

Many Americas

MANY AMERICAS 1

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Overview

In a 1782 description of life in the British Colonies of America, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur posed—and attempted to answer—the question "What is an American?" Crèvecoeur heads a long line of writers who have struggled to articulate the beliefs, values, personal traits, and socioeconomic conditions that are typically "American." While these attempts to create a unifying description of America have provided certain familiar images, such images come largely from "mainstream" culture and have omitted many Americans.

From the beginning, America has been a mosaic. In many ways, ours is a culture of difference—of "other" cultures, languages, ethnic groups, and economies. Frequently, those who inhabit "other" Americas feel they are ignored by the larger culture; sometimes, in the words of Luis Rodriguez's memoir *Running Scared*, they even feel "disposable."

The six works in this series record the experience of those "invisible" and "disposable" Americas. Such authentically American voices challenge readers to consider the interplay of the ideal and the real in America's self-image. Sometimes harsh, sometimes sorrowful, sometimes playful, these books offer us the opportunity to shape an America that is more inclusive and accepting of diversity. In this way, their vision is a deeply hopeful one.

By turns hilarious, astringent, and heartbreaking, the twenty-two interwoven tales in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1994) depict life for modern Native Americans in and around the Spokane Indian Reservation. Struggling against poverty, hunger, alcoholism, loss, and broken dreams, Alexie's characters fight difficult battles, often using humor as a weapon, to achieve a hard-won, complex sense of self, integrity, and community.

In a briskly honest, witty, insightful memoir, *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled* (1998), Nancy Mairs, afflicted with MS, teaches able-bodied readers how to re-envision "disability." As one reviewer noted, this is "a chronicle of inspired adaptation, spiritual as well as

physical, to limits. The aim is the creation of joy" (Sallie Bingham, *The New Mexican*).

Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca—Gang Days in L. A.* (1993) recounts the poet's coming of age in the Hispanic gang culture of East Los Angeles. Dedicated to twenty-five childhood friends who died the victims of gang violence and written for his son, the book vividly captures the desperation and brutality of gang culture, as well as exploring its roots. Alternately sad, chilling, and hopeful, Rodriguez's memoir asks us to consider the ultimate social price of a life-style he calls "collective suicide."

Doris Grumbach's journal of her seventy-fourth year, *Extra Innings* (1995), like its predecessor, *Coming Into the End Zone*, contains the sometimes poetic, sometimes tart observations of a writer during a relatively ordinary, yet active, year of later life. Her accounts of diverse literary, family, and personal matters occur in the context of a larger search for peace and "home" in her permanent relocation to Maine during this time period.

Set in segregated Louisiana in the late 1940s, Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) tells the story of a young black man who is condemned to death for his role in a robbery. His mother wants only that her son know, before his death, that he is a man, worthy of dignity and self respect. To this end, she enlists the local schoolteacher to visit her son in jail. Who learns what from whom is at the heart of this story that speaks about race as well as issues of crime and punishment in American society.

In Kaye Gibbons's first novel *Ellen Foster* (1987), the young orphan girl, having heard that the Foster children have a stable, good home, has named herself "Ellen Foster." Resilient, naïve, and intelligent, Ellen is in the literary tradition of the precocious child narrator. Through Ellen, Kaye Gibbons addresses the lives of "cast-off" children. As believers in the human ability to transcend harm, both Ellen and her creator remain optimistic through great struggles.

Suggested Further Reading

For further exploration of the American mosaic, 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.

Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina*

Robert Olen Butler, *Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Arranged Marriage: Stories*

John Gilgun, *Music I Never Dreamed Of*

Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*

Leonard Kriegel, *Flying Solo: Reimagining Manhood, Courage, and Loss*

Robert Laxalt, *Sweet Promised Land*

David Leavitt, *The Lost Language of Cranes*

Catherine Liu, *Oriental Girls Desire Romance*
Adrian C. Louis, *Wild Indians and Other Creatures; Ceremonies of the Damned*
Paule Marshall, *Brownstones, Brown Girl*
Toni Morrison, *Paradise*
Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine; Wife*
Chaim Potek, *The Chosen*
Tomas Rivera, . . . *and the Earth Did Not Devour Him*
Danzy Senna, *Caucasia*
Luis Alberto Urrea, *Nobody's Son: Notes From an American Life*
Helena Maria Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*
Wakako Yamauchi, *Songs My Mother Taught Me*

General Commentary on the Series

The series was an interesting one, and the books selected to represent the various "subcultures" that make up America were well chosen. The readers in our series were mixed in their reactions to the titles, but the group kept up its membership roll through out the series, so I take that as a sign they found the books interesting.

We knew going in to the series that each book was selected because it depicted people "different" from mainstream America. I saw it to be my job as a scholar to help the group define "mainstream" and "different." Juxtaposing those terms invites comparison of groups and of people, which I believe is not a great first step in heating the burner under our melting pot. It might have been a good thing to include in the series one book that was purported to exemplify mainstream America. I can't think just now what book that might be, but it would be one that by definition would not succeed in that goal in modern, multi-cultural America. But reading such a book would give participants some external point of comparison when learning about the other cultures. At the Eppson Center, participants were inclined to use only their own personal experience as a point of reference, and I'm pretty sure that would happen no matter where the books were discussed. Unfortunately, a frequent outcome of this internal point of comparison was a great deal of "...well, I've known Mexicans, and they are all...." or ".... all the blacks I've known act like...." etc. The articulation of these opinions was a source of lots of discussion among the group, which is a goal to shoot for. The higher goal was sometimes lost as a result, however. Instead of swapping stories about "the handicapped" and so on, our discussions were much more fruitful when we discussed the books not in terms of the groups they represented, but in terms of the human experiences they represented. The nature of this series invites comparison, which at its worst also invites criticism and gossip. At its best it invites reflection and impetus for change. The former was the easiest for the group to slip in to and created a "fun" atmosphere for people. Perhaps any discussion of ideas is better than none at all.

As far as specific books, other than adding the unknown (by me) "norming" book, I was satisfied with the other

material. The novels were interesting to the group, especially the Gaines book. Ellen Foster was not as strong a book, in my opinion. It did, however, invite us to discuss the relationship in this country between the powerful and the powerless, and was a good book to read early on for that reason. I believe that the non-fiction memoirs worked best in the series. As a newbie to this process, I'm wondering if plays are ever added to the list of items in each series. They would provide a different challenge to readers and are a literary source that deals with contemporary issues in a way that is very immediate and direct. Just a thought. Perhaps they could form a series on their own and be lumped together by theme, such as American plays of the 1990s.

