resistance, we had a good discussion, beginning with reasons they thought the book mundane (how could "*Good Will*" be mundane?). We talked about the basic theme of desires and where they take us. We discussed the desire of parents to shape their children and the other factors that influence children.

Of course, we talked about differences and similarities between the two novellas' use of first person (male & female), the use of power, the consequences of actions, moments of epiphany. We discussed how a closed circuit of family can suffocate. We compared the writing styles of the novellas--linear & non linear--and their maleness and femaleness. Those who read both much preferred the linear, as they usually do. The group consists of many linear, straight-to-the point thinkers.

In the previous two discussions in this series, we discussed whether the books were Hispanic & Native American novels or whether the stories could occur in any family. Similarly, we discussed whether these were "Caucasian novels." Because the novellas seemed "ordinary" to the group, they did not think them "Caucasian." We also compared pictures of families in the three books read so far.

Maggie Garner

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

Diane LeBlanc

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

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

Judy Powers

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Judy's idea of reversing the order of the Smiley novellas is a good one. Now that I think of it, we did spend much more time on *Good Will*.

Diane LeBlanc  
Laramie

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The Afton group was roughly split on their reaction to this novel. Half liked it or appreciated it very much. Half were turned off, and found the book a chore to read. Jane Smiley always does this to discussion groups, of course. That's why I like to lead discussions of her books. Comments picked up on the way the stories select a single incident or issue way back in time and show how lives develop and mutate around that incident. Since this same group had read *A Thousand Acres* last year in the Pulitzer series they spent a lot of time comparing that book to this. A few participants are new or had not read the previous novel, so the comparative discussion was somewhat fruitless. We spent the final thirty minutes talking about our own families, the impossibility of seeing one's own family objectively, and the tendency to think one is doing the right thing and then learn later perhaps not.

Peter Anderson

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Discussed separately and together, these books again evoked lively discussion, especially in terms of "family portraits." Why the author represented men in both cases negatively was discussed--all generally feeling she must not hold men in very high regard. The patriarch and his impact on the wife and children was the focus of much of this discussion. The role of racism was also discussed and how it differed from the racism in other books in the series. (I presented Loni Morrison's objection to the use of blacks as "others" in this story--an objection many in the group disagreed with.)

Ann Noble

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The Smiley novellas were received well by the group, which surprised me. I had been extremely upset by both stories, so found that I was perhaps pushing my point of view too strongly for the group. This reminded me later that I need to structure the discussions so that group members can reflect on their responses to readings, rather than trying to push one particular interpretation. Next time I lead this series, for instance, I would discuss better the conventions of the novella, and how these two played on the same themes. I would also suggest starting with *Good Will*, as it is easier to follow the narrative line in that story. One comment Smiley made in an interview I would follow up on more; she said: "the way that people come back from suffering has always interested me." We did not look at how the protagonists had recovered from their traumas and that might have put a better 'ending' on our discussions. The Smiley book is a hard one to end a series on because it concerns such traumatic events.

Connie Brown (Upton)

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After a few preliminary remarks about the novella-as-genre, we spent most of our time discussing *Good Will*. Some members of the group expressed admiration for the father's ideals, while others had a more difficult time with his sanctimoniousness. It was pointed out that part of the father's generation's experience had led people such as he to want to flee the material world and "grow one's own food" etc. There was some discussion about the boy's motives: we agreed that the death of his pony was the proximate cause of his arson, but there were other hints dropped throughout the story. We talked about the puritan, back-to-nature streak in American literature--from Thoreau to Wendell Berry--and its concomitant self-righteousness.

We also spent some time visiting about *Ordinary Love*. What links the two narrators, we agreed, was their need for control, but the mother in the first novella exhibited many signs of being emotionally and physically battered, and most of the group tended to like her, or at least have sympathy for her, particularly in comparison with the father in the other story, as well as her ex-husband, the physician, whom we all despised. Both novellas dealt with similar themes and produced a fine discussion--particularly in the ever-fruitful realm of gender roles.

### Study Questions

1. Are the characters one-dimensional? Likeable?
2. What is the purpose of the novella?
3. Is *Good Will* a study of violence or one man's need to control?
4. Discuss the foreshadowing in *Good Will* during the ice-skating scene and elsewhere.
5. Are the Millers racist?
6. Are the narrators effective? (Female in *Ordinary Love*, male in *Good Will*.)
7. Both stories are about broken dreams--compare and contrast them.

