

# Living With Violence: Conflict and Community in Contemporary Cultures

## LIVING WITH VIOLENCE: CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURES 1

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## Overview

In spite of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the symbolic end of the Cold War, most Americans would probably agree that we live in an "age of conflict." Every day, newspaper and television headlines tell us of new and not-so-new "wars" in faraway, unfamiliar places—Bosnia, Northern Iraq, Haiti, Rwanda, Somalia. Typically, we find it difficult to understand the nature and sources of these conflicts, to say nothing of their effects on the minds and spirits of those immersed in them.

The books in this series take us into six contemporary cultures in conflict and allow us to examine them from various social, cultural, and political perspectives. Those living in these cultures may not be "at war" in any conventional sense, but they live in a continual state of siege or in its aftermath and must cope with the attendant ambiguities, uncertainties, and suspicions.

The six writers represented here are most often concerned with the impact of violence and aggression on the powerless and in societies typically characterized by political repression and murder, genocide, and terrorism. A comparison of these accounts, individually and culturally, offers us valuable insight into the nature and effects of conflict in our global community.

Sahar Khalifeh's novel *Wild Thorns* (1976) captures everyday Arab life in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Usama, a young Palestinian-turned-terrorist, returns to his homeland after having worked abroad in the oilfields and is shocked to discover the changes in all aspects of life brought by the occupation. Usama's struggle, set against that of his cousin, who has made a kind of peace with the occupation, provides a vivid picture of the polarizing effects of oppression.

Julia Alvarez's novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), is a fictionalized account of the lives and martyrdom of the

Mirabal sisters, who helped form an underground movement in the Dominican Republic to overthrow the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo and were eventually murdered for their part in it. Told from the varying perspectives of the four sisters, the novel conveys the growing political awareness and commitment of the Mirabals without diminishing their human sides as young women growing up. The book shows how ordinary people can become heroes, sometimes in spite of themselves, and summon up extraordinary courage in support of their beliefs.

Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (1998) is a journalistic collection of eyewitness stories derived from the author's numerous visits to Rwanda. The book traces the origins and extent of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, vividly capturing the horrors of that period, and examines its lasting aftermath in that small African country. Gourevitch's moving, and often painful, work raises serious questions about international responsibility in future cases of conflict and genocide and about human nature and the human condition as a whole.

In *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000), Loung Ung recalls her experiences as a childhood survivor of the Pol Pot regime. This is a powerful story of a family forced to flee their life of privilege and to live under the constant fear of discovery, suspicion, and death. Ung recounts her firsthand experience of genocide, starvation, and heroic sacrifice as the family struggles to survive, to reunite, and to triumph in the face of crimes against humanity.

The Indian trader Salim, the narrator of V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979), has moved from his home on the East Coast of Africa to an isolated trading community in its interior. Salim's role as an outsider and his observations on the political turmoil of the community and country reflect Naipaul's bleak, sometimes controversial, vision of Third World countries caught between the oppressions of colonialism and the chaos of post-colonialism. The novel has been compared to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in its pessimistic assessment of human corruptibility and its themes of alienation and exile.

Michael Ondaatje's novel, *Anil's Ghost* (2000), takes us to his home country, Sri Lanka, a country torn apart by civil war. Anil Tissera, a young woman educated in England and America, returns to her homeland as a forensic anthropologist sent by an international human rights group to discover the source of the organized campaigns of murder engulfing the island country. She also embarks on a discovery of love, family, and identity. As we follow the mystery, the book powerfully reveals to us the arbitrary nature of violence and the unknown enemy.

## Suggested Further Readings

For further exploration of conflict and community in contemporary cultures, look for these titles at your local library or bookseller. The Wyoming Council for the

Humanities cannot provide these titles for addition or substitution in this series.

Isabel Allende, *The House of Spirits, Of Love and Shadows*

Robert Olen Butler, *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain: Stories*

Lan Cao, *Monkey Bridge*

J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Slavenka Draculic, *S: A Novel About the Balkans*

Eduardo Galeano, *Days and Nights of Love and War*

Yuan Gao, *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*

Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World*

Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days*

Fergal Keane, *Season of Blood: A Rwandan Journey*

Peter Maass, *Love Thy Neighbor: A Story of War*

Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*

Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction*

Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*

Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War*

## **Anil's Ghost**

As this was the final book in the series for our group, we initially discussed the impact of the series and what purpose(s) the series served (this was sparked by one participant's expressed desire that the members of the group "do something" in response to the issues raised by the series). This interesting exchange is included in the final scholar's report. After this, I provided a brief biography of the author and an overview of the conflict in Sri Lanka and the status of the tensions today between the Tamils and the Sinhalese majority. This led into an interesting exploration of how individuals and societies come to grips with conflicts, especially ones that last for generations. Is the very act of survival, and at what cost, enough to represent living with violence? Or should there be some progress towards peace or at least closure as realized in our previous book *\_First They Killed My Father\_*. Perhaps one of the more intriguing aspects of our discussion centered upon Ondaatje's "ghost" in the book. We proposed several possible ghosts including Anil's submerged childhood, Sarath, "sailor," the victims of conflict in Sri Lanka and elsewhere as laid out in Anil's experiences, Anil's struggle with relationships (family, husband, boyfriend, etc.), etc. This discussion prompted a lot of insightful debate. Another especially powerful aspect to the discussion was the look at the various relationships explored in the book, but the group especially liked that of Sarath-Gamini for discussion purposes. In addition, we touched on the glimpses of other cultures that Ondaatje gives us as well as how these cultures tend to regard violence. Some of the group disliked the "chopped up" nature of the narrative while others liked this. Most felt that

Anil was not as developed a character as they would have liked feeling that they "knew" Sarath better by the book's end. But Anil did lead into a debate on the position of women in Asia and how Anil emerges as a contrary figure based upon our expectations. This book depressed several of the members, but this may have been indicative of the weightiness of the series this being the final book.

Erich Frankland, Casper

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Pinedale: The group discussed the turmoil in Sri Lanka during the 1980's and 90's and which exists to some extent today. This was then compared with ongoing violence around our world today, then violence throughout history. A "man's inhumanity to man" discussion. The group looked at a map of Sri Lanka to locate cities talked about in the book. They were also told a little of the present economy and government and political structure. While looking at the map several wondered how things are going with the cleanup from the tsunami that struck that region. The group even got into a discussion of the education of the Sri Lankan people and that went into a discussion of our local education system and then to some talk about ideas on the "No Child Left Behind" policy. One does not need to lead this group to have them go from characters in the book and situations to similar situations in their own lives. We could not ask for anything better from our WCH book discussion groups.

--Richard Kalber

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Riverton: I began by offering background on Ondaatje and a brief look at the recent history of Sri Lanka. Then I asked the readers their reaction to Anil's Ghost. To their credit, every person had read the book. But a majority felt it was disjointed, didn't develop the characters, didn't explain enough about the reasons for violence, and didn't achieve its purpose. And they provided example after example to defend their claims! I responded that several reviewers had stated similar criticisms of the book. Then those few of us who liked, even loved, the book, and felt that it got to the very heart of how an individual often CHOOSES how to respond to violence, offered our opinions. We talked about how each character reacts to violence and how some characters lost more to the violence than others. It was interesting to vote that while Ondaatje holds that Sri Lanka simply serves as a metaphor for violence anywhere, it is important to acknowledge the centrality of the Sri Lankan setting in the novel. We all loved the descriptions of Sri Lanka. There was, however, and general consensus that the book works less well than the others in the series in portraying the impact of violence on everyday lives.

--Barbara Gose

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The group discussed the history of Sri Lanka, and its various ethnic and religious groups, and generally how their conflicts have led to the present situation of long-running near-civil war. We were struck, on the other hand,

how the author did not include this context in his novel. The author deliberately made no effort to explain the roots of the violence that pervaded Sri Lanka. That was perhaps uninteresting to the author, or at least beside the point: he seemed entirely focused on the effects of widespread violence and social upheaval on individuals, rather than exploring what drives the violent to their actions. The group noted how the notion of personal distance from violence (and distance from the political roots of that violence) pervaded the novel. The protagonist had a double distance: she had left her country, so upon her return had that added perspective, and had taken as her profession forensic pathology, which requires an expert's distance from its fatal subject. Similarly, her Sri Lankan "colleagues" had retreated. One was a professional who assiduously avoided politics (with a brother, a doctor, who had fallen into a numbed depression as he treated the maimed and supervised the dead created by the violence) and the other, a more "elemental" type, a man whose wife had been killed but who had an eerie ability to reconstruct the appearance of the dead through his sculpture. The group also tried to puzzle through the meaning of the novel's title. No consensus was reached. On the one hand, it was easy to imagine the various "ghosts" with which Anil had to deal. There were the memories of her childhood with which she had to deal, echoes that washed over her as returned; there were the memories of all the violent death she had investigated all over the world, which she seemed to drag behind her like the chains of Marley's ghost; and finally there was her main preoccupation in Sri Lanka, the one skeleton she carried around and became obsessed with identifying. On the other hand, the author gave no particular clues to the "correct" interpretation of his title.

Bob Southard

Anil's Ghost was the last book for us in the violence series. I provided some background information on the author, including information from Ondaatje on his views about the book. The group appreciated Anil's Ghost for a variety of reasons, including the language (almost like poetry), the description of Sri Lanka, the moral ambiguity of Anil's quest, and the question of whose story this is. We struggled with questions like does Anil do more harm than good, does she do what she does because she feels guilty, how can you tell who the good guys are, and is there hope found in the last chapter? Readers were most moved by the brother Gamini and his efforts in spite of all the horror surrounding him. We ended our discussion by looking back over the books we had read in the series and commenting on the one or ones we appreciated the most. Every book was mentioned by someone, with the exception of A Bend in the River. Perhaps the most affecting was First the Killed My Father, which participants felt was all the more chilling coming from the child's perspective. All agreed that they were glad they had read We Regret to Inform You..., but that it was by far the most painful. As a group we are glad we chose this series. We also agreed that the books offer little or no hope that violence will slow or stop, but that they did provide insight into the ways in which ordinary people can cope and sometimes even triumph.

Barbara Gose

This was an excellent book and final discussion to complete the series. Participants appreciated the skillful writing and the non-linear composition, which echoed the theme of the past living in the present and the present presaging the past. Many saw this book as addressing the issue of living with violence most profoundly, and observed that, for all the political and historical reality of the situation in Sri Lanka, this was the least political, and most spiritual, of the works in the series. It is also the book that offers the clearest ray of hope, albeit a hope grounded partly in the perspectives of vast space and time. We returned to the question of whether violence is inherent in human nature or not, whether certain forms of spiritual faith or political systems either transcend or control the impulse toward violence, and the ways in which the characters live with violence. Anil retreats into the lab and a faith in truth, but is a permanent émigré; Sarath tries to maneuver politically and to escape into the past; Gamini throws himself entirely into work/healing, but the real survivor is Ananda, who tries to kill himself, but lives to perform the final act of creation and reconstruction in the face of destructive violence.