Julianne Couch

All of the books in this series were well received. However, a few were not as interesting to the members as the rest. ELLEN FOSTER was not as complex as it could have been, which is to say the themes of youth, abuse, and poverty were not as well developed as they might have been. Many had trouble with the young protagonist's adult way of dealing with her problems, too, but this was ameliorated somewhat when I told them this was at least semi-autobiographical--at least we had much discussion in terms of the author's possible psychological motivation for creating such a character. EXTRA INNINGS was also less well received. The author seemed in some ways less representative of the theme of aging in America because of her means. However, by discussion's end, I think the group generally appreciated that she was free to be negative about old age and death, whereas initially many of the older members agreed with the critics of Grumbach's earlier novel in this regard.

Michael McIrvin

I thought this was one of the strongest books in the series and was rather surprised to learn I was practically alone in this feeling. We discussed at length why so many didn't "like" this book--were they uncomfortable with her message? viewpoint? tone? Are we used to hearing about our racist society, but put off when we're attacked for being insensitive to the physically handicapped or "crippled" as she refers to herself? The debate was thought-provoking--as obviously was the books for the group. I also discussed her background and other works--and read several reviews about this book, which were very positive. The group wasn't swayed--though moved by her words, most still weren't going to pass the book along.

Ann Noble

Waist-High in the World was the first book discussed in the WCH Many Americas series at Upton on January 11. Several participants commented to me beforehand that they weren't sure how we were going to discuss such a book. Mairs' sometimes in-your-face 'voice' in the text had made them apprehensive. Happily, at the end of the

evening all members agreed that the book had indeed been worthwhile, and they had learned a lot from it about the world of the disabled and the issues surrounding that world.

I introduced the series by likening us to a tour group exploring worlds unknown. Susan, the P.D., is the bus driver and I'm the guide who offers a few pertinent background details as we approach each site. The group got a kick out of this analogy, and it seemed to allow us to begin an inquiry into worlds outside our immediate experience. One point Mairs makes in much of her writing is how words define us. For instance, she proudly calls herself a cripple because it exactly describes her condition. To begin the Upton session I asked everyone to jot down a few definitions of themselves on index cards and then share them around the table. My caveat was that descriptors had to be outside the usual family labels of wife, mother, etc. This made the task more difficult for participants but they eventually came up with descriptors such as reader, cook, lifelong learner, horsewoman, etc.

Most of our early discussion centered on disabled children and the cruelty they must endure from their peers. We discussed why children seem to label each other in this way and decided that constant pressures of fitting in cause us all to look for ways to differentiate ourselves from others. One argument that Mairs didn't seem to win with our group was the need for mainstreaming disabled children and providing them with the services they required to do this. One teacher summed up the general view, "why do disabled kids use up so many financial resources when there are plenty of kids-in-the-middle who need special services also but don't qualify."

Several group members shared stories about disabled friends and relatives, and we discussed the question of identity again-are we defined by the disease, or is the disease defined by our response to it? Apparently there are two MS victims in Upton who cope with their conditions in very different ways-one as a 'fighter' and the other as a more passive victim. One group member has an adult daughter with MD and we discussed how she seemed to have the kind of personality that allows her to cope well with it (or is it the other way around?). Other topics discussed included severely disabled "freaks" such as twins joined in one body; how small communities accept and participate in the lives of the disabled people among them; and about travelling with a disabled companion. We enjoyed Mairs descriptions of travelling in England and in the national parks and group members had similar stories to share. We discussed the ADA and came to some better understanding of its importance, although again we questioned whether the cost/benefits were fair to business and taxpayers. (We could not quite get into the hard question of whether this kind of right was an inalienable one of citizenship or not.) Everyone agreed that they'd also learned a lot from

Mairs in reference to accessible home design for the physically disabled. Other topics stemming from Mairs' ideas concerned the enormous commitment required from one's caregivers, which in her case is her husband. We discussed the American 'custom' that a disabled person's

family is expected to be most responsible for their care rather than societal institutions. We had few answers for these hard questions but we pondered them nevertheless. Other hard questions included should people be allowed to choose to abort severely disabled fetuses, the promises and problems of genetic testing, fetus sex identification through amniocentesis, who can define quality of life for anyone else?

Some things we'd learned from the book and briefly discussed included: sexuality of the disabled; fears of the disabled about who will care for them when their special caretakers die, leave, etc.; the high rate of divorce in situations where one spouse or child becomes disabled; how children of disabled parents seem to accept them at face value; and those lines in the sand that we all keep moving-in the case of an MS patient perhaps it's from brace to cane to walker to wheelchair to bed. In the case of the rest of us, that moving line more often has to do with age and physical condition, e.g., what is an acceptable weight as we get older!

All in all the discussion was educational and reflective. One exercise that I had considered doing that I might try next time was to have small groups (threes, perhaps) review then present the arguments Mairs presents in each of the six essays in the second half of the book. Our discussions ended up touching on most of them but this might be another way to cover ground. Interestingly, I found that my place in the evening's discussion was not so much to lead the group from topic to topic or question to question (happily, conversation moved around the group all on its own) but to bring up Mairs' point of view in reference to the topic. In the end it felt a bit like Mairs was there with us discussing her book.

Connie Brown

Because this was my final year leading discussions in Dubois, the entire period was sentimental for me. I've been coming to Dubois as discussion leader for seven years now. The group feels like family.

In general, the group seemed to be of the opinion that the majority of these books are dreary. Readers appreciated elements of every book, but they agreed that the series as a whole paints a dark picture. High points of the year included *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Ellen Foster*. Least appreciated were *Extra Innings* and *Always Running*. It's interesting that this group liked the novels the best. I'll be interested to compare Dubois' experience with that of other groups.

Peter Anderson

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven

TONGUE RIVER LIBRARY
August 27, 2007

14 participants

As this was our first gathering for the Many Americas series, I didn't prepare the group for the book at all, so I was pleasantly surprised that they didn't seem to have any problems with the structure as they have in the past with some of the books by Native Americans. Several said they've finally learned to just "go with it" and not worry too much about a linear structure and clearly identifiable narrators so they don't get so frustrated!

After explaining that the series was asking us to look at often marginalized American from within their culture, I asked what expectations we bring to books by and about Native Americans.