Kevin Holdsworth/Jennifer Sorensen

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This discussion points out the advantage of both men and women being part of our book series. One man attended. He saw both novellas, but especially GOOD WILL, very differently from the women in attendance. Points discussed:

- Does Smiley hate men?
- Are characters one-dimensional?
- Is GOOD WILL a study of violence or of one man's need to control?
- Why does Rachel (ORDINARY LOVE) tell a) husband b) children? Is this reasonable?
- What do novellas do WELL? (We have a senior member, who will "zing" us back to reality. She did this when she reminded us of the purpose of the novella.)

This was a spirited discussion, although with much disagreement. We all related to the book and were glad we read this Smiley!

Barbara Gose

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All the participants liked this book. We briefly discussed the form of the novella (I did) and then proceeded to the works. We discussed boundaries around and within families, and the virtues of firm, rigid and loose boundaries. We discussed issues of control and the relationship between control and freedom. We spoke of how the undealt-with problems of the parents are acted out by the children (the sins of the parents are visited upon the children). We tried to locate the "good will" in the story, as well as the ways in which the "love" is ordinary. Participants wove their own stories, from their lives and the events in the books. We spoke of the inadvertent hurts of blindness or intimacy, and the ways we destroy structures when we lack the insight and courage to transform them. We connected all the works as dealing with closeness and distance, engulfment and rejection, separation and connection in families.

Stephen Lottridge

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Some of us read Ordinary Love first, some Good Will. I'm not sure we came to any conclusion about which should come first. One group member described Ordinary Love as peeling an onion, because of the layers of understanding. We wondered, in a family, what secrets do we keep, what do we tell. Mothers walk out on their families in Betsey Brown, Yellow Raft, and this book. One member said, "We may not like her story, but she tells it well." In Good Will, there was discussion about whether the child's violence was the result of violence (slaughtering of the lamb/turkey, death of the colt) or of want. The father was utterly controlling and had control of his environment, but not of his child.

Carol Deering

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For Ordinary Love, the Meeteetse group talked about the "perfect family" and a mother's role and responsibility. We spent time talking about women who need to escape and the things they'll do to flee from situations they find stifling or intolerable. The elderly cousin's story was inspirational here (21). No one, of course, liked Pat-the-control-freak and we despised Ed. But what we really found poignant was the mother's belated discovery of her children as victims of a family breakup: "The lost, living child, bobbing on the waves of its own resourcefulness" (85) and ". . . when I stepped out from between father and children, not knowing, but not not knowing, either, I left them to their own devices, didn't I? Whoever did it, they were damaged, weren't they?" (87).

As our narrator, Rachel, views her own life and children, she muses, "I have learned, over the last twenty years, to embrace the possible and not to mourn the rest" (52), which reminds me a great deal of the narrator of Tilly Olson's "Tell Me a Story," who did the best she could. But the book's last image of Rachel's inadvertent gift to her children of an unattainable Eden—"perfect family happiness"—is pretty depressing.

If anything, the group had an even stronger reaction to Good Will. The Miller patriarch seemed biblical to us, and one member of the group pointed out the biblical echoes in the book's language. He's oppressive in a thousand well-intentioned ways, and his wife and son react against his vision of a self-sufficient Eden.

Several folks noted the narrator is a Vietnam vet, leading one woman to share her experience working with isolated, survivalist family groups who live along the western edge of Wyoming. Several years ago, she was part of a project that located and brought in vets' families for counseling on the effects of Agent Orange. What happened, however, was that the organizers needed to bring in a tremendous number of counselors to work with the vets (all male), their extremely isolated wives, and the children. She said that the emotional problems these families were experiencing because of their isolated, self-sufficient lifestyles were devastating. The women, for instance, literally didn't know how to talk to each other. An amazing experience.

Deb Koelling

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Before discussing the novel, I shared information about the author, Jane Smiley, with the group and we talked briefly about the novella as a form. I had made copies for everyone of five quotes from Smiley and from critics about Ordinary Love and Good Will which we used as springboards for our discussion.