Since the series tended to present a view of violence that offered little hope to transcend it or to live with equanimity within it, I brought to the final session two resources that offer a countervailing view to the idea that violence is inevitable and destructive. The first book is entitled Making Peace: Healing a Violent World, edited by Carolyn McConnell and Sarah Ruth van Gelder. The articles in the book are taken from the YES!, A Journal of Positive Futures, which is the second resource.

Stephen Lottridge, 4-15-04

After I shared a brief history and reviews of the book, the group dove into my first question—why did the author use italics in segments of this book? No one clear answer was forthcoming, but I had found a pretty good reason online. It was suggested that these short vignettes give "greater insight to the varied aspects of the war-torn community."

Seems like we spent less time on discussing history and politics, and more time discussing the actual writing with this one. Reviews of the book were mixed. Some of the group loved *Anil's Ghost*, while others found it a bit fragmented and felt it didn't hang together too well. Most agreed that everything having to do with Anil's life in America could have been omitted.

Another good point made was that the violence in this book seemed more personal than in our other books. Perhaps this was because characters such as Sarath, Gamini and Ananda were so well-developed. The overall theme of the book—the thread that was supposed to tie it all together—was loss. Anil loses Cullis; Sarath, Gamini and Ananda lose their wives (or a loved one anyway). Meanwhile we have the background of loss for all of Sri

Lanka, which has lost peace to carry on a seemingly meaningless war ("The reason for war is war."). Group members thought it very sad that families were afraid even to mourn or ask questions about family members who had disappeared.

We also discussed the title of this book, which seems layered with many meanings. I suggested perhaps the book should have been named *Anil's Ghosts* since we came up with a whole list of ghosts: Cullis, Leaf, Sailor, Anil's past, Anil's family, Sarath, and even Sri Lanka itself. We also thought this book had a lot of heroes. Interestingly, the group never named Anil as one of them.

Finally, we discussed the ending of this book and how it might be symbolic. I suggested that closing the novel with the rebuilding of the Buddha might also reflect loss. Even reconstructed, the Buddha remained cracked, just like Sri Lankan society. In addition, group members thought the Buddha symbolized the impossibility of denying the past. Overall, a great discussion! They covered important aspects of the novel really well!

Kathy Bjornestad, Sundance

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Attendance at our final WHC discussion was way down due to a confluence of people being out of town, getting full time jobs, and so on. Still, four of us met to talk about our penultimate stop (we're doing one more non WHC book, *The Namesake*, which will take us from India back to the US) on our trip around the world.

One of the things we've been trying to do with this series is to learn a bit more about the countries the books take place in, and so I started by giving a very brief run down of the history of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. I also noted that at the time this book was published, the war in Sri Lanka was mostly over but that since then, it has started up again, which is why the Tamil Tigers sound familiar.

We talked about the characters in the story--which ones we liked and which we didn't; what motivated these people to continue in their work despite all the setbacks, and what might happen to them after this story ends. Although the book was mostly well-received, there was some grumbling about ambiguous endings.

Since many of our members are regular mystery readers, I asked them if they thought *Anil's Ghost* was a mystery in any way, noting that it did contain the requisite dead body and the investigation (complete with forensic evidence) that the genre requires (at least according to the definition I was given in library school--one could spend long hours arguing about that).

The group was unimpressed with this as a way of looking at the book and was uninspired by my next tactic, which was to talk about Ondaatje's love of film editing and whether there were film-like elements to this book. Some days your topics spark discussion and some days they just don't.

And finally, here are a few other topics I introduced that mostly didn't take:

I recently read a blog post by Michael Berube that I thought bore some relevance to the book. It is (in part) about the difficulties of telling a big, grand good vs. evil story when you are trying to tell it via the lives of some fairly ordinary people (hobbits, children, etc.). I wondered if that kind of critique applied to *Anil's Ghost*.

I also talked about how Ondaatje's book was, like some but not all of the other books we read, grounded very much in a real situation that, while fictionalized, was not disguised (as the Congo is in *A Bend in the River*). But while it's grounded in a real situation, it does not really take a side in that situation, which Sri Lankan reader, writing on Amazon.com, really took Ondaatje to task for. "The reason for war was war," says one character in *Anil's Ghost*. But is that a cop out? Is it lazy to say, "Oh, dude, everyone fights there" instead of trying to figure out what was really happening or who was to blame for what.

Finally, I read to them the passage near the end where Gamini talks about how in American movies the protagonist gets on the plane at the end and leaves the country where he's been fighting or what have you behind, and that produced some of the pleasure of recognition.

There's a lot to discuss in this book, but sometimes discussions just don't get going.

Laura Crossett, Meeteetse Branch Library

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Only four readers attended to discuss *Anil's Ghost*. One regular reader bowed out because the book didn't engage her interest but the vast majority were lured away by an Air Force Band concert scheduled for the same evening. No doubt we will spend some time on the *Anil's Ghost* at our November meeting.

Those who gathered talked about the unconventional structure of the book. One person pointed out Ondaatje had created a literary analog of the forensic investigation for the reader by providing a variety of evidence which the reader needed to analyze and assemble in order to make meaning of the book. Reading descriptions of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems* suggested the idea of using multiple genres to convey a story. This information synthesized with the forensic theme of *Anil's Ghost* made it possible to see the latter as a forensic experience for the readers.

Other remarks focused on the way *Anil's Ghost* fits the discussion theme of "Living With Violence." The overt violence of assassination or torture is more than brutal enough but the violence has other results. The paralyzing effect of fear on the people of Sri Lanka is worse in some ways than the overt violence. Asking about a missing person or speaking out against the violence--actions a person might take in a lawful country--could result in the death of the missing or the disappearance of other family members.

The resulting tension provides a constant dissonance to life that keeps the people of Sri Lanka in a perpetual state of hyper-awareness. Unfortunately, with the senses of an

outsider Anil misses the subtler signals and endangers herself and those around her. This may be a subtle observation from Ondaatje about the bumbling efforts of Western organizations and governments that try to help but only create more danger.

All in all an intriguing book: Possibly one that stimulates more insights with periodic reading and reflection.

James Mims

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12 people showed up for this longer than usual discussion on the book about which they had divergent views. We started with a map and some background on Sri Lanka. Most of us admitted little prior knowledge about Sri Lanka remembering only the terrible tsunami that it suffered a few years ago. We enjoyed the sense of the physical beauty and enduring culture that Ondaatje gives us. The history of the country and its connection with colonialism and India is relevant to the long, vicious civil war and to our discussion since we agreed that the author gives no explanation for the roots of the violence, only the effects.

Several noted that the book seemed disjointed and hard to follow, so we talked about why and the structure. It helps to go over the italicized parts at the beginning of each section and realize that they do relate and pull together in the end. We discussed each of the major characters and how they deal with the horror of the atmosphere in Sri Lanka.

We agreed the lack of meaning pervaded everything about the war -- no clarity, no sense of purpose other than the great quote that comes up more than once about war becoming "the purpose of war." The group like Sarath really more than Anil and felt that he was the real hero in the story, certainly a dynamic character who, in the end, made a choice knowing what would happen to him. We identified other places where characters' humanity emerge in spite of the tendency or desire to detach and close off from the situation.

Among other topics, we discussed various ways to interpret the title, the symbolism of the Buddha and the Buddha's eyes, and the water imagery. And finally, I had asked the group at the beginning to, as we discuss the novel, think about what ways the novel transcends the very specific situation in small, far away Sri Lanka. They had wonderful insights here. In spite of the initial reluctance many had about the novel, the discussion was rich and very worthwhile.

-Norleen Healy

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Thirteen Sheridan readers gathered to discuss Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost. To begin I gave some background on post colonial literature and post modern literature. I also included information on how the civil war ended and the situation in Sri Lanka today. One of the members of the group brought me the recent article in the New Yorker on the Tamil Tigers. Additionally I gave some background on Ondaatje, his writings, and some

comments he has made on his writing style. I have included some information that I presented below, both words of Ondaatje and some critics, as these seemed to really help the group understand the book and helped frame our discussion.

- "Ondaatje highlights the tensions between documented history and communal memories, explore relationships between the characters and writer as well as the relationship between the writer and the readers". We discussed the idea of documented history and communal memories when we discussed In the Time of the Butterflies so this helped connect the books we are reading and take us into a broader discussion.
- "Anil's Ghost webs words and images while raising questions about the nature of the creative act and the emotional consequences for the artists involved". (Anthropology, archeology, artificers, doctors. Anil, Sarath, Gamini, Ananda, Palipana, Lakma).
- "Ondaatje fuses science and art, knowledge and rock and word".
- The "mystic logic" (p 261) of science and art is confounded by the "mad logic" (p 186) of political terrorism.

The themes we explored included how the characters in the book live through the violence; and the how the various characters search for truth. For this part of the book we concentrated on Anil, Sarath, Gamini and Ananda. The readers had many questions which really invigorated the discussion. The *Grove of the Ascetics* and a discussion of Palipana, as well as whether or not the ending was hopeful or not, took us in many directions, including the meaning of Buddha's eyes. In discussing this book we referred to specific passages in the book more so than any other of the novels we have read. The final question posed was: what does the title of the book mean? Who is Anil's ghost? I prefaced the question by reminding the group this is a post modernist novel so there is no correct answer (this brought a lot of laughter).

Readers did begin by looking at the statement on pg 305: "He and Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasana". I again reminded them that this is a post modernist novel; hence you as a reader can bring your ideas to the question which led to lots of terrific discussion.

Particularly helpful in discussing this book, I found, was explaining post colonialism and post modernism. Also particularly helpful in terms of this book, when discussing themes and how one lives' with violence was to refer to specific passages in the book. It was also wonderful that members of the group also wanted to share passages in the book. I was hesitant to do this series as I felt it might be too depressing and the group would not enjoy it. Boy

Howdy was I wrong in my preconceptions; the series is going extremely well.

Katie Curtiss

## **A Bend in the River**

Attendance dropped to seven for our third book in the "Living with Violence" series, not including a guest. We moved our meeting up one week due to Easter falling just after our regularly scheduled time, which may be one reason. It also could be that the first two books were non-fiction and somewhat harder to get through, both for content (genocide) and writing style (journalist on politics), discouraging further participation. I don't think so, though, as this group is pretty consistent about trying what is offered. It will be interesting to compare the turnout for our final book, which is also a novel.

Jenny Ingram with the WHC joined us from Laramie and contributed to the discussion as well as provided information regarding other Humanities Council programs, grants, etc. It was a great opportunity to hear council news, visit about new book series, and ask questions about the program changes, etc. Thank you, Jenny, for taking the time to join us.

This book was well received, which makes leading a discussion difficult. The more controversial, hated, reviled, or disagreeable the work, the easier it is to lead a discussion; it truly leads itself. We had plenty to talk about, though, and did. However, the level of commentary and group interactions just doesn't rise to the level, or at least, is much more difficult to attain/sustain, from the humanities perspective when a book doesn't stimulate intense feelings.

A rundown of the characters was a recurrent topic throughout the evening. Almost every character was brought up with Yvette, Salim, Ferdinand, and Metty being the most discussed. We talked about the various cultural, religious and geographical backgrounds brought together in the story. What were all of these various personalities looking for? How did they end up at the city at the bend of the river?