Ranchester is right on the edge of the Crow reservation, so the poverty, alcohol and drug issues, and even the importance of basketball are all familiar characteristics. One person said "We KNOW the people in the book. We see them every day." We discussed the Anglo values that we bring to bear when we look at the reservation and how those values are not, in many ways which we discussed, the same as the values of the Indian culture. We looked Some of the qualities Alexie highlights through the stories that we don't necessarily preconceive: the humor, the nonjudgmental nature of their dealings with each other, and the resiliency in spite of the problems on the reservations. In discussing the characters, we could see how Alexie considers Thomas, Victor, and Junior as parts of himself as well as representative of the Indian psyche in a larger sense. The group was interested in details about Sherman Alexie's life, before and after his success. One person has heard him speak and reinforced what we might expect about his sense of humor as well as his sense of irony and his cynicism.

I felt like the discussion showed more understanding and sensitivity on all of our parts about the problems the reservations face than some past discussions, so Alexie would be pleased.

While most people came saying that they were glad they had read the book, two members disliked it intensely and came to hear the discussion and share their views. As discussion leaders and project directors have discovered over the years, participants learn from the discussion and often grow to appreciate, if not love, the book they thought they hated. This certainly happened last night. Many people in the group left determined to re-read the book, read more Alexie, and see his films. I was fortunate to have Carol Deering's research help and it provided so much good information that some of the participants asked to take articles home with them or for the web addresses to find the articles. I was so pleased with the response to

this book. I think in the end the thing we gained most from reading it was a sense that Alexie placed us, the readers, at the table, as part of the story (see the last line in the book - "All of us. ") We were fortunate to have in attendance a woman whose daughter did her dissertation on Alexie. She provided interesting points and shared openly stories from her husband's childhood on the Wind River Indian Reservation. In particular she concurred with Alexie that humor is the most important coping mechanism on the reservation. We talked extensively about the use of humor, popular culture, Native American culture and the difficulty of its survival in the face of the dominating culture, and the way in which each story ends with a sentence or two that sums up the entire story and makes you say something like "oh, my." I began the evening with a fairly extensive biography of Alexie, in hopes of putting the book in context for the group. Then I asked each person if they would like to comment on the book. This led to a wonderful discussion, with lots of laughter, questions, divergent opinions, and appreciation for having read Alexie.

Barbara Gose, Riverton

The book clearly made an impression on all of the participants. Although it is a book of loosely conjoined chapters/stories/episodes, many of them made a strong impression on the readers and some of them pointed out and discussed their favorites. One or two of the participants were Indians or had married Indians (and we used this term rather than the oh-so-politically-correct term Native Americans) and had lived among Indians (Oklahoma) or on reservations. We discussed how their experiences there corresponded with those related in the book, and they generally found them true to life. The drinking, joblessness, despair and alienation of reservation life were all too frequent in their experiences, but also the strong family bonds, sharing, friendship and good humor were also noted in their personal experiences. The place of story tellers like Tomas Builds-the-fire was also discussed, especially the importance of such people in preserving the identity and dreams of a people now aimless and filled with despair. On the one hand people would ask him for a story and on the other hand they would ridicule or avoid him. Especially poignant was his voluntary muteness later in life.

(The Rev.) James S. Thayer
Gillette, WY – discussion in Sundance

We up in this area live on almost on the edge of the Crow Reservation. That fact in addition to that there were some in the group who either teach or work in some other capacity where they directly deal with Native Americans got us immediately into discussion of the problems everyone is aware of already and that Alexie dramatizes in the book. It seemed that we were focusing on the negatives, but some people did finally allude to some of the affirmation in the book: the humor, the acceptance of each other foibles, the generosity. One perceptive person said that even though we see so much, it's from the

outside and that this book made her realize how little we really know the Native Americans. No one really seemed to find the style of writing or the tone off putting. We have, over the years, done other books by Native Americans which helped.

Norleen Healy, Story

As usual, initial reactions to the book varied, with some people liking it very much and others being put off by the erratic organization and the poetic/impressionistic style that made it difficult to find a coherent narrative whole.

Several major topics emerged in the course of the two hours. Alcoholism on the reservation, and its devastating effects on families, culture and health, led to a wider discussion of alcoholism in cultures that have been effectively destroyed or emasculated, so that there are very few productive avenues to follow within traditional culture. We observed that, historically, that has affected men more than women, and that women tend to have the greater strength in holding some remnants of culture together. We discussed the function of witnessing, when direct action seems impossible or hopeless. We spent a good deal of time discussing the function of story-telling itself as the way of imagining something better and of holding on to history. This was especially evident in the life of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, whose story telling lands him in jail for crimes (imagined) he committed in a former life, but whose stories rouse people's energy and imagination. We discussed family relationships, and children's ability to find comfort of some kind even in the most "dysfunctional" of circumstances and families. We broadened the discussion to the counterforces of assimilation and autonomy when two disparate cultures encounter each other, and discussed that issue in relation to the current political and cultural world. Some people offered specific information about Sherman Alexie's life as it related to some of the stories, and those of us who had seen the movie, *Smoke Signals*, recommended it to the others. Several people had some experience with trying to be involved with the Wind River Indian Reservation, and we discussed at some length the balance between genuine compassion and a desire to be helpful, and our inherent innocence of the native American experience and the possibility of appearing to be arrogant or patronizing even while desiring to be helpful. We also discussed the importance of individual responsibility for our own behavior in relation to others, starting at the smallest levels, as a basis for addressing larger social issues.

At the end, we had to struggle out, since many of the participants wanted to continue the discussion further.

Stephen S. Lottridge, Jackson

There was mixed reaction to *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. A few people appreciated the humor. Most were offended by the language and said they refuse to read a book with such language.

Our discussion covered a number of topics but was limited because some readers refused to read the stories. We discussed alcoholism and the effects of it. That discussion led to talk about family relationships among the characters, the role of women in those relationships, and the extended sense of family in a tribal-based culture. We looked at those characters who were able to forgive in some fashion. We also talked about the importance of story-telling in Alexie's book and the qualities present in cultures with an oral tradition. Of course, we especially looked at the story "The Trial of Thomas Builds-A-Fire" for this discussion. We discussed the complexity and contradictions inherent in being an American Indian in the current U.S. culture.

We also looked at the style that Alexie uses and noted that the voices in his stories almost seem indistinguishable in contrast to the variety of voices in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*.