The first quote (from Smiley) was about the structure of the novellas:

*"I did set out to pair the point of view of a father with that of a mother. And I consciously constructed one of these novellas as more*

*masculine narrative—essentially linear – and the other as more feminine, in which things are hidden and then revealed. “Ordinary Love” is like looking at a rose where the form unfolds around the center. What unites the two is the subject of power. In each case its uses are at issue in a kind of morality play.”*

This prompted a discussion of the difference in the structures of the two novellas. Most preferred the linear form of “Good Will” and found “Ordinary Love” confusing, but Smiley’s explanation helped us understand that there was a reason for the difference. We also talked about the similarities in the two works in spite of their different narrators and family situations. Both were families who were in or had been in crisis situations, who had failed to understand and communicate with each other fully, who had controlling fathers. Group members found it difficult to understand why Rachel had been so insensitive to her husband family when she had the affair. They felt that Rachel’s feelings of guilt for the suffering of her children were justified. The group also recognized that the alternative to leaving the family was to sacrifice herself, which led to an interesting discussion of how expectations of marriage have changed since the women’s movement. We talked about how hard it is for any parent to bring up children without “damaging” them in some way by their actions. That seemed to be a theme in both stories. Both novellas led us to probing discussions of relationships between married couples, between parents and children and between families and communities.

Several members of this discussion group had tried or are trying to live on the land self-sufficiently to some extent. As a result, there was a strong reaction to the family in “Good Will” and a lengthy discussion of how the paradise they had created had gone wrong. Most blamed it on Bob Miller’s controlling nature. We wondered, was the family too isolated, or was the problem that they had allowed the outer world “in” too much when they allowed their son to attend public school? We wondered why Smiley had chosen to make black people the victims of Tommy’s rage and decided that her intention was not to suggest that the Miller’s were racist, rather it was a literary decision to provide a more vivid contrast between the Miller and the Harris families.

We agreed with reviewer Josephine Humphreys who said, “Both novellas end with a chastened, richly incomplete consciousness of how we live and what we want.” The fascinating aspect of these novellas is not that we are left with a satisfying conclusion, but rather that we have been asked to examine our own motivations, actions, and thoughts as family members through looking at these two families.

The most useful sources I found were various interviews with Smiley which you can find on the internet by just searching her name, the New York Times review “The Perfect Family Self-Destructs” (Nov. 5, 1989), and “A Better Place than Paradise” by Dolores E. Brien, 1996 (The C. G. Jung Page). The latter two were articles suggested on the WCH resources for discussion leaders and available on internet.

Marcia Hensley

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The group, which had read *A Thousand Acres* for a previous series, generally liked Jane Smiley’s work, although some preferred the novella *Good Will* over *Ordinary Love*. We explored issues of family, class, what was and wasn’t ordinary, what was and wasn’t good, etc., and had a very interesting discussion about responsibility, intention, and control. It seemed that the intentions were “bad” in *Ordinary Love* and “good” in *Good Will*, but the results were the same: decimated families, broken hearts, and general destruction of one form or another. After spending the year with *Family Photographs*, we decided that families had more in common (across culture, race, and class) than less, and that each of the texts we digested asked us to confront similar issues within ourselves. Some members admitted to having a very bad year, hence their lack of participation, which was partially brought on by the issues “hitting too close to home,” so to speak. Nonetheless, we finished with good cheer, pie, coffee, and the agreement that next year’s discussion of more “classical” texts (through *Mirror, Mirror*) would be fun and challenging in a less personal way.

Clifford J. Marks

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Laramie: I had sent out an email asking that everyone read both novellas since they are so different. It turned out that people were so taken with Smiley’s use of language that they read and enjoyed both stories. I was asked if she had written these with the intention of being together, which she had. A good source of information and Smiley quotes (including how she felt when she was writing each novella) is the book *Understanding Jane Smiley* by Neil Nakadate.

We talked about the form of the novella, which people really liked. We did start the discussion with information about Smiley’s life, and how it might have led to her interest in exploring family relations, and especially the issue of power. For example, Smiley said about her father that, “it was clear to me that he was an authoritarian man and that, in order to do what I wanted, I was better off without an imposing, controlling figure in my life...I think it’s important for people to recognize who has power over them” (qtd. in Nakadate 144).

People were less sympathetic to Rachel than I would have expected. One woman remarked that she had just had twins, and so found it very difficult to understand why someone would jeopardize her children. There was also a feeling that Rachel should have been less nonchalant during her “confession.” However, people did feel that Pat was basically abusive. Everyone responded to how Smiley puts language together, and a couple of people pointed specifically to p. 93 as containing lines that remained with them.