How free were they to really pursue what they were seeking? Do free will and choice really exist? Are we really autonomous? We pretty much agreed that although it seemed the characters were exercising free will history, culture and especial family influenced events and decisions.

All seemed sad or depressed, but not beaten by life.

We skipped around quite a bit, but touched on the following: Yvette's beating by Salim - why he did it and why she reacted the way she did; Ferdinand as Salim's savior and perhaps the unknown man to be executed in his dream; Africa as a continent evolving from a tribal past, through colonial rule, and the forces of modernity (Big Burger Bar, Domain, airplanes); the Madonna cult and the Big Man; uprootedness and dislocation; the sources of history/knowledge. We analyzed some of the author's

writing: what did he mean by trampling on the past; no right or wrong in Africa, only wrong; the phrase about the ants and their way of carrying on; the first line of the novel.

I gave some background of the author, in particular regarding the criticisms and controversies he evokes, especially regarding racism, neocolonialism, religion, and his portrayals of the third world. I told how his family history was not unlike Salim's: Indian grandfather; born in Trinidad; educated and residence in England. A participant asked which book he won the Nobel prize for - was it this one? Jenny pointed out that the prize is not awarded for a particular piece of work, but his was awarded around the time of publication of this novel.

I also had maps of Africa showing where some have imagined the events of the novel occurred, including Mombasa, Kenya as the East Coast city Salim left and Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire) where he ended up. Those who read the book on the Rwanda genocide (and even those who didn't but attended the discussion) felt that they had a much greater understanding and appreciation for events in Africa, whether presented in fiction or in the news.

Tough series, but a good one. Really try to get your group to try this one.

This discussion drew 13 participants; many of whom had struggled with the book or not yet finished it. After discussing Naipaul and the post-colonial situation in Africa, we dived into the author's portrayal of Africa in contrast with our own perceptions. Many felt that Naipaul, unlike Alvarez's work, did not give the reader an adequate understanding of the place. This led into a critical overview of the author's character development (again compared unfavorably with Alvarez). The discussion then moved onto the significance of two passages on Africa's "simple democracy" (p.48) and the impact that guns have had on the "warrior" nature of tribal identities (p.68). These sections did generate some interesting discussion and especially in relation to contemporary events. The various social and personal tensions addressed in the book also provoked some vocal discussion though most participants did not "get" Salim's out of character attack on Yvette. The group seemed to be struggling to find some Nobel worthiness in the book and feel that it paled in comparison with Alvarez's work. The illustrative characters for the group seemed to be Zabeth and Father Huismans. The act of living in the increasingly chaotic post-colonial situation also attracted a fair amount of attention, but most felt the book rather depressing (again the comparisons with Alvarez). In spite of the pessimism and skepticism regarding the book's worth, the discussion did go rather well drawing in previously quiet members and provoking different lines of inquiry.

Erich Frankland, Casper

Everyone loved this book. They loved the way it was written, the sense of place, the descriptions, the imagery,

the characters, and they even loved the long, flowing (like the river!) dispassionate monologues of Salim. I asked each reader to talk about a character she particularly liked or disliked. It was interesting that Yvette was picked often; she fascinated the group. We spent time on why she was beaten by Salim; a symbol of European dominance, jealous rage over Raymond, inability to take charge of his life, what? What is the cause of rage? Could have/would have a woman written this, particularly this scene? Every other character was mentioned as a favorite by someone, which makes the point that Naipaul made the people come alive. We talked most about Salim. Does he have a past and, if so, where did it come from? How much does a displaced person hold on to from the past, and what does he/she move away from? We asked the same questions of the Africans, Ferdinand and his mother, particularly. We examined what the future holds from Salim. Will he ever truly engage life, or will he remain the dispassionate observer? How does this means of handling violence differ from the characters in the other novels we have read in this series? The group spent our time together focusing on being homeless and what that means in the world. Much less emphasis was placed on the political issues raised by the book. It was an engaging discussion. At the end I read a brief reference to Naipaul's latest, and he says last, book.

Barbara Gose

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This was an interesting novel and we had a very good discussion. Talked about the author who went from depression and attempted suicide as a young man to receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. The author, Naipaul, has been almost too honest in his writing from his experience and has been called a "racist", among other things. "A Bend in the River" is quite pessimistic about not only Africa but of the author's view of the corruptibility of all humanity.

We talked about how every character in the book, whether native or immigrant, felt disenfranchised. That went to a discussion of the idea of disenfranchised people worldwide from the time of colonialization to the present day.

Richard Kalber

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As opposed to *Wild Thorns*, the group agreed that this novel took pains to create rounded characters, rather than simply having the characters exist to illustrate some thematic point. While it was true the characters existed within well-defined classes, the group was generally impressed with the texture of the world Naipaul created, that is the care taken to show where they started, how they lived, and how where they lived changed them. What seemed to strike our group most was the bleakness of Naipaul's vision. We agreed this was very much exhibited in the characters, all of whom without exception seemed both trapped and sad, or at least at the mercy of the larger forces that surrounded them. We discussed some of those larger forces, particularly those that seemed to preoccupy

the characters and the author. Those included both the landscape – the overwhelming presence and untameability of Africa itself – and, in broad terms, Africa's political history over the last centuries, with Arabian people moving east to settle and trade, then being in a sense pushed back, or into a secondary position, as the European powers began to colonize the continent, and finally and most lately, the rise of native people as the colonial powers receded. The group discussed how Naipaul exhibited an almost misanthropic, and a certainly hopeless, vision as he explored these larger forces. The Arab characters seemed doomed and displaced, the characters of the former colonial classes seemed powerless and almost cartoonishly ill-equipped to deal with the rise of the formerly colonized, and the native characters, with the exception of those who lived in the bush and simply did not participate in society, seemed by turns deliberately cruel and unprepared as they tested the limits of their new power. All of the characters in the end were portrayed as obtuse and unable to break out of the cycle of history, and all that abided was Africa itself, which absorbed and ultimately reclaimed the attempts at "civilization" imposed on the land by these various groups.

Bob Southard

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The group generally liked the book – the style and organization - but found it thematically difficult. People spoke of the way violence was more of a background in this book than in the first two. We discussed the violent episode between Yvette and Salim and the way hurt and fear lead to violence. We also discussed the relationship between sex and violence. The idea of men as prey and the law of the jungle captured our interest, and we discussed the ways in which that attitude persists today. We again discussed the rise of tyranny and the violence that engenders it, as well as the violence needed to sustain it. That led to a discussion of the Kafkaesque idea of an execution where the victim was not known until the last minute. People observed that Nazruddin was the main "happy" character, who kept his family intact. I identified the character as that of the wise fool of Persian folklore, whose basic wisdom and happiness see him through hard times. The theme of uprootedness and loss of community occupied us for some while, and several people spoke of the cultural uncertainty and the ungroundedness of connections as a breeding ground for violence. We discussed some recent local violent incidents and their bearing on our own lives, especially how much are we like Salim.

Stephen Lottridge, February 2004

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Several people expressed the opinion that this was the best book we've read in this series so far. They loved Naipaul's characters and found the story very believable. A reader stated that he felt Naipaul writes with equanimity, with a certain distance and coldness, by which was meant a carefully detached narrative style.

A participant observed that Salim is neither black nor white and the novel seems to be a reflection of that troubled middle-of-the-road situation. He is, this reader pointed out, caught between Eastern and Western history, ideas and forces. This led to a discussion of Naipaul's standing in world literature.

After discussing the controversial nature of Naipaul's work and the reasons he is considered a neocolonial thinker, the group seemed to divide into those who agree with Naipaul and those who don't. One participant's father was for many years a member of the British diplomatic corps in Africa, and she had lived with her family in South Africa during the height of the anti-Apartheid movement. She brought a different viewpoint to the discussion from several of the others, finding much in Naipaul's novel that rang of truth, while several other participants disagreed strongly.

We discussed whether we felt people were better off under colonialism than they are as members of newly-liberated nations, as Naipaul avers, and the debate was spirited. The conversation turned, of course, on how to define "better off." We also discussed the oft-argued question about whether western democracy is a good fit for all cultures, specifically African cultures.

We also spent time discussing the difficulties of establishing a personal identity in a splintered culture. One of our participants, born into a family of Indian immigrants living in Fiji and educated in America and England, related how difficult it is in her experience to have any clear sense of personal identity when a person is brought up in a radically mixed and turbulent culture.

Peter Anderson

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I started off discussion with a few of the more interesting Naipaul facts, such as that he tried to kill himself and only survived because he ran out of gas. I also read some excerpts from Amazon reviews which gave a variety of perspectives on this book.

The group seemed to enjoy the book—I received no negative feedback. They especially appreciated the developed and diverse characters and found some humor in Mahesh's business ventures. Naipaul's view of Africa interested them, as well as the way the Bush people lived, fading back into the bush when times got rough. We discuss the word, *malin*, and how it could be applied to all primitive societies, as well as how this way of seeing people might promote violence in a society. One of the group members shared some interesting information on the history of the Congo and how King Leopold and the rubber wars devastated the country.

I brought up the idea of symbolism, and we did talk a bit about the water hyacinths, but the group seemed more interested in sharing their knowledge of history and Africa (several of them have been there) than in a purely literary discussion. We also hit on the theme of dislocation a little bit. I suggested that Indar might represent this theme the

most. In addition, Selim, with his reluctance for change, struggles against dislocation.

A few of Naipaul's other books were mentioned as good reads, and the group spent a little time choosing next year's series.

Kathy Bjornestad, Sundance

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Eight of us met on Wednesday to discuss V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*.

I normally begin book discussions by telling people a bit about the author, but this time I started by asking the participants what they knew about the author and what they might guess about him from having read the book. One woman had read reviews of the recent biography of him and said she would stay silent. I was somewhat surprised that no one else had any thoughts--or had even given any thought to who the author might be or what he might be like. I'm going to write the MLA and tell them that the *Death of the Author* is alive and well in Meeteetse. (When I was a kid, I always thought that if I published a book, I would want the title of the book on the cover to be bigger than my name, because I thought the title was more important. Then I got older and became fascinated by writers. I felt suddenly as though everyone in the group was thinking like me as a kid. I don't know that that's good or bad, but it interested me.)

Anyway, I then gave them a sketch of Naipaul's life. I had the atlas out so we could see Trinidad and India and eastern and central Africa and England and appreciate the distances that both Naipaul and his characters traveled in their lives.

Some people who disliked the book were irritated with its lack of action, and one said she wasn't at all sure what she was reading. Others disliked Salim so much as a character that they ended up not liking the book. Those who did like the book were impressed with the writing and with how well the book conveyed the detached, here today, gone tomorrow nature of the characters' lives. I noted that one of the big criticisms of Naipaul is that many people feel he is racist and condescending toward Third World countries, but none of the discussion participants seemed to agree with that assessment. We talked about how all the different characters ended up in the town and what their motivations were for staying and leaving.

I'm always a little startled by the extent to which some discussion participants want me to have answers and to tell the *What the Book is About*.