Maggie Garner, Medicine Bow

Riverton: I began by some background on Alexie and then asked if any in the group had read Alexie before and/or had seen his films. One member of the group has read all of Alexie and is passionate about his writing style and point of view. Others were new to his work. Two people had experience with teaching on the Wind River Indian Reservation and they were able to contribute their perspectives and compare them to those of the book. We spent the bulk of the evening on the question of what constitutes "success" from the Indian perspective as opposed to the white perspective and how is Alexie received within the Indian community. People's opinions as to the future for Native Americans - preservation of culture, finding some means to replace the "warrior" role for males, assimilation or not, alcoholism, were widely divergent. We differed among ourselves, but believed by the end of the evening that we had learned from sharing our opinions about this book. I ended by recommending some essays and poems by Alexie for those readers who wanted to read more.

--Barbara Gose

The Alta group enjoyed a lively discussion of the Alexie book. The conversation returned repeatedly to the experiences of group members with Native American culture. For instance, one participant had lived and worked on the Navajo reservation for a number of years and she related stories that pertained to subjects brought out in *Lone Ranger and Tonto*. Another participant grew up in western Nebraska and recalled interactions - often very negative - between Indians from the Pine Ridge reservation and the Nebraska farmers.

All participants seemed to have read the book with enthusiasm and appreciation, commenting on both the poignant and trenchant elements brought out in the stories and the powerful writing style. Major subjects of discussion: poverty (we spent time talking about the flood

in New Orleans and the impact of tough times on the poor everywhere in the country), alcoholism (our discussion ranged from the possible genetic vulnerability of Native Americans to alcohol to the phenomenon of casinos on reservations) and survival.

Another popular topic was Alexie's repeated use of dreams and dream imagery. Participants noted the relationship between dream-telling in Native traditions and the practice of oral tradition.

--Peter Anderson

The group as a whole liked the book. Several ladies had lived on reservations and one had taught on two different reservations. One lady brought an ad she had for Furniture Company owned and operated by Indians in Yakima, Washington. The discussion was entered into by everyone. Sherman Alexie's writing of education on the reservation took the group into a discussion of the present administration's "No Child Left Behind" concept and how it may or may not affect reservation children.

Some had seen the author's movies and we discussed those shortly along various aspects of Sherman Alexie's person and accomplishments. Several of the ladies are planning to travel to Salt Lake City, Utah to hear Alexie when he is there November 1st.

Richard Kalber

A large number of readers came to the library and expressed little or no interest in the selection nor the author. After hearing about Alexie's life—born hydrocephalic, learned to read by age three, by five had read many books including *The Grapes of Wrath*, left the Spokane Indian Reservation to receive a better education, gave up drinking at age 23, received many national awards for his writing, and delivered the 2003 commencement address at the University of Washington—however, they became more involved in several discussions.

Alcohol abuse among Indians seemed to be most disturbing for the readers, and why Alexie spent so much time and effort writing about it. In discussing this disease many ideas were battered about concerning the Indian culture and how little we really know about our neighbors on nearby reservations.

We also compared this view of Native Americans with that of Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, which we read last year.

Jim Fassler, January 12, 2004

Clearmont Library

One of the great things about leading these book discussions is how I can never predict for sure how a

group will react to a book. I had warned this group that they might have some trouble with this book for any number of reasons, and, as it turned out, I couldn't have been more wrong. They were warmly receptive to it. They granted that they were sometimes confused as to who was telling a particular story, but that they didn't find that to be off-putting. I gave them some background info about Alexie to start. They immediately could see how parts of his life and his family are reflected in the stories. We decided that Thomas Builds-a-Fire, Victor, and Junior all represent parts of who Alexie is and how he sees himself. I asked them to consider ways in which the novel either upheld or challenged our outside preconceptions about the Indian culture. We talked about how helpful it is to look at that culture from within and how that does broaden our view. For example, humor isn't something we associate with the culture and yet it's pervasive in the stories. We looked at many examples of the various kinds of humor and its function in the various stories. That drew us into a discussion of the survival mechanisms employed – alcohol obviously, story telling, humor, etc. We discussed how the "white" educational system has failed the Indians and compared that to the same situation in *Always Running*. Other topics of good discussion centered around the tradition of basketball on the reservations, the male/female roles (one person pointed out that the women cope and survive better on the modern reservation because their role has stayed essentially the same while the men have no real role or role models, as Alexie illustrates in so many ways), and the many ironies. We talked about the underlying voice of Alexie throughout and looked at passages that revealed his cynicism and anger. This group was not offended by the language. One person said he could see that Alexie was also a poet because of the beauty of his style. People had lots of passages marked to read to illustrate things they wanted to discuss. This was one of our most lively discussions, definitely the best in this series.

Norleen Healy, January 2004

Classes at EWCC had been cancelled for the evening due to the winter storm, so only six of the "regulars" showed up. The discussion was very general in nature, and only intermittently referred itself to Alexie's book. All present have read and discussed other Native American authors, so there was an opportunity to compare the current work with, e.g., *River Song* and *Fools Crow*, as well as books from outside the WCH programs. I had with me a video of the movie "Smoke Signals" and we watched the first 15 minutes or so, which allowed viewing of the NW reservation landscape of eastern Washington and Idaho, as well as glimpses of the pace and humor of reservation life.

Bob A Brown, Torrington group, 11-3-03

As group members arrived at the Glenrock Branch library last Wednesday evening, a mood of eager anticipation intermingled with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. Thanks to Carol Thomas and her staff, that atmosphere

contributed to a very lively and thought-provoking discussion. Following introductions, we struggled with the questions "What is an American?" and "What does it mean to be an American?" Members conceded that we often rely on stereotypical images when we consider those questions, but also suggested that we struggle with defining "an American" because ideas and images are in flux.

Background information on Sherman Alexie served as the bridge between the "what is an American discussion," the series' theme and group members' individual responses to the book. (Great appreciation to Judy and the WCH staff for the excellent resources on the BD web site. I'd highly recommend scholars read the interview with Sherman Alexie on the film *Smoke Signals* AND that scholars check out essays by Sherman at <http://www.fallsapart.com/student.html>. Members shared their individual responses to Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Many commented how the short stories forced the reader to relinquish typical expectations for narrative structure; one reader noted how the book "twisted me out" of those expectations for a linear narrative structure, while another admitted having difficulty with the stories' structure until she "gave herself up" to the book, after which she found it thoroughly enjoyable. Both readers suggested that in giving up expectations for a "traditional" story with a clear beginning, middle, and end, they were allowed to experience a new perspective, perhaps a perspective displaying a different cultural or world view. We considered the influence of Native American oral tradition on contemporary Native American literature, and the effect oral traditions may have on narrative structure. (It must be noted that while a number of group members found the book to be difficult reading or offensive, they are greatly intrigued and may get together in April for a screening and discussion of Sherman Alexie's film *Smoke Signals*.)