We segued easily into *Good Will*. Many felt that Bob had good intentions, although he was very controlling. We

also wondered what it would be like for Tom to grow up, and write his story about what had happened. Smiley wrote that, "I wanted to write about trying to be God. Bob creates his world, and I wanted to write about what the creator learns from the rebellion of the created. His son's problem is that he can't find a niche in his father's world...I could only do that, I thought, from a man's point of view" (qtd. in Nakadate 147).

--Kelly Gove

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Twelve folks came out to the last discussion of the Rock Springs "Family Photographs" series to discuss Jane Smiley's ORDINARY LOVE AND GOOD WILL. "Good Will" was the favorite of the two, for its more straightforward plot and familiar style, but we discussed both more or less equally, touching, among other things, on the themes of how our children remain a mystery, how they are so often damaged by parents' actions, how desire so often blinds and drives us (Rachel in "Ordinary Love" following her own to the detriment of her kids, Bob in "Good Will" so driven to control his environment and his child). We were all interested in Smiley's comments on these stories, as reported by Marcia Hensley on page 26 of the Archives. We speculated about the titles—what's "ordinary" about the first love, what's "good" about the will in the second story. We finished by making a few connections back to the other books in the series that we read.

Rick Kempa

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Sundance started off the series with eight readers attending. I am not new to this group, but new as the leader, after a six year absence. We began with introductions and met several new attendees. I started with general information regarding the WHC and Humanities. We acknowledged Jill Mackey and the Crook County Library as our sponsor with much gratitude. I then briefly outlined the series with the reminder that not everything in these readings and discussions is uplifting necessarily, and this series (Family Photographs) might be one of the more difficult ones emotionally.

I then gave a short biography of Jane Smiley. I believe every reader was aware of her and most had read her work. We also touched on the differences among novels, novellas, and short stories. Lots of different opinions or no idea at all. I threw out Stephen King's definition of "an ill-defined and disreputable literary banana republic" which seemed to work for us, at least for the laugh.

I then opened it up for the book discussion itself and this crowd got right to it. We did Ordinary Love first with the first speaker going for the twins. He felt this relationship was the basic foundation of the story. Others felt it was the issue of Rachael and her role as a mother vs her yearning to be Rachael as a free spirit. The consensus seemed to be that she was selfish, conflicted, and unable to calculate the costs of her desire "to be Ed" and her desire to let Pat know she wasn't his.

Pat was uniformly ruled controlling and compared to the controlling "Uncles" who retrieved the runaway Aunt. Was it revenge to blurt out the affair to Pat? Twenty years later to her children? Was it because she felt herself so fragmented? This really was a good discussion on the mother's role in children's lives and the impact each can have on the other. The group was mighty curious about who was not in the story, and wanted to know more about Daniel and Annie. They also pondered on what was left unsaid and agreed the story left lots of gaps to fill in. One reader commented that she didn't dislike the story, but would sure write a different ending.

The second story, Good Will, was started off again by our one male attendee. He definitely saw Bob as a product of Viet Nam and damaged severely from that experience. Bob needed control, built what he wanted to control his world to the point of being too self-sufficient. We have some trouble with Tommy in deciding if he was troubled by a mental illness (the "look"), jealousy, isolation, lifestyle, or all of it.

Mostly it seemed he was damaged by his father's idea of an ideal life and his mother's acquiescence? submission? willingness? to allow such an upbringing. She herself felt the need to escape by attending an offbeat church. In the end, we talked about how resilient the family seemed to be in their new life, although Bob apparently understood the need to pay some lip service in the interest of maintaining his family, but also in acknowledging the duality of life.

After we hashed out these perspectives, I read a few quoted by the author regarding her work and this book. There was some surprise when I relayed that her intent was to "twin" or pair the perspective of the mother and the father through a linear narrative (masculine) and a secret/revelation style (feminine) with the subject of power. There was no surprise she had been married multiple times as many felt her tone was not particularly generous to the men.

I finished the evening by explaining the our next book, Bone, was anything but linear. I anticipate another thoughtful discussion.

## **A Yellow Raft in Blue Water**

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The Lusk group enjoyed this book, and liked its three part structure. They recounted how the exposition of the different points of view and motives for actions seemed a realistic example of how each of us makes assumptions regarding others based on limited and often incorrect observations and points of view. Although they initially had difficulty identifying Rayone/Christine/Ida as a family, the discussion led the consensus to shift towards admiration for these women and their relationships with each other.