I was so bowled over by Naipaul's writing that it was somewhat difficult for me to refrain from pointing out "all that English stuff" (as a kid once wrote to YA author John Green), but I want to hear what the discussion participants think. I sometimes wish I could absent myself from the discussions and just observe in the form of a fly.

Laura Crossett Meeteetse Branch Library

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Thirteen readers gathered to discuss V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, at the Washakie County Library. While few of the readers could actually say they liked this book, all found the ideas engaging and useful for establishing some sense of why Africa still struggles. Salim's as a fellow denizen of Africa, and a non-European, non-colonialist seems to legitimize him as a chronicler of African thought. In fact, most readers felt Salim served as a stand-in for the author. The revelation that Mr. Naipaul hailed from Trinidad, completely undermined this trust. Information that the author had traveled extensively in Africa and India helped repair the trust to a degree but without its former strength.

Still, Mr. Naipaul's artfully presented views on Africa, Africans, and African leaders helped readers to see and think about Africa in new ways. A substantial part of this book's appeal was the opportunity for readers to decipher and discuss the many metaphors which abound. Places, objects, and people, were frequently more than what they seemed. Picking apart the metaphors kept readers engaged while they considered the complicated tangle of naked self-interest, desperate need, and deep-rooted resentment of Africans toward their leaders, the privileged cronies, and the outsiders who overturned their lives. Salim's brief history shows the succession of power from the Arab slavers, through the European Colonizers, to the current incarnation of the African Big Man. *A Bend in the River* effectively shows that the struggle is not simply the jungle versus civilization but a war within Africans where the savage jungle contends for control with the civilized citizen. V. S. Naipaul's look at the chaos that is Africa seems as relevant now as it did when it was first published.

James Mims

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Because I find this novel to be quite complex, I began by asking if anyone had any questions about any aspect of it. Needless to say, there were many questions, actual questions and things people just found puzzling. However, there wasn't as much resistance to the novel as I worried there might be and most had finished reading it.

I gave some brief background on Naipaul including some of the really sordid details of his personal life which we later related to the novel especially in terms of Salim's treatment of the women. Naipaul also seems to suffer from the sense of displacement and of being an outsider that most of the characters felt. We also talked about the Nobel Prize and how it differs from the Pulitzer in that it isn't awarded for a specific piece of work but for a body of work and why Naipaul might be deserving of the award in spite of his public and personal persona.

We also placed the settings in the novel to what would make geographic sense in Africa and briefly discussed the history of Africa from the distant tribal past through colonialism to the present dismal state of affairs in the chaotic post-colonialism in many of the African countries as illustrated in the novel.

We discussed the major characters, how they were alike and how they differed. Of course we focused on Salim and had a good discussion about why it was hard for the reader to really attach to him ....how he is representative of the the modern existentialistic 'hero' in that he finds no meaning or "grounding" in anything.

Several in the group had picked up on Naipaul's use of symbols (the water hyacinths , the river. the "Bush", Domain, etc.) which we discussed, looking at passages.

We looked at some of the many ironies. (They've learned that this is something I especially like to explore, so they humor me!) On the whole, in spite of my concerns about how they might respond to the novel, it was one of our richest discussions in the series. Most said they couldn't claim to have "enjoyed" the book, but they were glad they read it. I can't say enough about this group's willingness to engage and what they bring to the discussions.

Since this was the last of the series, we ended by comparing *A Bend in the River* to the other three novels (In the Time of the Butterflies, *Wild Thorns*, and *Anil's Ghost*). All dealt with countries in the throes of change and revolution. We talked about how, in each, the characters respond to the violence surrounding them...what was different in each novel and what was the same. Interesting to me, while everyone in our group liked *In the Time of the Butterflies* the most, they differed greatly in how they would rate the other three on a scale of one to three.

*Wild Thorns* was probably the least favored of the three though (I thought it would be *A Bend in the River*).

The group did say that they were glad they had finally let me talk them into this series and that they felt they had learned a lot, even though they might be ready for something a little lighter next time!

If I were to do this series again, I would provide background information on the countries and some things to consider as they read before each of the sessions (maybe as handouts when they check out the book). One of the Story participants suggested that this would be helpful for this particular series, and I agree.

-Norleen Healy

## **First They Killed My Father**

Twelve ladies gathered for the first book of 2008 Living With Violence series. After greeting everyone, I relayed the basic outline of the series and how the four out of six books were picked (a big thanks to our Sundance friends). No prodding was required to initiate discussion. I suspect that will be the case with all of the books as conflict itself seems to generate the most discussion.

The book seemed well received, and if anyone present had strong negative feelings, such were not expressed. The group talk was more focused on the individual,

personal plight of the family versus the horror that overtook the country, social system and entire way of life. The main topics were family and relationships; the suspicion created; who was targeted and why; survivor guilt; the author's tender age, especially for suffering four major family losses; the discipline required to keep the family's prior life secret and the enormous cost for failure; selfishness, greed, sacrifice in the face of starvation; sending your children away in order to live; Pa's constant presence in her life. The photo and family tree were helpful in getting to know the family as well as understanding the bonds between and among the various members.

I did provide some biographical information on the author, including the publication in 2005 of *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind*. I read a small portion of a speech Loung gave on July 20, 2000, in Chicago where she read the section of the book describing the burning of her red dress. She said this was the first time she realized that she had to be quiet and that her parents could no longer protect her, a six year old, and that she was responsible as well for protecting others. I also told about a section where she talks about being at the movies. She would sit on her father's lap and he would turn his palms upward, holding her refreshments. She said "he was my cup holders. He was my everything."

The group understood how Loung could only have written this book with the help of family memories. I also conveyed that I read where it came about as the result of an English paper in college with her professor encouraging her to go further with it.

There was some discussion on genocide, such as the Holocaust, Africa, Native Americans (Anne Frank's book especially); landmines; the Viet Nam War and our experiences with that; the secret bombing of Cambodia and how it lead to the Kent State shootings. I provided some historical background on the United States' involvement and how it shifted depending on the course of events. I relayed that genocide trials arising out of "the killing fields" was as current as indictments in November, 2007.

I asked for criticisms of the book and there were not many. The extraordinary power of Loung's memory and the coincidental reunions with family members were mentioned. We also discussed the title of the book and how her father wasn't literally killed first if you consider the sister's food poisoning death. One member stated that perhaps she was referring to his symbolic death during the evacuation and by his "failure" to protect his family from the Khmer Rouge.

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The participants were rather excited to begin discussing the book. After providing an overview of the author and the context for Cambodia, we delved into the horrors of the violence and uncertainty under the Khmer Rouge (KR). The group was deeply struck by the personalization of the conflict and its effects upon the peoples of Cambodia, and I think this literary effect was

complemented by the author's inclusion of photos (we discussed how these survived). The significant role that family ties played in the struggle to survive under the KR as well as the decades after the conflict emerged as a focal point for discussion. We had some excellent contrasting remarks with *In the Time of the Butterflies* (our first book in the series) and *Grapes of Wrath* (from last year's series). This led into a discussion of the impact of violence upon children, communities, and familial relationships. Two of the participants had been to Cambodia, which provided further insight into the devastating nature of the conflict upon the country's topography and population. We also ventured into comparisons with other conflicts in the past (Holocaust) and the present (Darfur) in discussing the age old question of why such violence continues among humanity. Most of the participants admittedly were moved by the work although one was skeptical of the author's intentions on writing the book and what she has done with the proceeds (monetary self-interest). Altogether the group seemed deeply moved by the isolation imposed upon the family in their struggle for survival, and how the different strengths of the family members enabled the family to live through this tumultuous period.

A note to other groups that there is a new version (2006) of this book out which includes letters from those impacted by the book, author comments, and some updates.

Erich Frankland  
Casper book group

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The books in this series have made the Pinedale group more interested in the history, politics, and culture of the countries the authors write about than in the book itself. They were interested in why she would write this sort of story. But they were more interested in talking about genocide in about as many places worldwide as they could think of, including the people who were responsible and why it came about.

The group talked about whether they could survive under the conditions the author and her family did. Would they just give up and starve to death or is there some mechanism in the human spirit that kicks in and helps people keep going in such terrible conditions?

They were surprised to learn how many people worldwide are killed by landmines each year and the total since they have been planted. What was more amazing is the unknown number that still exist in many countries. One lady said that when she travelled there that women in some parts of Cambodia still tether their young children to the house so they cannot wander into the fields and possibly be killed or maimed by a landmine.

In spite of the fear about the title of this series, *Living With Violence*, the group is enjoying it more than they thought they might. It has brought the planet we live on into closer focus.

Richard Kalber

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The group discussed the history of Cambodia, including its long-running conflicts with Viet Nam and Thailand. Particular attention was then paid to how Marxist theorists, interacting in Paris with their Vietnamese counterparts, began to put themselves into position to begin an anti-government revolution in Cambodia. This intersected with the US/Viet Nam war, and we discussed how America's efforts to keep a rightwing Cambodian government in power, eventually resulting in devastating bombing of Cambodian Marxist rebel positions, contributed to the tipping point where Khmer Rouge finally took over the country. We marveled at the narrator's description of these events, and the vivid details of how the Khmer Rouge went about "cleansing" the country of everything they had theorized was wrong with Cambodia: city-dwellers, bureaucrats, those who were educated. The dislocation was hard to imagine, especially when related through the eyes of a young girl, as every structure and bit of normalcy was deliberately stripped away, and most of the country's population was simply sent out onto the roads, only with what they could carry, with no particular destination, with no food, and no hope of an end. There were of course questions raised about the reliability of the narrator. We discussed some criticism the book has received from other Cambodians: that the narrator's family was not completely apart from some of the oppression that the rebels were fighting, as the family's father was a member of the government's secret police; that parts of the narrative, particularly several coincidental meeting of family members, were unbelievable; that several aspects of the Cambodian genocide were underplayed or casually misunderstood. The participants didn't feel this issue of unreliability much mattered. They had already understood that memoir is necessarily personal and selective, and that no one person's experience could hope to be (nor did this purport to be) a comprehensive and completely accurate historical study. This seemed particularly forgivable here, as the memoir was an adult's memory of a young childhood experience, and everyone had read the book just that way, understanding that memories of events would naturally have been shaped by the intervening years.

Bob Southard

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After giving background material on Cambodia during the time period of *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung, a clip from the movie *The Killing Fields* was shown depicting the evacuation of Phnom Penh. Then a staged interview between an ABC moderator and Loung Ung gave her accounts about her life as a child, her first days in America, and her involvement in the Landmine Free World. Also, some great book reviews were read.

In a very lively discussion people shared some of their childhood experiences and their memories of the Vietnamese War including the lottery system, the college deferments, and going to Canada to avoid the draft.

Parallels were drawn between Cambodia and other countries, particularly with our first book about the Dominican Republic. It was suggested it was dangerous being a democracy.

The group really liked the child as narrator and appreciated the book very much. The group noted the importance of families, and how they pull together.

One of the best discussions with everyone wanting to talk. Carol had her seventeen year old daughter read the book, and she thought it should be required reading in high school.