Some readers expressed dismay with some of the language, which opened a discussion of language as a reflection of culture. A few suggested that the author may have been merely attempting to portray a contemporary reality. There was some speculation whether the language found to be offensive by some may actually work against the author's intent as it may reinforce certain mainstream social attitudes which reflect a negative Native American image. Others offered Alexie may have used what may be defined as "offensive" language in order to capture the Anglo reader's attention with a linguistic "smack to the face." We spoke of language as a kind of weapon, which also allow me to share some of Sherman Alexie's comments on imagination as a weapon. We also spoke of considering language use as a kind of survival tactic.

Group members commented on similarities between mainstream culture and reservation culture: cherishing family, the need for heroes, a desire for a purpose in life, an appreciation for the culture's folklore or stories. Naturally, that led to observations regarding how very different the reservation culture appears in comparison to group members' experiences. However, several group members noted that although the reservation seemed "bleak," the book's tone seemed "optimistic" or "uplifting,"

which was a pleasant surprise for them. There was some discussion of the significance of basket ball on the reservation, which interestingly enough, led to a discussion of the role of mysticism or magic in the characters' lives and how that role affects characters' world view.

Some time was spent on the significance of the book's title, with group members speculating how media images can influence both Anglo and Native American expectations (Coincidentally, other scholars and groups may be interested in Alexie's essay "I Hated Tonto (Still Do)," which may be found at <http://www.fallsapart.com/student.html> or in the Los Angeles Times, June 28, 1998).

Our discussion drew to a close as I shared the following excerpt from Ian Frazier's *On the Rez*: "America is a leap of the imagination. From its beginning people have had only a persistent idea of what a good country should be. The idea involves freedom, equality, justice, and the pursuit of happiness; nowadays most of us probably could not describe it much more clearly than that. The truth is, it has always been a bit of a guess. No one has ever known for sure whether a country based on such an idea is really possible, but again and again we have leaped toward the idea and hoped. . . The idea does not truly live unless it is expressed by an act; the country does not live unless we make the leap from our tribe or focus group or gated community or demographic and land on the shaky platform of that idea of a good country which all kinds of different people share. (found in the excerpt of Frazier's *On the Rez* in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1999, p. 84. It must be noted that Sherman Alexie gave Frazier's book a negative review, as seen in "Some of my Best Friends" which may be found under "Essays by Sherman Alexie" www.fallsapart.com/student.html (I plan to share his comments with discussion members at our next session)

At the next session I also plan to open with a discussion of the odyssey tradition in American culture, as well as group comments on heroes and heroic behavior, in light of the question "What is an American?" that should provide us with an interesting transition from Alexie's short fiction to Mairs' non-fiction *Waist-High in the World!* I also shared a copy of Sherman Alexie's essay "Love, Hunger and Money" with interested group members. The essay voices Sherman Alexie's position on casinos and gambling on reservations. The essay is available in the Sept. 19, 1994 *High Country News* as well as on the internet via the Sherman Alexie web site.

Another excellent internet source is http://www.aboriginalvoices.com/1997/04-07/sherman_alexie.html It was at this site I read the humorous and acerbic interview transcript "Spokane Words: Tomson Highway Raps with Sherman Alexie." This interview is fun to read and truly gives one insight to Alexie's humor as well as to his social and political concerns. The site also offers a number of good links. I'd recommend it!

Other resources available on the WYLD cat system:

"Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals" An Interview with Sherman Alexie" in *Cineaste*, 1998. Vol. 23, p. 28 (authors Dennis West and Joan M. West)

"An Indian without Reservations" in *New York Times Magazine* 1.18.98, vol. 147, p. 16+ (author Timothy Egan)

"White Men Can't Drum" *New York Times Magazine* 10/14-92, vol. 142, p. 30.

Ebba Stedillie (Glenrock group)

The Kemmerer group had a great discussion on Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. I began the session by reading his essay "I Hate Tonto (Still Do)" to the group. Before we discussed the book, we defined "American." The group agreed that America is a melting pot and to specifically define an American is difficult. I asked the group how they thought Indians (Alexie prefers this term over Native Americans) would define themselves as Americans and several readers said that Indians probably either felt they weren't classified under this term or had a hard time identifying with other "Americans."

We talked quite a bit about Alexie's background. If anyone ever has the chance to hear him read, he is a wonderful reader. I used to live in Spokane and saw him read several times. He doesn't "read" his stories as much as he tells you a story that is similar to one in his book. Anyway, I brought in several of his essays and poems that I found on the Internet. The poem "Defending Walt Whitman" is an interesting poem about basketball that I tied in with our discussion of basketball in the book. I tried to get "Smoke Signals" but it was checked out. I wanted to show the opening scene of the reservation in the movie and I'll try to get it for a later meeting.

We discussed the stories working together more as a novel than as a collection of short stories. A reader commented that the stories worked by themselves but were more cohesive as a whole, larger story. Another reader was confused at first with the narration of the stories because he kept getting the characters mixed up. He said he realized after the first few stories that the stories themselves were more important than which character was telling them.

The idea of basketball as a symbol ended our discussion. One reader saw basketball as a symbol of the modern warrior. Great basketball players on the reservation are seen as heroes, as warriors were in times past. One reader saw basketball as the savior of the reservation. The problem is that basketball only seemed to last for so long until something—usually injury or alcohol—took it away again.

This was a great book to begin the "Many Americas" series. The Kemmerer group enjoyed it and it worked very well with introducing the theme of "Many Americas."

Hilary Barton Billman

A lot of people had opinions about this book, which they frequently voiced all at once, starting before the session had even begun. Much of their enthusiasm was fueled by frustration at the actions of the characters in the book. The characters were seen to represent the majority of Native Americans, who are perceived by the group as lacking in "go-gettiveness."