Bob A Brown 12-3-03

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The book was praised by everyone in the group. One woman did a literature class paper for CWC based on the book – she received an A! We had a wonderful discussion about Reservation life and families. As an active member of Reservation life for many years, I was able to explain a great deal and answer many questions. Comparisons were made with religions in *Bless Me, Ultima*. There is an emphasis on “shame” rather than understanding of extended family life.

Barbara Sage, 3-11-04

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Participants liked this book, especially the realistic portrayal of women by Dorris.

The discussion of characters led to discussion of related issues--the establishment of "fixed identities" in families, miscommunication, and the "passing down" of traits and problems within families. Members felt hope for Rayona. They would have liked the book to have continued a bit longer to give them a better sense of what happened regarding Christine's death and Rayona's future.

We also talked about the role of Christianity, hurling slime at Fr. Tom and giving kudos to Fr. Hurlbert. Besides the roles of the priests, however, we looked at the positives and the negatives that Christianity contributed to the people of the reservation.

Maggie Garner, Jan. 2004

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Since I had prepared the readers for the rather unusual structure of the book, they took off with the author's idea and how exciting it was to go backwards in time to see other characters' perspectives of incidents and life in general. To view characters' actions and reactions to similar family situations resulted in some lively discussion which, in turn, led to the appreciation of Ida's inner strength and tremendous loyalty to her family's secret. All three women were considered to be good mothers considering the hardships and traps, which they themselves developed within the family.

The influence of urban life was discussed, but the group decided that Clara had already been changed before the birth of Christine and Ida remained true to herself and her heritage.

Much of the time was spent discussing how small, seemingly insignificant, acts of kindness impacted the three women's lives. This discussion brought to light the importance that minor characters can sometimes play in any work of literature. It also reminded all of us that such acts could be vitally important to their recipients.

Jim Fassler

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Most said they didn't think they were going to like it at first, but as they got into it, they changed their minds and became intrigued with the structure and the different

narrative voices. Some said it turned out to be their favorite in the series. They talked in specifics about how their attitudes toward certain characters and events changed as they heard the stories told from each of the women's perspective. We talked about the barriers each created that intensified the miscommunication among them. Since *Ranchester* is right on the edge of the Crow Reservation, there was discussion about the way reservation life was represented: quite realistically, most thought. The group was interested in the cultural conflicts depicted such as Ida's obsession with soap operas and her insistence on speaking "Indian." They were not surprised at the level of patriotism on the reservation (I was when I first read this novel). One person made a good point about how few ways Native Americans have to reflect that warrior tradition and what the inability to do so does to the men on the reservation.

Using their discussion of how all families have "secrets" and how hard it is to know the whole story, I gave some background about Michael Dorris whose life bears this out. Only a couple were familiar with *The Broken Cord*. I suggested Louise Erdrich's early novels.

Norleen Healy 0203

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In discussing the third book in the Family Portraits series, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, I began discussion with a review of what family literature tends to be about (a la Peter Anderson's analysis): forming identity, changing cultural circumstances, roll-over of generations, authority within family, new or different definitions of family. I then gave an enthusiastic rundown of Michael Dorris' biography, including his mixed blood status, education, marriage to Erdrich, native studies program at Dartmouth, adopted children, suicide. I suggested we discuss the questions around the suicide after we'd given our attention to the book as a freestanding piece of imaginative writing.

We then launched into discussions about the structure of the book and such: not much plot, more character driven, etc. Parts of the book that worked and didn't (rodeo part was stretching it to most of us, but a nice fantasy); most agreed that "Ida's secret" was a big surprise to them. Symbolism discussion included the raft image (i.e., life raft) and how each woman had one; braiding of the hair and braiding of the strands of the stories, etc.

I presented the question of the paradox of the Catholic (Christian) Church being both a destroyer and redeemer of the native culture, but most people saw the church represented more as individuals than as an institution--Father Tom and Father Hurlbert were discussed. We discussed friend Dayton's character and we all liked him regardless of his prison history; group consensus was that he and the brother Lee had been a couple and this didn't prompt any arguments. We had some fun with a small group exercise of imagining the characters in the book in five years and what they'd be doing (all agreed Christine would be dead, most thought Rayona would stay there living with Dayton but become good friends with her grandmother). We were sure that Ida would tell Rayona

the family history so she would understand her place better. We felt hopeful for Rayona's life.