Betty Shurley, Dec. 2003

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Thirteen of us gathered to discuss this book. I began by providing some biographical information about the author, material in news accounts on trials for remaining Khmer Rouge members, some background material on the origins of the Khmer Rouge, and some short comments concerning various reviews of the book. The Dianne Rehm audio interview is very informative and is available online. She hosts an NPR show out of Washington, D.C. We discussed Ung's ability to reconstruct the traumatic events of her life in Cambodia which led the group to comment on how both telling and writing our stories dredges up memories. Some other points of discussion included the guilt of the survivor, who survives and who doesn't and why, how does prosecution work when it's hard to decide who's responsible (this in relation to the announcements that genocide tribunals will begin soon), and family relationships. The group has loved every book in this series. We do feel, however, that we need recommendations of histories or political tracts that provide background on the various regions in which the books take place. If anyone has suggestions, particularly for Southeast Asia, I would appreciate it.

Barbara Gose, Jan. 2004

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Seven people attended the Sundance discussion of the book, *First They Killed My Father*. We began with a National Public Radio interview (npr.org) with the author, from 2000. This not only reminded people of the events in the book (some had read it almost a month ago) but also gave added insight on the author.

Conversation often veered into world history and world events only somewhat related to the book, and I recalled members by asking what they found most memorable/horrific, etc. about Ung's memoir. Some of the more interesting ideas members brought up are listed below:

1. Themes running through all our books are that totalitarian societies must create an enemy, and that resentments and equalities often are at the root of violence.

2. Marking distinctions is the first step towards destruction.

3. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

4. The difference between Russian Communism and Asian Communism seems to be the intent – in the USSR, it was to industrialize; in Cambodia, to “peasantize.”

Questions we asked:

- Did the idea of a “perfect” society alone cause the Khmer Rouge to kill heartlessly, or did it also take the lust for power and control to make them kill?
- Are we naturally good or not? And how do you get people back to an original, uncorrupted state?
- How much did the American presence (or lack of, since they left) influence events?
- How did life change for the “base” people once the Khmer Rouge came into power?
- Why did the Cambodians hate the Vietnamese so much?
- Are Americans like the base people, safe in our own beds ignoring what goes on outside our doors?
- Seems like there has been a lot of ethnic cleansing in the past hundred years. Has the world always been this way and we just hear more about it now?
- How accurate are the narrator’s memories, since she was quite young when the holocaust occurred?
- Who was Ung’s father really? What was his role as a policeman? Was he really as good as he seemed?
- Things that struck people most about this book:
- The description of starvation
- How survivors of traumatic events often feel guilt
- What an engaging character Ung was because of her fiery spirit

Kathy Bjornestad

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Election night saw five readers gather to discuss *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* by Loung Ung. Most readers, including some who talked to me at other times, found this book more engaging and easier to read than either *Bend in the River* or *Anil’s Ghost*. As a group we concluded that the more conventional narrative and linear organization made this book more accessible. The content, however, proved off-putting to some readers.

One reader summed up the negative reaction concisely when she said, “I don’t know why I read this book.” The brutality and systematic cruelty repulsed this reader and others like her. Readers who found more value in the book focused on empathizing with Loung Ung and her family.

No one seemed to experience a cathartic reaction probably because the intensity of suffering is so far removed from the lives of most Americans.

The violence in *First they Killed My Father*. . . is clearly more visceral than that of either *Bend of the River* or *Anil’s Ghost* where the violence was much more atmospheric. The violence in Loung’s story creates a deep hatred for the Khmer Rouge. In the other books, however, the reaction to violence is tension, fear, and sorrow.

In addition to problems with the visceral violence, some readers had issues with the story being told from the perspective of a girl aged five to nine. We discussed whether a child could actually recall these events. We concluded that since the violence was constant and recurrent that the book might actually represent Ms. Ung’s memories. We also felt that “rehearsed” memories or stories shared among her family might be the source of the material in the book. In the end, some decided that it was possible that the author had written the book based on her own memories.

Overall, *First they Killed My Father*. . . , was easier to read than the other selections we mentioned. At the same time the brutality bothered many readers. As a reader put it, “I’m glad I read this book, but I will never read this again.”

Norleen Healy

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Fourteen participants attended the last discussion in the series. I began by giving background information on the author Loung Ung including the work she is doing today with the project 10x10. Ung is involved, today, with the W/KR tribunal to convict members of the Khmer Rouge of war crimes. I found some articles on to the current trials and presented those. Additionally I gave background information on the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, including the role of the US.

The discussion began with a discussion as to just what were the goals of the Khmer Rouge and how they impacted the Ung family; both in their initial move out of the city and the long term necessity for family secrecy. We proceeded with a discussion of just who pa was, the change in his demeanor just he before he left, and the legacy he left Loung. The group grappled with how people survive during times of violence by comparing Loung and her sister Chou; as well as Meng, Keav, and Kim. We had a good discussion of the book as memoir in terms of the voice of a child when an adult writes the book.

Loung writes on page pg 205 “I had never seen an execution”. The discussion turned to the execution of the Khmer Rouge prisoner and the italicized parts of the book – the death of pa, ma, and Keav.

I found a fascinating criticism of the book and asked the group their reaction to the criticisms, which included Loung was using the Khmer Rouge for commercial purposes, she was a racist, did not understand Cambodian culture (she was, after all a Chinese, light skinned Cambodian). From this point we had a discussion as to why Ung Loung wrote

the book. I presented some quotes from Ung, as to why she did write the book.

We ran out of time so I was unable to wrap up the discussion series by evaluating each book and the lessons learned. However, I think all enjoyed the series; certainly the number of participants did not fall off during the series. I was hesitant to choose this series but thoroughly enjoyed being the discussion leader. We all learned a great deal about the world at large and the conflicts which still live with us.

Katie Curtiss

## **In the Time of the Butterflies**

Because many people were unfamiliar with the history of the Dominican Republic, I provided a brief overview of it along with the usual remarks regarding the author and her body of work. I believe that this context really helped provide a foundation for some great discussion. Every participant seemed to have been really engrossed by the book, and I have to concur that Alvarez is a great author. The group liked the individual personalities that emerged of the four sisters in addition to the other characters, which made the troubles that they suffered that much more "real." We had a lengthy discussion on what life might be like under a dictatorship and especially how this might impact families and friendships. The "power" of the sisters in resisting the evils of the dictatorship as well as the sexism that they had to contend with led to an interesting exploration into the roles of women in society and the limitations/possibilities that they have to effect political and social change. This led to a discussion of the gender relationships in the book and how progressive the principal family was. Utilizing the character "Dede," we talked about what role survivors have and how a country or society can come to grip with past violence. Once the discussion unfolded this was a very energetic session in spite of being one of the largest.

Erich Frankland, Casper College

This was our first meeting with the violence series. After some introductory remarks and a biography of Alvarez, we proceeded around the table so that everyone could comment on *In the Time of the Butterflies*. This book has been used extensively as a summer reading for incoming college freshman and will be the book for the "One Book One Chicago" reading in October. This information prompted an animated discussion among our all women group as to whether or not this was a woman's book and how men would react to it. In the end the consensus was that men might emphasize different points, but that this was not a woman's book. Other points discussed were the following:

- the relationship among the sisters
- the family
- how individuals survive the everyday aspects of dictatorship

- how each sister evolved, how each came to the revolution, and why Dede did not
- Dede's role as oracle of the Butterflies
- revolution - in this case, what was their goal, was it achieved or not, how do the Butterflies differ (or not) from terrorists
- the role of the church
- and finally, what would compel us to act as the sisters acted

The book generated enthusiasm for the series in general. People read it carefully and came with copious notes.

--Barbara Gose

Discussion included: a sketch of the history of the Dominican Republic, including how it developed – or perhaps only recently left – the colonial era, including America's two occupations and how Trujillo adapted his dictatorship to stay on the right side of the United States during the early Cold War. An appreciation of how the author took care in drawing each of the characters: she succeeded in never making them "types," in the sense that their personalities were all fully drawn before the political events of the novel set them in motion. How they reacted to, and participated in, those events then made perfect sense, and never felt as though the author had created stereotypes to help make a point. This led to a discussion of how individuals in the group felt they would react in the circumstances in which the characters found themselves. This was made easier by the author showing how different the three sisters were, which made it easier to imagine following one or another of their paths: being of a political, almost radical bent from your early years, and therefore naturally being drawn to the danger and obvious justice of opposing the dictator's regime, to being drawn into events by family necessities, to having religious beliefs finally spur one into action. Finally, and perhaps anticipating future books, we discussed the particular nature of the dictatorship and oppression of the Trujillo regime. We considered the difference between "gangsterism" – a regime coveting and maintaining power to enrich itself and its friends – versus regimes motivated by a more pure ideology. The former, of which the Trujillo regime seems a member, seem to at least initially take steps, such as building an infrastructure for a country, that can win it adherents internally and from outside observers. Its corruption and oppression also seem to follow the somewhat more "rational" lines of organized crime, where its violence is exercised to achieve specific ends, only perhaps in its later stages beginning to use terror for the sake of terror.

Bob Southard

A small group enjoyed this final discussion in the Living With Violence: Conflict and Community in Contemporary Culture series for Alta library. Reception of the book ranged from vibrant enjoyment to take-it-or-leave-it. None of the participants seemed to feel it rated among the better

books we've read in this series although most thought it a good novel. Several commented on the quality of writing.

We spent time discussing what it may be like to live under totalitarianism, with frequent ironic references to our own lives. The theme of denial arose repeatedly. We talked about the ways in which we deny or fail to observe what's going on around us every day. We seldom recognize the import of what we've encountered until we view it in hindsight. While it's happening, we simply cope.

The discussion of the novel led us inexorably into a discussion of terrorism, which segued, oddly, to dialectics about such things as Internet filters.

The group focused on the issue of complacency and acceptance and how overt political control finds root in a populace which relinquishes its hold on power. The discussion reverberated around the puzzling question of whether it's really more conservative or liberal to feel a compelling need to maintain an iron-fisted control over the activities of one's government.

Peter Anderson, 3-18-04

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The group seemed to react positively to the book. They appreciated the variety of voices and perspectives. We discussed the relation between personal/private and public/political life and the way temperament influences participation in social and political life, comparing and contrasting the four sisters. We viewed the novel as a coming of age story for all the sisters, and discussed the role of genders in traditional and non-traditional activities. We worked on defining tyranny and violence, and spoke of fear as the (or "an"?) underlying motivation for both. We discussed the moral assumptions underlying tyranny and democracy, and the inherent underlying tyranny and democracy, and the inherent dangers in power ("Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.") We took up Alvarez's observation that the creation of myth around Las Mariposas is the same force that created the myth of Trujillo. We agreed to keep returning to the task of understanding violence, starting with our own individual capacities for it and our complicity in it. Needless, I think, to say, our discussion frequently touched on the USA's role in current world violence and the participants' thoughts.