Much anecdotal evidence about Indians group members have known was presented to confirm the presence of this "un-American" quality. I brought some of Alexie's poetry to share with the group, and read to them a portion of the foreword to *OLD SHIRTS AND NEW SKINS*. Hearing the foreword writer's perceptions and explanations related to Indian disenfranchisement, self-destructiveness, and coping skills gave the group pause. Some more objective discussion followed. The group member who had been most vocal in her dislike of the book (language, drunkenness, etc.) admitted that she felt better about it after hearing the discussion. Her discomfort with the book, she discovered, was closely related to her inability to "help" people in despair. The discussion didn't lead the group into making connections between other books in the series. I closed with a reading of Alexie's poem "Defending Walt Whitman," which is about basketball. I wish I'd read it at the start of the session—it seemed to soothe them somehow!

Julianne Couch (Laramie senior center group)

I began discussion by suggesting that the version of America presented in this book might be our hardest to comprehend. The degree of despair depicted rivals that in Rodriguez book, but there are cultural components we are not privy to as outsiders (like "Indian time" and clinging but not clinging to traditional ways, which cannot exist except in a diminished form but still exert force on the Native psyche). And of course there is the reservation, which makes Native American reality a world apart in physical and psychological terms as well.

Rather than lead as heavy handedly as I thought might prove necessary, which could sound more like a rationalization than a discussion, I suggested a new approach to this book: the members asked questions of the author as if he were in the room, then we all attempted to answer in his stead. The result was a nearly universal move toward empathy and a lively discussion of Native American culture past and present, how the present situation is both infected by and has irrevocably changed hits people's self perception and their concept of the world.

My favorite part of the discussion was in our attempt to define, and more importantly to understand, Indian time--how it is both means of survival (i.e., thinking on a larger time scale allows for hope in spite of their terrible history of the last 100 plus years) and is like being in a prison in as much as many seem unable to get beyond a strident sense of proud heritage and ultimate dispossession to something else. We also talked at great length about what

"something else" might possibly mean (Alexie says that it is impossible for an Indian to not be an Indian) and whether or not the author himself represents another way for an Indian to be in a world dominated by whites: a story teller, keeper of the tradition of sharing a vision with the tribe but also sharing it with white readers, the teller of Indian truth regardless of how harsh it might be.

Michael McIrvin

Sherman Alexie's THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO FISTFIGHT IN HEAVEN proved to be a challenging and provocative text. There was the challenge posed by the structure of the text, with its lack of narrative continuity and its dream sequences. The greater challenge, perhaps, was for us to recognize and confront the familiar stereotypes of Americans which often color our reactions and responses. We worked hard at rising to these challenges--not a particularly easy discussion, but a very good one!

Rick Kempa

The group had mixed feelings as to how the book "felt" to them as readers. Was it sad? funny? Both? Why? we discussed this for a while until the group begged for information about the author, which I provided. (This seems to be of great interest to this group, and therefore an important part of my preparation.) Obviously there were a lot of autobiographical parts to this book.

We also discussed his style, which was unusual. It largely confused most of us, but in the end it didn't bother most because somehow it still kept our interest. (It often took the readers a while to figure out this was several people's stories.) The discussion ended with an examination of Alexie as a representative Indian (his preferred term) writer for today. And, how did our cultural stereotypes (we're all white) influence our look at this. Great book for the series.

Ann Noble

I started our session with quite a bit of biography about Sherman Alexie, all of which I had just learned from reading WEB materials. I was knocked out by what a neat young man Sherman Alexie is! There is an "official biography" on his website www.fallsapart.com/biography.html. and more good info at www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/alexie/. My enthusiasm for him was probably one reason why I was more optimistic about Indian lives and futures than most of the group members. (Alexie prefers the term Indian, by the way, and it's easier to write than Native American or indigenous people, so I'm using it here.)

More than eight of 16 group members present had taken me up on the invitation to watch the video of "Smoke Signals" which I'd left with the PD Susan Brewer last month. They were glad they had, as they found the book

tough going. (Several more readers plan to watch the video now that we have discussed the book.) Readers' first questions had to do with the symbols and details of Indian culture throughout the stories, and we all realized how little we knew; for instance, what does fancydancing look like? what does a ribbon shirt look like and what is its purpose? how did basketball get into the culture and why is it so important? etc. I had only general information to share, but we relied on it and were able to continue the discussion (I will certainly bone up better on these things in future).

To facilitate discussion we went down a list of questions I'd prepared:

- What do these stories tell us about Indians today? [they are survivors]
- Can we hear the ironic voice of the author and others in these stories?
- What is the role of the storyteller in this culture? [is he listened to?]
- Who is most likely the Sherman Alexie character in these stories? [Thomas]
- What are some of the symbols Alexie uses to explain the culture?
- What are the differences between male/female characters? [women are realists]
- What are the differences between Urban and Reservation Indians (Skins)?
- What is the function of alcohol and alcoholism in the current culture?

In general, the group was not optimistic about the current or future lives of the kinds of Indians portrayed in this book, although some members could see and appreciate the ironic humor of much of the writing. (Explaining irony is tough, I discovered!) Several comments offered were: These people have no positive models to work with, how can they improve their lives? These people have no maps to follow into the future. These people have lost traditional Indian culture and have nowhere to go except the "Pow Wow Tavern." These people lack purpose in their life; how can they succeed?, etc.

I worked hard at trying to keep us out of the kinds of cliched thinking about Indians many Westerners such as myself grew up with, but these are hard habits to break. For instance, one pattern we all fall into is referring to Indian culture as only a thing of the past. Perhaps what was most hopeful about our discussion was our realization that indeed, we are learning a bit about Indian culture by participating in a WCH BDG. Last year we read Yellow Raft in Blue Water; this year Lone Ranger; next year, What?

Connie Brown

Thanks to Alexie's extensive website, I was able to provide information about him. One of the ladies in the group is Indian and has lived on a reservation and provided further insight.

The discussion was animated about the "Indian condition," their culture and our understanding or lack of understanding of that condition. We discussed the hopelessness they have. It was an insightful discussion.

Norma Christensen (Worland group)

[Norma--Is the website you refer to one of those listed on our minisheet for the series? If it's not, would you supply the URL. Thanks. Judy]

A central theme for our discussion was the balancing of the grim setting with the humor and personal stories of the text. Most enjoyed the author's style and ability to create mental pictures of the reservation as well as the different personal insights on the reservations' problems and weaknesses. The multiple levels within the stories were fascinating for the readers such as the conceptualization of time, the interplay between the different cultures, the individual's place in a group-oriented culture, etc. Much discussion revolved around the debate whether the tensions were cultural, economic, or both (some parallels were made with Appalachia among others). There seemed to be numerous favorite passages and stories (and almost all of them were different). This enthusiasm made for a vocal and productive discussion by nearly everyone in the group. There was a little tension among the group over the "blame" issue generally associated with white guilt, but the exploration of this also proved valuable.