One of the morals of the story we discussed was: can telling the truth of your own life save you? Another question we spent time on was: is this family unique in its communication problems, or are many families that way, including many of our own! Personal identity in mixed blood situations such as Rayona was discussed, as well as the failures of both of Rayona's parents.

Connie Brown

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A small group attended to discuss this book, which is probably my favorite of the series, but they didn't seem to care for it, overall. Many found it hard to understand; they found its structure bothersome; they didn't like the characters, especially that of the mother. On the other hand, several participants described how the book grew on them as they read it in much the same way that the layers of the family are peeled back by the narrative. This all-female group applauded also the author's remarkable insight into women. They spent about fifteen minutes grilling me about whether men would read the book the same way that women do, a line of questioning which I found high impossible to answer.

Fruitful topics at this discussion: specifically Indian aspects of the novel; motivations of the characters, especially Ida; meaning of the title; participants' own feelings about their kids and parents, especially how they learned their mothers' secrets.

Peter Anderson

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Following a few preliminary comments regarding goals and purpose of discussion groups, we had a wide-ranging discussion. The most useful questions and responses dealt with the reliability of the narrators and the questions of truth--family truth, especially, the various roles the priests played in the story, the symbolism of the title and of the braiding of hair, the rodeo part and our problems with it, and the presence of family secrets in the novel.

Discussion Questions:

1. Can telling the truth in your life save/redeem you? (mothers' secrets)
2. The braiding of hair occurs in all three sections of the novel. What is the significance?
3. Who is Lee's father?
4. The title of the novel is a symbol. Explain.
5. There are a lot of unsolved issues at the end of the book--do you like the ending? Why/why not?
6. Discuss the paradoxical role of Christianity (catholic Church) as destroyer and redeemer throughout all three sections of the book.
7. Was the rodeo scene at the end of part one believable?

Kevin Holdsworth and Jennifer Sorensen (WWCC library group, Rock Springs)

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The group liked the book, though some people felt Christine was a "dipstick" and Ada "cruel." We discussed intergenerational relationships, and whether we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of our parents; how being an oppressed subculture affects family relationships; miscommunications in families and how families tend to lock individuals into fixed identities; what stimulates change in these characters & in families in general; can hope be drawn from bleakness? No comparison to other books. Some people told of the author's life and present native American reservation life. At the end we discussed the central image of the title, and the central theme of [mystery?] in family relationships.

Stephen Lottridge

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It was obvious that Michael Dorris grew up in a family of women (mother and aunt) and that his wife, Louise Erdrich, had a hand in this novel. The group watched part of an interview video (Writers Talk: Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, by the BBC) and were impressed with how well they knew themselves and their craft. (I wondered who took care of the children while the authors were off creating characters!) This book showed that all families have stories/secrets. No one has the whole story/truth--just versions; we are each trapped in our own subjectivity. The Catholic Church was shown as destroyer, as well as redeemer, depending on which character you look at. Hair braiding was a symbol: three strands (generations) made a family. We pondered, if there had been a sequel, would all reconcile? Would Ida tell Rayona of her heritage? Some members of the group thought a woman might get away with passing for a man in the rodeo, but riding for so long was questionable. There was a short discussion on prejudice among Native Americans, and the group decided this book realistically portrayed life on an Indian reservation. This book may have been the best-loved by the group. (I suppose it was my second favorite.)

Carol Deering

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I began by discussing the biography of the author, Michael Dorris. Normally I do not do this, but the circumstances of his suicide, his marriage to Louise Erdrich, the fact that he was the first single man to adopt a child in the United States, furthermore that he adopted children with fetal alcohol syndrome, and that he killed himself facing charges of child abuse, all intertwined, I believed, with the themes of family, responsibility, identification, self-determination, and "excuses" in the novel. We also analyzed why the novel was written from the youngest to the oldest perspective, and speculated about how we tell stories. I offered that hearing Rayona's story first represented the instant reception of information. Delving deeper in Christine's and Ida's stories reflected how we look into things, learn about our history, and discover