Stephen Lottridge, Jan. 2004

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I started off our discussion about In the Time of the Butterflies with a brief history of the Dominican Republic. Other people, including one lady who had visited this country, chimed in. I followed the history with Julia Alvarez's brief autobiography of her writing life found on her official web site. Some of the things she said raised a few laughs and set the tone for further discussion. Armed with several maps and a list of characters, we set off. In the Time of the Butterflies

Sundance: The group enjoyed this novel overall, though most agreed that it jumped around a little too much. None of us wanted to read about graphic violence and were pleased with Alvarez's treatment of a brutal dictatorship. We also enjoyed how the author's fictionalization took us deep into a moment in history and gave us a richer understanding of it. We all wondered how accurate Alvarez's version of events was, for she herself says the characters are based on her own interpretation, and that they "took over" as she wrote. One group member said that the girls were actually machine-gunned in a field rather than strangled and beaten. This made us wonder about the accuracy of other events in the story. Still, the group appreciated Alvarez's engaging style, the way she hinted at events and lured us into the story.

Several good questions came up. Were the Mirabel sisters' deaths worth it? Did anything really change? I pointed out that until very recently, dictatorships controlled the D.R., and corruption is still a problem, even today. Another good question: how do people become heroes? Other than Minerva, most of the heroic people in the novel were sucked into heroism or fell into it by accident. We agreed this is a realistic portrayal of how heroes are made, and that Alvarez wanted to reveal humanistic pictures of heroes that showed both their strengths and weaknesses.

Several people brought pictures of Trujillo, and our conversation veered to related topics such as Communism and the governments of Haiti and Cuba. The group was unanimously harsh towards the U.S.'s history of supporting brutal dictatorships in Latin countries to serve its own purposes. Eventually I brought discussion back to the book by remarking that it must have been difficult to sacrifice family for the greater good. We ended discussion with a few quotable places from the end of the book. There is a good quote from Dede about the meaning of freedom (to be free is to be ourselves). Finally, we decided that the book shows that change is usually a painful, slow process.

--Kathy Bjornestad

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Chris's post reminded me that I need to get one up about our discussion here in Meeteetse last week.

We are doing the Living with Violence series, only we are cleverly calling it (thanks, Jenny!) the Journey Around the World series, which I hope will help stall the immediate attrition rate we'd get here if I announced that we were going to spend the winter reading about war and torture and so on. At least we are starting the series at the right time of winter: I had a professor in college who said he'd only teach the Inferno in the spring semester because reading it when the days got shorter and shorter was just a bad idea.

Anyway, we had nine people come to talk about Julia Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies, which is a cheerful little book about living under the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. I was slightly ill last week, and thus my recollection of the discussion is a bit hazy; my apologies in advance for that.

I began by talking a little bit about Julia Alvarez and by showing some pictures of the real Mirabal sisters (see <http://www.el-bohio.com/mirabal/>).

I had a whole slew of questions prepared about point of view and building suspense and the role of faith in the various sisters' lives and so on, but the participants got such a good discussion on the sisters and what motivated to get them involved and what it must have been like to live under Trujillo that I was reluctant to interrupt them. I did note that it was fascinating to read a book in which Castro is still a hero, and several people reminisced about when he was still seen as the good guy. We also talked a bit about what it must have been like to live under the Trujillo dictatorship and in what ways even our own society has some of those qualities--one person brought up the pressure there was to display an American flag, and another talked about the fight they are having about whether or not they can say grace before lunch at the senior center.

I was thinking about these discussion series and how we go about discussing the books. In some sense, I suppose I'm missing the purpose of the Living with Violence series since I'm not introducing it as being about violence.

My training is mostly as a writer, and therefore the things that interest me most in books are often the writerly ones--how is the story constructed? How does the action move forward? How are the characters defined? Etc. I wonder how the rest of you handle discussions in that regard? How much obligation do we have to discuss how books address the theme of the group we are reading?

Laura Crossett, Meeteetse Branch Library

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The Saratoga Book Discussion Group met to discuss the second book in the Contemporary International Writers Series, *In the Time of Butterflies*, on June 23, 2010. There were nine in attendance for this discussion and began with an overall reaction to the book. The group felt they all had a better understanding of this book than with *Wild Thorns*. However, some in the group did state it was difficult to get through the beginning of the book, but then couldn't put it down. A short history of the Dominican Republic and of the author was given, especially with respect to the author's connections to the underground movement, as the author's parents were also involved in the movement but fled to America to escape imprisonment.

The group was eager to discuss the personalities of the four sisters and stated they felt that all the sisters, with the exception of Dede, evolved; that Dede remained unsure about the revolution. The group felt that Dede didn't want to rock the boat and more of a conformist; that Dede was the one who was trying to be the protector of her sisters and was always worrying about them and their safety. It was also pointed out that Dede was the one to survive and therefore able to keep her sisters' stories alive. This led into a discussion of what we would do personally if we put ourselves in the Mirabal sisters' position and lived under a dictatorship. If we lived under a dictatorship with rigid control over the people, sexism, unjust imprisonment, etc., would or would we not be a part of an underground

movement according to our circumstances with family, etc?

Other questions that were raised:

- Why Minerva didn't take the warning from the sales clerk for what it was worth?
- Why did Minerva's fear of that warning dissolve?
- Was it worth it to take that chance? Especially with their husbands in jail and children at home?

These questions led to the conclusion of our discussion and it was left with the thought that the three sisters symbolize courage and strength for their country.

Stephanie Jeffers

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15 people attended this, the first discussion in the Living With Violence series at the wonderful Story library. I have been trying to talk this group into selecting this series for some time, so I was anxious about their response to the book. As it turns out, I needn't have worried. They were captivated by the book and felt that the violence, while there in the background throughout, was subdued in the actual telling of the story.

Initially we place the novel in its historical context and segued into the whole Cuba/Batista/Castro and even Che Rivera issues that were going on at about the same time as the Dominican Republic /Trujillo dictatorship. Some in the group told that reading the novel had spurred them into researching the history of that period. This got us into a discussion of the value of (good) historical fiction.

Our discussion of the story included the following topics (some of which veered off considerably into other areas)

\*Characterization of each of the sisters and the motivation for each.

\*The role of the patriarchal nature of that society in the lives and events.

\*The influence and importance of family in the society. How does it influence choices people make?

\*Revolutionists vs. Terrorists.

\*Gender - Is it a factor in the Mirabel sisters becoming such legends?

\*Was it all worth it? Would Trujillo have been brought down anyway?

The participants brought in lots of references to specific passages in our discussion, and we did spend time discussing Alvarez's Postscript at the end of the novel.

Several indicated that they intended to read other of Alvarez's writings. I have subsequently read her book of essays *Something to Declare* which I wish I had read before the discussion.

Though cold weather and scheduling conflicts kept some folks away, eight readers came together in Worland to discuss *In the Time of the Butterflies*—the final book in our series, *Living with Violence*. Though most readers liked this book better than the others selected for the series, they still found it depressing. The author displays remarkable skill in showing readers a violent, corrupt culture but manages to do so in a manner that focuses on the human story rather than the atrocity.

Unlike *Anil's Ghost* with its experimental organization, *In the Time of the Butterflies* follows a more conventional, linear time-line and conveys its story through a more familiar narrative. Our group also noted and approved of the masterful job Alvarez did in creating and maintaining four distinctive narrative voices. Furthermore, the author matures the voices as time passes but maintains their unique qualities. Another reader mentioned the author's use of details. By weaving a cloth of fine detail, Alvarez brings the garden and prison scenes to life. All these writing strategies work together to make this book an interesting read but Alvarez also works the plot to make the book intriguing.

Though we learn early on in the story that three of the sisters are killed, Alvarez keeps our interest creating real tension, through real relationships, and family drama. The drama is so intense, readers can forget how this story plays out: at least for a moment or two at a time. More importantly, the Mirabol women represent hope, a commodity nearly non-existent in *Anil's Ghost*, and *Bend of the River* and but a distant dream in *First They Killed My Father*. While deposing Trujillo doesn't resolve the Dominican Republic's problems it stops the terror for a time and cracks open a prison door that might allow access to a better world. This small victory sets *In the Time of the Butterflies* apart from the other books and gives readers a sense of hope's precious nature.

For reading groups considering this series, I suggest you end with this book so your readers avoid ending on a completely depressing note.

Norleen Healy

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Fourteen people ( I think, darn I always forget to count) gathered at the Sheridan County Fulmer Public Library to discuss Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*. First I gave some background on Ms. Alvarez, sharing some information from an interview she gave in 2000. (Citizen of the World: An interview with Julia Alvarez. Source: *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 274. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.) I then asked the group to characterize each sister; followed by a discussion of what politicized each of the sisters and what made each sister join the revolution. We also discussed Dede and why she did not join in the revolution, how she survived her sisters' deaths and her role as the "oracle". I then talked about the structure of the novel. For this part of the discussion I used some quotes from the interview with Ms. Alvarez. A novel can be "a process of 'historization' that does not remove

women from history but enables women to see themselves as a part of history".

We discussed Ms Alvarez's choice of form, which she felt allowed her to generate a sense of the Mirabal sisters' courage and the magnitude of their sacrifices, as well as humanize them. I also gave some background on the structure of the book as testimony, "commemorafiction" and the role of collective memory. Alvarez speaks about her novel as being a new narrative space: the in between space of history and memory, vernacular and official, fact and fiction that can be 'entextualized' in a novel.

All but two members really enjoyed the book and appreciated Ms. Alvarez's style of writing. Many brought up passages and incidents in the book that they felt brought them a greater understanding of the sisters. The two members who did not like the book said they did not like the "feminist" sentiments in the book, nor Ms. Alvarez's historical fiction.

We have now read two books in the series and the group is definitely enjoying the books. I gave the group some information on the background of the civil war in Sri Lanka, for their next book, *Anil's Ghost*. Additionally I gave the readers some themes to ponder as they read the book. I am so fortunate to have such a great group.

Katie Curtiss

## **We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families**

I must give credit to this group. *Living with Violence* is a difficult series, and still, eight people attended our discussion of the genocide in Rwanda. At least three of these did not finish the book, or even get more than forty pages into it. But they attended to hear what was said and to discuss in generalities. Most who did read to the end admitted they didn't want to and were disturbed by the book. It gave one woman who quit reading nightmares. It was a meeting that started on its own before everyone had arrive and also, finished early. It made a powerful impact on everyone there.

Participants touched on the main themes that prior groups generally discuss: reasons for the genocide; the role of the international community and why it did so little to stop it; the behavior and circumstances of individuals portrayed (the General, Paul, the minister in Laredo); how people could be induced to kill or allow themselves to be killed; the camps; reconciliation and its difficulties. Someone noted of the lack of dogs, another conveyed frustration with the difficult names of people and places and so on. The movie *Hotel Rwanda* was brought up and recommended - we may schedule a group viewing later in the spring.

I presented some information that I thought would help them understand some of the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects underlying the genocide including: the evolution of tribal divisions from occupational status

(croppers/herders) to class status (aristocrats/peasants) to racial status (Hutus/Tutsis); the role of colonizers and foreigners (Speke) in these distinctions; the concept of outgroups (enemies) to build community cohesion; the political use of terminology such as genocide; the importance or non-importance of technology in effecting the genocide (Holocaust vs. Rwanda, the use of radio, telephone, fax); the distinction between the civil war and the genocide.