This series is remarkably timely given the national debate on what makes an American and as we continue to probe our national identity.

Erich Frankland (Casper College group)

The Dubois group was relatively unimpressed with this collection of stories. Although a few readers seemed to have admired the book, most felt like they had been browbeaten by it. The fact that we have read "La Vida Loca," "Ellen Foster" and "Lone Ranger" in a row -- three troubling books -- may have contributed to a certain weariness with painful subject matters. Some members of the group attacked the book for perpetuating what they saw as a victim attitude, a form of self-disempowerment. Others criticized it as unrepresentative of the modern Native American experience. Some recoiled from its darkness and downward spin. Still others simply disdained Alexie's occasionally coarse language (that last response has not been typical of this group, another reason I suspect battle fatigue).

Nevertheless, we did have a long, spirited discussion. Here are some of the approaches I took:
What preconceptions about Native American life did you take to this book? Did you feel changed by it?

"Lone Ranger and Tonto" implicates American pop culture. What does this collection seem to be saying about Indians' relationships to mainstream America?

What purposes do stories (and the act and tradition of story-telling) serve for individuals and their cultures?

Alcoholism is presented as a continuing, pervasive problem for Indian culture, but Alexie seems to treat alcoholism almost as a given. In what ways do widespread cultural health problems affect the cultures that have them, and individuals living within those cultures? Can the alcoholism problem among American Indians be compared to alcoholism in rural Russia? AIDS in Africa? Drug abuse among urban Chicano poor people? How do Alexie's stories correspond (or fail to correspond) to your notions of substance abuse and its effects?

p. 149: "Imagine Christopher Columbus. . ." How would you respond?

p. 196: the "gearshift" paragraph. What have Native Americans lost? What is your own culture losing?

p.177: passage about bulimic girls in the bathroom. Unpack the notion of "education" and how it varies among sub-cultures. Is your own education as broad as you might have hoped? Is it all-encompassing? How has your own education failed you?

Carefully track the recurring characters, themes and situations running through these stories. Does change take place? How or why not?

When is honesty dangerous?

What is your experience (assuming you are an "outsider" glancing into Native American culture through this novel) of having read this book? How close do you think can you come to understanding Alexie's life and perceptions of the world? Are there realms of human experience among cultures which simply do not overlap? Is there any sort of universal human experience? Can white people ever "understand" Native Americans, and vice versa? To the degree cultures cannot entirely overlap or share their world views, what does it take to maintain civilized cohabitation of the continent by us all?

Peter Anderson

Always Running: La Vida Loca

Fourteen of us met Tuesday night at the Albany County Public Library to discuss *Always Running* by Luis Rodriguez. Even though people at first mentioned how far away that world seemed from Laramie, there was quite a bit of talk about issues of race, class, drugs, and teenage sexuality as they play out in Wyoming. We talked about how the situation in the book would be even more difficult for females to escape.

Thanks to interlibrary loan, we were able to show a short (35 min.) video called *Youth Struggles for Survival, Father and Son*, which features the work Rodriguez does with youth, including his own son. It is very sad--there are scenes of Rodriguez taking his son to jail, and of the funeral of one of the kids who worked with Rodriguez and

his community group. However, I think people appreciated seeing it because it showed some of the people who are mentioned in his book, as well as hopeful scenes of the community work.

Rodriguez also has an up-to-date website with lots of information, and we sent the link out to people to look at before the group met: <http://www.luisjrodriguez.com/>

We had a spirited discussion of this book. I began with a little recent background on the author and shared information on attempts to censor *Always Running*. We agreed, in general, that censorship is not a good idea. However, there was a strong feeling among some members of the group that Rodriguez did not deal adequately with the consequences of his and others' actions. The sense was that the book would have been stronger if that had occurred. We talked about the self censorship that often takes place in schools/libraries/classrooms as a result of one complaint or even a fear of complaint. It was interesting for us to note how many books we have read over the years in this discussion group have been on censorship lists.

We decided we were glad to have read *Always Running*, as it exposed us to a life different from our own and made us think about what, if any, improvements have occurred since the 60s and 70s. There was wide disagreement about the quality of Rodriguez' writing - some loved it, others thought his style weak. Among topics we explored were family relationships, sexism, racism, why gangs are attractive, and how someone like Luis (and his brother, but earlier) escape

--Barbara Gose

Rock Springs: Whew!!!!!! We didn't like this book at all. By the time we read his disinterested description of the third gang rape, we were sickened. We understood that he wrote this book for his son. We also realized that he's trying, in as graphic a way possible to discourage his son from following the same path he had gone. But ...we thought it was too too much.

None of us are prudes, nor are we saccharine. However, we don't like wallowing in filth and depravity, either, and we didn't appreciate ANY aspect of this book. Most of our members didn't finish because they became so bogged down with the muck and mire.

--Vicki Vincent

Except for a couple of participants who disliked the graphic descriptions of sex and violence in the book, the group generally appreciated the author's sharing of his early troubled life in the LA area. Discovering one man's view of gangs and their existence in the barrios of the 1960's and 1970's led us to some answers. Perhaps the desire of feeling "family" security, which the gang often provided, helped some teens. The power generated by a

gang also afforded them self-esteem. The book and discussions then provoked many questions which really where not answered but did help us to understand better the reality of life when an entire generation is "always running." After Rodriguez left the crazy life of depression and he devoted his time to conscientious thinking against the establishment, his writing became a message of hope especially for his son. A thought from his epilogue pretty much shaped our question, "Why?" Rodriguez wrote, "Gangs are not alien powers. They begin as unstructured groupings, our children, who desire the same as any young person. Respect. A sense of belonging. Protection." The thoughtful discussion lasted longer than any other we have had.

Jim Fassler, Feb. 2004

Another challenging discussion, as Torrington itself is divided into south of the RR (blue collar and Latino) and north of the RR (increasingly middle and professional class the farther from the tracks). Discussion of the Latino/American and Mexican national communities led to the inevitable confrontation of differing judgments, from "why don't they just get a job?" to the more liberal despair that America can't (or won't) solve its large and increasing split between "have" and "have not." Three of the group challenged us all with what I think are central questions for the series as well as for our society: "Should they (i.e., minority groups) change? Why? To become what? I have since used these questions as part of the exploration of the other books in this series, as well as the other groups with which I am involved.