information about our families. Most of the group liked Rayona and many had significant empathy for Ida, but a number of them thought Christine was a rather shallow and self-serving character. Of interest, I thought, was their attachment to Ida through her story. Most wanted to hear more, but realized that perhaps the novel suggested how we lose track too easily of the stories that precede us, and hence we lose track of the people too. We spent a number of minutes analyzing the symbolism: we looked at the title, and we looked at Rayona as a symbol of secrets: her heritage, revealed by her skin and face, could no longer be hidden from the world. Rayona is like Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*, in that her life will not be controlled, necessarily, by the forces that oppressed Ida and Christine. A spirited discussion ensued as to whether there would be hope for Rayona or not: some speculated that she would be stuck on the reservation, but others thought that her moments of escape and freedom would allow her to transcend the circumstances that kept her mother and grandmother tied down.

Here are some questions that might be useful:

1. Why the tri-partite structure and why is the novel ordered from the most recent to the most distant generation?
2. What might be the relationship between the author's family history and the image of family in the novel?
3. How are Native Americans portrayed? How does this relate to your perception of Native Americans?
4. What do you think is symbolic? How and why?
5. What does this novel suggest about the future and the past?
6. How is identity created? How much does family have to do with it?
7. What advantages/disadvantages does an author have if his narrator is a woman and he is a man?

Cliff Marks (Encampment/Riverside group)

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The group was eager to talk about the significance of the title. Most had not picked up on all the scenes involving the raft in the lake, so we examined those to start the discussion. The other major concern for the group was trying to come to terms with the behavior of Ida and Christine. We kept coming back to this mothers/daughters topic, no matter what other questions we started out to discuss. Several group members just couldn't justify the family damage caused by what they saw as Ida's pride and Christine's shallowness, but most said their original opinions had been softened once they learned "the rest of the story" in Ida's section of the novel.

I reviewed the facts of Dorris' life. The group felt he showed great insight into the way women think, possibly due to Erdrich's collaboration as well as his own experience being reared in an all female household. We noted the irony that Dayton was accused of child molestation just as Dorris was much later and the fact that

Dorris had not learned of his father's suicide until he was in college (a family secret similar to those in the novel).

When I asked if they all agreed that this was a dysfunctional family, a lively exchange ensued which led us to share our definitions of functional and dysfunctional families. The group felt lack of honesty was the root of the dysfunction in this family. I think everyone agreed that most families have some degree of dysfunction. At this point we reread the novel's last sentences about the braiding of hair and discussed the other examples of "braiding" in earlier sections that suggest that in spite of the dysfunction of the family, Rayona, Christine and Ida were inextricably linked and did provide some support and continuity for one another.

Other topics we discussed: the good/bad influence of the priests in the novel, whether or not Lee and Dayton were gay. Although none of us have first hand knowledge of reservation life, it seemed to us that the world Dorris portrayed was consistent with what we have read and heard about the problems of Indians of that time. The group felt that the novel's three-part structure was what made it so interesting, even though it was sometimes confusing. A few recommended going back to reread Christine's section after reading Ida's section because then you see the full significance of several events, such as Ida taking Christine and Rayona to meet Clara in the nursing home. Similarities were noted between *Yellow Raft* and the two novels read previously, *Bless Me Ultima* and *Montana 1948*. The consensus was that this was the group's favorite book so far.

Current Biography Yearbook 1995 has a thorough discussion of Dorris' life up to that point. *Newsweek* 4/28/97 examines circumstances surrounding his suicide.

Marcia Hensley

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I began by discussing the biography of the author, Michael Dorris. Normally I do not do this, but the circumstances of his suicide, his marriage to Louise Erdrich, the fact that he was the first single man to adopt a child in the United States, furthermore that he adopted children with fetal alcohol syndrome, and that he killed himself facing charges of child abuse, all intertwined, I believed, with the themes of family, responsibility, identification, self-determination, and "excuses" in the novel. We also analyzed why the novel was written from the youngest to the oldest perspective, and speculated about how we tell stories. I offered that hearing Rayona's story first represented the instant reception of information. Delving deeper in Christine's and Ida's stories reflected how we look into things, learn about our history, and discover information about our families. Most of the group liked Rayona and many had significant empathy for Ida, but a number of them thought Christine was a rather shallow and self-serving character. Of interest, I thought, was their attachment to Ida through her story. Most wanted to hear more, but realized that perhaps the novel suggested how we lose track too easily of the stories that precede us, and hence we lose track of the people too. We spent a number of minutes analyzing the symbolism: we looked at the title,

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Cliff Marks

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The Meeteetse discussion group (14Jan02) focused its discussion on the three women of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*: Rayona, Christine, and Ida. Everyone appreciated the differences in point of view (POV) and how the shifting POV let us understand each woman beyond the stereotypes that had jumped into our minds. For example, as we read Rayona's story, we thought, "What a horrible, selfish mother that Christine is!" Yet when we read Christine's story (and, even more, Ida's), we managed to pierce the stereotype and develop empathy for difficult situations, choices, and lives. The shifting POV was also a good reminder that each episode of a family's history has many versions, many perspectives—each flawed, each true.