It was interesting that President Bush visited Africa, including Rwanda at the time we were reading the book. We discussed current and past events in Africa and elsewhere, i.e., Darfur, Europe in WWII, USA. We talked about where we were in 1994 when the genocide occurred and what we recall of it. Many did not know it was occurring, and of those who did, I believe all were like me - I relied on the media to inform me of events (how else?) and was unable from that information to tell, virtually from week to week, whether the Hutus were the "good guys" (which I recall being the general slant) or the "bad guys" and then what did that make the Tutsis? All very confusing at the time. However, I do feel that all of the participants came away from this experience and discussion more aware of the world outside of America and the conditions so far removed from our own experience to almost defy belief. While not liking it one bit, they felt better for it. I call that a success.

The group was not very interested in the author. Outside of where he was born and who he worked for they were far more interested in what he wrote about in this book. They decided that since reading the book those who have not seen the movie "Hotel Rwanda" would not go see it. This was a good book to end this series on because they became quite interested, more so than in the previous books, in why the international community does so little to try to stop genocides around the world. I gave them the status of the cases before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The names of the people who have been and are still be tried were all mentioned in the book.

They were amazed that Tutsi people seemed to be so calm about being butchered and tortured. I gave them some background on the original territories and migration of the Tutsi and Hutu people who came from northern Nilotic and southern Bantu tribes respectively. We talked about the problem the genocide in Rwanda has created in neighboring countries. They wondered how the present genocide in Darfur, Sudan, compared with this one in Rwanda. I asked them how they felt the genocide in this or any other country we read about in this series compared to our killing of Native Americans as we created the United States of America.

--Richard Kalber

We were glad we had read it and we only wished that more people would. I brought the discussion up to date with articles about both the international tribunal and the local (grass) courts and their trials. We spent most of our

time discussing the reasons for the genocide, the failure of the international community to act in the genocide and their willingness to offer aid in the camps, how reconciliation can take place, what the future is for Rwanda, and why the United States responds as it does and what we might do differently. While we were a small group, all had read the book and had opinions and were willing to share them. We ended by talking more generally about the future of Africa and compared Naipaul's views to those of Gourevitch as to this future. We debated the role that racism plays in the United States' lack of interest in Africa. Finally, we were interested in what made the individuals in Gourevitch's book act - Paul, Odette, Kgame, to name just a few.

--Barbara Gose

The group discussed the detailed history of Rwanda provided by the author. Of particular interest was how the now-accepted tribal divisions (accepted at least by the West, and endemic in the media) were largely creations of the colonizers of Rwanda, having roots in rather strange European notions of judging "evolutionary" advancement by appearances of various native groups, and cemented as the colonial powers found the distinctions useful, as this categorization allowed them to in a sense divide and conquer, giving privilege to one ethnic group to help control the other. Related to this, we discussed the author's strong argument that the most devastating (in terms of trying to decide upon helpful courses of action) mistake that can be made when we confront these genocidal horrors is to accept the notion that they are inevitable, a product of centuries-long strife where each side has its grievances and the roots are lost in the mists of time. In essence, the author argues that this is an abdication: these horrors have specific causes, and it is possible, and in fact required, to take the time to sort out the victimizers from the victims. This rest of the discussion is hard to categorize. This was probably the most challenging book to discuss, both due to the numbing horror of the events so thoroughly described, and the author's anticipation and discussion of so many of the issues raised, so that it was somewhat difficult to add to what Gourevitch set out. In a sense, we nibbled around the edges: trying to imagine what dynamic could lead hundreds of thousands of people to follow the murderous directives of their "leaders;" how we might react if our own community was seized by violence that was even a fraction of what occurred in Rwanda; considering both the complicity and bravery described; remembering how we all learned of the genocide, and what we thought at the time; and considering the responsibilities, if any, of our country, and the West in general, when confronted with this sort of murderous breakdown of society elsewhere.

Bob Southard

The group agreed the book was very powerful, especially since Gourevitch introduced philosophical concepts around which to organize the reportage. I recommended Romeo Dallaire's memoir of his work as the head of UNAMIR as

an accompanying view. Much of the discussion was philosophical and psychological. How can people be induced to kill, to participate in genocide, to allow themselves to be killed? What is the inherent violence of colonialism and economic exploitation? We returned to the theme of the inherent violence of ideology, and the tendency to evoke (or create) an outside enemy in order to build a cohesive community. Comparisons to the rise of Nazi Germany, the rise of Stalinist Russia, the decimation of American Indians, and many other historical instances of massive violence were invoked. People spoke of their own violence and fears of it, in others and in themselves. The group returned to the question that intrigues and baffles – is violence inherent in human nature, or is it a learned behavior, Nature (the reptilian/fight-flight brain), or nurture (learned behavior as a response to fear and expression of desire)? Is war (violence in general) obsolete, as the Dalai Lama says, and we are just slow learners, or is it hard-wired and so needs to be channeled and controlled but cannot be eradicated?

Stephen Lottridge, 3-25-04

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We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families by Philip Gourevitch was a very intense and disturbing book. Some found it difficult to finish but all agreed it was necessary to have read. Many remembered when the genocides in Rwanda occurred.

There was a wealth of material to present including a detailed interview with Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley and Philip Gourevitch presented in part as a live interview.

There was concern about how the bodies were left and how they were deposited. This was compared to Germany, Cambodia, and Iraq.

It was suggested that all African states were affected by European Colonizers. That Africa should take responsibility for itself, and others should stay out. Sometimes the problems of helping others does more harm than good.

Whose job was it to stop the massacres? There was a lively discussion of the international community, and how Africa was ignored and exploited.

Finally, a newspaper clipping dated 8/26/03 told of Rwandans vote in first presidential election.

During a discussion a menacing machete was lying on the table!

Betty Shurley, Jan. 2004

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Fourteen people gathered to discuss this book. At the end of the discussion a woman asked if anyone would have read this book outside the series. All present answered no. All present then agreed that they were so glad that they had read it. The last word came from a young

woman who asserted that reading this book was courageous. For every one of us the book proved painful. Yet it provoked a full discussion. I started by giving a short biography of the author. Then I pointed out three articles I would use to comment during the evening and told the group that anyone could borrow the articles after our discussion. I will list some sources at the end of this post in case any other discussion leaders want them. We talked about genocide, its definition, incidents, and the role of the U.S. and the U.N. in calling actions in Rwanda "genocide." Following the general discussion of genocide we discussed the following: what should the U.S. have done, how does our action in Rwanda compare to Iraq, what complicated our (government, media, individual) understanding of the tragedy in Rwanda, how does one recover, punish, accept blame and live with oneself following this genocide, and, finally, what is our individual responsibility. We (rather painfully) examined some of our opposition to U.S. action in Iraq and compared it to our belief that our government should have done more for Rwanda. We focused on General Dallaire and his inability to move beyond his failure to help Rwanda. He is a tragic figure. All of us appreciated the author's inclusion of history in the book. This helped us put the genocide in Rwanda in the context both of history and geography. You may recall that we have found that to be a problem with some of the other books. I would repeat my request for any general history/politics books on Southeast Asia and Africa. To people looking at series for next year, our Lander group is unanimous in recommending this series.

Websites are  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil/etc/slaught.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil/readings/>

I especially recommend Samantha Power's article in The Atlantic Monthly. It is cited in the second site above.

Barbara Gose

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Sundance: I began discussion by reading excerpts from a variety of reviews, and the group agreed—along with the reviewers—that Philip Gourevitch's novel is an important book and an enlightening one. The readers enjoyed the author's very quotable writing style and the forceful and masterful way he presented his point of view.

I followed the reviews with a short clip from *Hotel Rwanda*, which most but not the entire group had seen. The movie tells Paul, the hotel manager's, story, and after showing the clip I read his quote about how everyone has free choice. We then discussed what made some people kill and others resist. A few questions kept coming up over and over, such as why does genocide happen? We answered this with words like *fear*, *resentment*, and *power*, but power to get what, one member asked? This same person remarked that if you believe people come in "kinds," you set the groundwork for hate. Looking at our own country, we decided this is exactly how we think. Perhaps it is human nature to think that way.

Several members of our group had traveled in Africa, and one member had been in Tanzania in 1996, shortly after the genocide. She shared that she had had no idea what was going on even though she was near one of the infamous refugee camps. This brought on much discussion about how we cannot rely on our media to report fully or accurately on world events, and that the book made us feel blind and somewhat helpless. Even as we spoke, war had broken out in the Sudan, but did we hear much about it? This led to another point—that our government almost never intervenes for purely altruistic interests, but is (always?) motivated by economic interests. The group compared our actions during the Rwanda genocide to times throughout history when we and the Western world in general have supported the wrong side.

Finally, we discussed justice and the need people in Rwanda have for it, so they can move on. We also discussed briefly the role education plays in creating events such as genocide. Surely the poor, uneducated people of Rwanda were easily taken in by the Hutu Power radio's blatant propaganda, but can educated people be taken in just as easily if the propaganda machines are simply more sophisticated?

Whew! This book provoked some of the most meaningful (and long-lasting) discussions yet. We all felt changed after reading this book, and we all agreed it should be a must-read for everyone.

--Kathy Bjornestad

## Wild Thorns

Attendance fell to six readers for the last book in the series on violence. Incredibly, half of our regular readers faded away, I believe, due to the difficult subject matter of the series. Of the readers who saw it through, no one voiced sorrow that it was over, but all were enriched by the experience somehow, and felt they would certainly have a better understanding of current events around the globe as well as other cultures. In that regard, this series seems more successful in meeting the purpose of the discussion groups than many, many others. Maybe because it touches us where we really do not want to go - our core fear of violence/killing/atrocity.

We talked about the characters in the story and the events, but not too much or in great depth. What did seem to surface as topics veered into areas of "local" concern to the USA, Wyoming and neighboring states, or our communities. Race/religion became the underlying reference point for comments regarding bilingualism ("our" immigrant forbearers learned English to which I pointed out they, however, didn't learn much Indian language), multiculturalism (a reason for the demise of civility in America?), our experiences with "non-white" colleagues, friends, co-workers, neighbors, friends, family in our lives (at times verging on the cusp of uncomfortable in its expression), the rise of mosques EVEN here, etc.etc.etc.etc.

I provided some biographical information on the author, although there wasn't much to be found compared to the other authors. I also gave a quick review of the history of the West Bank from British colonialism to the current status of no man's land. We thought the portrayal of the plight, while not balanced, was not skewed to the Palestinian point of view, for example the Israeli soldiers weeping when the child came to the prison looking for father. We felt she attempted to portray life as she experienced it with all of its difficulties (working in Israel in order to not starve, family dynamics and tensions created by the situation, the militancy of the young boys, the ambivalence of Usama about bombing a bus Adil would be on, and so on - everyday life in that part of the world).

We are reading Rural America(???) in the fall and it will be a nice break. But I encourage every group to attempt this series. It surely gave every reader in our group a greater understanding of our world and ourselves and of violence, which is ageless and forever.

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This book generated as much discussion as any this Pinedale group has read in a couple years. Several brought books on Israeli-Palestinian relations to share. One participant served in the Peace Corp in Yemen some years ago and added some good comments as did one who traveled for some time in this area a couple years ago. The group got into the history of this part of the world from Ottoman control and decided they had to go all the way back to Old Testament time to get the feel of what the people there live with.

The group discussed terrorism, oppression, politics, culture, religion, and even international policy relating to Israel and surrounding countries. What does "shared oppression" mean? That took some time. Then they talked about the idea of martyrdom and whether any of the group would be willing to fight or blow themselves up as suicide bombers in a cause such as the characters were living through.

Decided there are several ways to be called a martyr, voluntary and forced. They also talked about oppression in other countries. The interplay of ethnicity, culture, religion, and other nation influence create a very complex problem. All agreed this is not a book they liked very well but one which opened their eyes and their minds. All of them would like to know more about that part of their world.

--Richard Kalber

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While a number of people who met to discuss Wild Thorns believed the book to be choppy in writing, with characters not fully developed, nonetheless the entire group was glad that they had read the book. Their reasons were these: reading about real people instead of news statistics, gaining insight into everyday life of people under occupation, understanding that reasons for and types of defiance vary, and counterbalancing what most readers believe to be a one sided view of the Arab - Israeli conflict.

We also gained perspective that little has changed in thirty years since the book was written. We benefited greatly from a new member of the Riverton readers group who has recently moved here after serving in the American embassy in Jordan. She had spent over a decade in the Middle East and was willing to give her insights into the Palestinian plight. And a word to discussion leaders - Carol Deering found the Iowa interview with the author. It is worth getting as I got a better understanding of the author's political views and how that infused her writing of this novel.

--Barbara Gose

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Some participants believed this novel was unsuccessful as a literary work. The primary complaint was that the characters seemed one-dimensional, created as "types" rather than fully-rounded personalities, in order to symbolize one or another sort of Palestinian. For instance, the "terrorist" character appeared on the scene fully-formed, and there was little exploration of how or why he became the way he was. The author seemed more interested in simply categorizing Palestinians – the terrorist, the common shop-keeper, the Palestinian who no longer lived in Palestine – and having those categories interact than in providing nuance or an explanation of how they came to be as they are. There was some historical discussion, focused on how the Palestine/Israel situation evolved to its current posture, but perhaps most striking to the participants was how the novel could have been based on today's news reports from that region, even though the books were written 25 years ago. The group was also aware that apparently inclusion of this novel in discussion groups had caused some controversy, apparently based on the notion that a novel written by a Palestinian would be biased against Jews or Israel. First, the group thought that idea gave readers little credit, as they understood every book had a specific author with a unique perspective. It's a given that a novel is not meant as balanced documentary. Second, and more important, the group did not feel the novel was biased. The general feeling was that the novel had little to do with the Israelis, and focused almost exclusively on the interactions of Palestinians among themselves, portraying the strengths and weaknesses of the internal workings of that society, with very little attention, other than as backdrop, given to the Israelis. As a matter of fact, the group found the portrayals of the Israeli army quite neutral, with some of the soldiers written sympathetically, including most notably the one murdered during the novel.

Bob Southard

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Some participants did not like the book. They found the characters flat and the writing jumpy. Someone there spoke of the kidney dialysis machine and I identified the difference between a life support system and a facilitating environment – the former maintaining existence, the latter allowing people to thrive – that metaphor proved fruitful. We discussed the relationship between individuals and society, and how underlying values and assumptions

impel individual and group behavior. The question of free will as opposed to social/political/military power captured our attention. We addressed questions such as: can political power/organization exist without violence or the threat of violence? What is the power, if any, of compassion in a world of violence? Can we effectively oppose violence on a large scale if we induce conflict in our private lives? Are anger, fear, sadness and desire primarily sources of violence or reactions to it? Conversation became specific about our present role in the world as arrogant arbiters of world order. I try to keep discussion open for a variety of views, but many participants feel strongly that the USA continues to foster violence and hatred. Many found the world view of the book hopeless. But toward the end, we identified the rule of law and the diversion of violent impulses into ritualized conflict (sports) as possible rays of hope, though dim ones.

Stephen Lottridge, Jan., 2004

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My first thought, upon starting this book, was to thank whatever gods may be that I did not have to lead a discussion on Sahar Khalifeh's book back in my hometown, where I have both Israeli and Palestinian friends. Discussing it in Meeteetse, where none of the seven people present at the discussion had direct middle eastern ties, mean that for the most part we were able to discuss the book and not simply fall into a who was there first argument about the Holy Land.

I began by talking about Khalifeh's history, noting that this was one of her earliest works and that she later became known as a feminist. In an interview published in the Iowa Review in 1980 (let me know if you'd like me to, uh, "lend" you a copy), she talks a bit about how she started out writing novels that were mostly about men because she didn't think books about women would be taken as seriously. The group--which, like many of these discussion groups, is primarily made up of older women--had a good deal of sympathy for that perspective.

The discussions where I like the book and no one else does are always much better than the discussions like this one, where I was largely unimpressed with the book and most of the participants liked it, but I do my best. We talked about how although the book was written in the 1970s, it could, aside from the references to Kissinger and Arafat (although Arafat only died a few years ago), be one that was written today. We also discussed how it's interesting that in this book and in others we've read in this series, American culture is well-known and prevalent in a way that other cultures are not known here. For instance, Wild Thorns is full of footnotes explaining that a person mentioned in the text is a famous pop star or playwright or what have you in the Middle East, and none of us had ever heard of any of them--whereas there are Joan Baez records playing during one scene in A Bend in the River, which takes place deep inside Africa.

I pointed out that this is the first book we've read in this series (plus the book we started with, Stones for Ibarra by Harriet Doerr) in which the author not only comes from the

country in question but also lived there during the time period the book covers, but that did not draw much of a response.

I'm looking forward to our next stop on the tour (Sri Lanka, via Anil's Ghost). I'll let you know when we get there.

Laura Crossett Meeteetse Branch Library

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The Saratoga Book Discussion Group met to discuss the first book in the Contemporary International Writers series, *Wild Thorns* by Sahar Khalifeh, on June 2, 2010. There were twelve in attendance for this discussion and began with a brief overview of the history of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and a background of the author. One attendee stated she had read the Koran which provided much insight into the religious background for the rest of the group and the discussion to follow.

One of the major topics discussed dealt with the two differing views/definitions of survival between Usuma and Adil. The group felt that Usuma looked at survival from an idealist point of view; that survival was through political independence. In contrast, Usuma's cousin, Adil, viewed survival as having a job, even if it was in Israel, and keeping food on the table for his family. The group was overwhelmed with the idea that Usuma felt the revolution was so important that he would kill his own cousin if that's what it took.

The topic of the varying definition of survival led into further discussion of other things that resulted from the occupation and the idea that economics can determine history. Such topics included social fragmentation, the weakening of the local Palestinian businesses, dependency on the Israelis for work, the demolition of Palestinian homes, political tendencies and the indignities such as the checkpoints and searches.

The overall reaction to the book was that it was a difficult read. Some felt they were not as familiar with the history of the occupation and many stated that this was the first book they have read of a Middle Eastern nature. Some expressed their discouragement that there hasn't been much progress or change in the West Bank since the book was written over thirty years ago. The discussion concluded with a recent editorial in the Casper Star Tribune, brought in by an attendee that addressed the continued Israeli/Palestinian conflict at present.

Stephanie Jeffers

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10 people gathered to discuss *Wild Thorns*. This is a smaller number than usual for whatever reason, most likely the difficulty of the book. Most of those who did attend felt the book to be difficult in terms of really engaging the reader and "hard to follow." In spite of that, the attendees had, for the most part, finished it, and all participated in a highly energetic discussion that went well beyond the usual time.

I began by reviewing (in so far as I was able) the background of the Israeli-Palestine conflict with help from

a couple of participants who, though they came from different political perspectives, did have a sense of the history. This part of the discussion evolved into arguments for and against both sides of the conflict illustrating well (as we agreed) the overwhelming complexity of the whole issue which certainly the novel illustrated. As Adil says, "There's more than one dimension to the picture."

In our discussion of the novel. we talked about the various characters and how they deal with the Occupation. The group was most sympathetic to Adil, but we did have to consider how his perspective does encourage the status quo rather than any change. They felt that Usama is a "terrorist," and we tried to define that label (another aspect of the discussion that segued into current issues). I related that I had read a review of the novel that contended that Nationalism was the villain in the novel -- that it prompts Usama and Basil to destroy their families; it kills Zuhdi; and it disallows any practical solutions. However, some in the group didn't feel that there was that sense of national unity among the characters in the novel, that it was more local and fragmented.

I asked for some examples of humanism which the group readily grasped. We talked about the many ironies that the author uses to illustrate the absurdity of the whole situation and agreed that we were left with a sense of how hopeless a solution seemed to be. All agreed that in the 30 or so years since the novel had been published, little has changed, and what has changed seems to have been for the worse.

We compared this novel to the last (In the Time of the Butterflies), especially in terms of the motivation for and logic of "revolution".

Overall, even though it was not a compelling book to read for most of the group, the discussion was provocative and certainly fraught with humanistic considerations.

Norleen Healy

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Fourteen people arrived for the discussion of *Wild Thorns*; our first discussion in this series. Thanks to advice from Norleen Healy I decided to provide maps and background for each book when the book is picked up. Hence for this book I provided an insert with maps of Israel. Additionally I provided a general background to the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. Additionally a thank you to the person who suggested reading in the *Iowa Review: An Interview with Sahar Kalifeh by Peter Nazareth*. It was enormously helpful for background information on Sahar Kalifeh, and crafting discussion questions for the book.

We discussed class differences and generational tensions within the Palestinian areas and the meaning of insiders and outsiders. The various perspectives of those who left and came back, contrasted to those who stayed and tried to survive. What is the design of occupation? What is the

relationship between occupation/disintegration as presented by Adil? We had a good discussion of how and why Usama would come to the conclusion that killing even those he knows would be the best way to fight Israeli oppression. In discussing this I pointed to pages 86 and 87 and the text, (I summarize here): *the value of the individual is of no importance in the fate of community, and the value of the individual only exists through the group.*

I planned on asking the group about the idea of recognizing our shared “humanity” in the book. However, a member of the group brought it up and then led us into a good discussion of recognizing the “other” as a human being. We discussed the incident in the market when the Israeli office was killed and the reaction of Adil and Um Sabir. Here the interview with Sahar and Kalifeh in the Iowa Review was really helpful.

I asked if the group felt Sahar Kalifeh was pro one side or the other; all agreed she was not. I asked if nationalism was seen in the book – as hero or villain.

Overall it was a good discussion. I found that there were moments when members wanted to sit and reflect. I felt it important to not emphasize right or wrong, and the group did not want to go there. The group agreed they really liked reading a story which introduced them to Palestinian life, its smells, traditions, markets and families.

As the discussion ended I asked if anyone has visited Israel. Debbie Iverson shared her experiences and I shared my experiences from my trip to Cairo and Israel.

I think most of us left the discussion more aware of the complexity of the situation and a deeper understanding of that complexity.

Katie Curtiss