Participants responded strongly to the voice of each woman. Rayona, perhaps because of her youth, was the most likable. Although all three protagonists were not equally likable women, we admired their strength, resourcefulness, and courage. All three were survivors. At the end of the novel as the three generations seem to find common ground back on the reservation, we had hope that Rayona would make it, by which we meant would have a rooted life that wasn't consumed with bitterness or regrets and where she wasn't used by others (i.e., the abusive priest).

We also explored a realm of related topics:

- the nature of family memories
- the source of individual and family identity
- patriotism, community pressure, and the warrior tradition
- "soap opera" as a metaphor for excessive lives, lives without balance
- videos as metaphor for life
- the complex effects of religion on a person's development
- good priests and bad priests
- wildness in young girls
- stereotypes of Native Americans
- reservation life
- communication, lack of communication, and denial in families

We also spent time talking about what we could discover about Michael Dorris's background, relationship with Louise Erdrich, family, and suicide. We pondered how we engage in a lifelong process of dealing with the effects of

our childhood, upbringing, families, culture, and personal demons . . . and that we don't always win.

Deb Koelling

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I gave some background to Michael Dorris, including his suicide and the ensuing lawsuits of sexual abuse and contesting the will. Most of the group was familiar with Louise Erdrich and several were familiar with *The Broken Chord*.

Since this is a "family photograph" series I suggested we first discuss that thread within this book. (There are so many directions to go with this book!). First we discussed the meaning of the word dysfunction (lack of communication, honesty, not meeting needs, abandonment) and then explored these ideas within the book. We had a rich discussion of "secrets" and the impact they had on each successive generation.

The group liked the structure of the book and one member commented it was like peeling through the layers to find at the heart, a family's secret. We had a great discussion as to whether or not Dorris was successful in writing from a woman's point of view. One woman with a great deal of experience working with both the Cheyenne and Crow, and at St. Labre, did not think the language or the first person point of view worked. She did not feel Indians would communicate the way they did in this book. She felt Rayona's voice worked to some degree but not Christine and Ida's. All believed the reservation was well described. Finally I threw out several quotes which led to a great discussion of culture and ethnicity; the mixing of "mainstream" American life and Indian culture; and the interplay of resisting and adopting "mainstream" culture. In this vein most liked the book because it was not a one dimensional or simplistic denunciation of American culture; instead "it was a novel about the complexity of history and cultural interaction".

The group is divided between Betsey Brown and this book as being their favorites, so far, in the series.

-Katie Curtiss

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I generally start the conversations with background about the author, but held off this time because I wanted to know what people thought about the book without it being colored by some of the details of the author's life.

With the exception of one person, people really seemed to like the book. That one person felt that the writing of Dorris' wife, Louise Erdrich, was so much better that we should be reading her instead of him. We talked about the focus on appearance throughout the book, both about the braiding of various people's hair and its significance, but also in other areas where this came up, such as when Clara returns to try and claim Christine and chastises Ida for how she looks, to when Willard Pretty Dog says that Ida is not that beautiful, to Christine's obsession with her own appearance as well as that of her mother and her daughter. We talked about the Letter, and two people

were able to give their remembrances of that incident from their childhoods, as they were both raised Catholic.

I had been unnerved by all that I found out about Dorris and was curious how others would react. I spoke of his father's suicide and the fact that Dorris, on NPR, said that his dad had been killed in battle. I also talked about the accusations that had been made against him, and of his own suicide. There was a conversation about whether we could appreciate an artist's works even if we know things about their lives that make us uncomfortable. One person who used to work with the DFS provided statistics on the high rate of physical and sexual abuse in families. The general consensus seemed to be that a person could be separated from their work.

Kelly Gove, Laramie