Bob A Brown, Torrington group, 10-6-03

The group was very moved by this book. Everyone thought it was an excellent choice for this series (*Many Americas*). . . and quite a contrast to last month's book (*Extra Innings*). It was thought that Rodriguez expressed himself very well. . .one truly felt a better understanding of gang life from this book. His social commentaries also evoked a lot of discussion. How much responsibility does the police department have in perpetuating gang life? How fair is his final comment that one has to be able to afford a family life? Is the gang life cycle breakable as the author hoped with his son? The discussion was thoughtful, and about a life-style far away from Big Piney, Wyo., yet still America!

Ann Noble (Big Piney group)

The Kemmerer Book Group began the session with a discussion of banned books. I brought in a few articles on the banning of *Always Running* by several school districts. In one article, from the Feb 4-10, 1999 *Sonoma County Independent*, Luis Rodriguez shares his views on the banning and I read out several of his quotes to the group. This site is <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sonoma/02.04.99/rodriquez1-9905.html>. One of the questions the article asks is

"could Rodriguez have told this story without the use of graphic language? Would the book have packed the same punch?" All of the readers answered no to both questions and we discussed the realities of gang life. We followed this by talking about banned books in general and how most of the group were surprised to know Rodriguez's book had been banned in the first place. Another interesting site on the book banning is <http://www.ultranet.com/~kyp/rockbann.html>.

When comparing this book to others in the Many Americas theme, one reader commented that this book was most like *A Lesson Before Dying* because of the types of prejudices and struggles. In all of the books the characters are caught in situations where they have no control but they know the situations have to change. Other topics of discussion were the role of women in this book compared to some of the other cultures we have studied in other books.

We also discussed other aspects of Hispanic life that make up America, such as migrant workers.

Hilary Barton Billman (Kemmerer group)

The group discussion of *Always Running* was by far the liveliest one yet. Maybe due to geography or maybe due to other factors, nearly everyone in the group has had experience with Latinos and was eager to share. Responses began with folks wondering why unhappy people living in poverty and despair don't simply return to the nation of their ethnic origin. After some venting about crime in the cities and illegal immigration, we looked at these emotional issues and sought insights from the text. We explored how the gang culture depicted in the book fit in to our idea of "America." One group member's opinion, that criminalizing the behavior of groups we cannot accommodate (to paraphrase Rodriguez) is probably the best option, caused some rancor in the group, including the group leader (me!). The observations of this self-professed "red neck" stirred some lively discussion. Also debated was the level of graphic language in the book. Many readers felt the language was acceptable for the content, and that the shock value was important to the story. Others held that if the book were to be read by its target audience (young people) the writer should have reconsidered his rhetorical choices in order to make the book palatable to school boards and parents. We discussed briefly the notion of book censorship, and then discussed the author's biography and relationship with his son, who is now in prison for attempted murder. The group was impressed by Rodriguez' personal honesty at exploring his own culpability in his son's troubles (not to mention, with his own) and felt the book was successful and very powerfully written. This group concluded that the book held hope, rather than despair, in spite of the fact that Rodriguez' old neighborhood, which he'd worked to heal, quickly fell into the old cycle of crime and poverty not long after his departure.

Julianne Couch

Luis Rodriguez' *ALWAYS RUNNING*, like Alexie's book, challenged our preconceived notions about "other" groups--this time the inner-city Hispanic gang culture. Thanks to a productive harvest from EBSCOHOST database (I typed in "Los Angeles/Hispanic/gangs" and received hundreds of hits; also "Rodriguez/Always Running" yielded some very good reviews and features), I was able to supply plenty of the context which we rural Wyomingites simply lack, so that we were able to move well-beyond some of our first unsympathetic responses ("Why didn't he just stop getting into trouble?" "Why didn't he use that college degree?") to a level of understanding, sympathy, and shared responsibility. One of our very best discussions!

Rick Kempa

I anticipated this group's uneasiness with some of the language and evocative images of violence and teen sex, and thus began our discussion by suggesting that this book and our next, *THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO FIST FIGHT IN HEAVEN*, would be the most alien depictions of America in the series for us all. I suggested that *ALWAYS RUNNING* especially offers up a vision of our country and our culture that is disconcerting, and in many ways gives the lie to our popular self conception as a tolerant people, fair in our enforcement of the rules, of America as the land of opportunity, a meritocracy where good will and effort are rewarded with material success.

To my great surprise, however, most found the book merely sad. We decided that it was not just that the book portrays a way of life that is self destructive, but that this depiction is of children who have no future and of problems that are epidemic in our country at present, especially for the poor: drugs and an increasingly systemic violence. This recognition on the part of the group led to two related questions, the latter far more difficult to answer than the first: how are the various versions of our communal self deconstructed in the book (i.e., education as the way up the economic ladder, the ability of the poor to will themselves out of poverty, the police as the protectors of what is good and right, etc.), and what specifically can be done to reorganize society? Rodriguez suggests in his preface that his book is argument for such a deep and pangeneral reformation, but he offers only his horrific experiences as indication of the need for reform and some manifesto-style abstractions (as a few group members noted) as regards what this meant.

One member brought a clipping about the current scandal in the LA police department as proof that things have not changed since the publication of this book, which gave rise to a suggestion that perhaps an ongoing series of small steps was all that can be expected: proving first that the powers-that-be (and we the people) will not tolerate an out of control police force, with an ultimate goal of improving race relations; starting inner city jobs programs, with an ultimate goal of full employment; hiring more and better qualified teachers and equitably distributing education funds, with an ultimate goal of truly educating all our children. Drugs we discussed in terms of illegality and treatment versus interdiction, but here we despaired. The

forces that drive the young and the poor to kill themselves and each other (an obvious mirroring, an obvious act of self loathing) seemed finally overwhelming. In fact, someone suggested to me after our discussion that our small steps could never outpace these terrible causes for despair. If nothing else, by the end of our session we understood completely why reading Rodriguez' book made us sad.

Michael McIrvin

Because many in attendance had not been at previous discussions, we briefly spoke about the question of the "ideal" vs. "real" America as portrayed in previously discussed readings (The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Waist-High in the World, A Lesson Before Dying, and Extra Innings). We also spoke of the invisible and "disposable" groups in America that are portrayed in these books, and commented on how Rodriguez's book presents yet another group --gangs -- that may not immediately come to mind when one thinks of "an American". (One member noted that gangs are not a new phenomenon in our culture, as their presence is seen throughout American history.)

We also discussed the author's motive in writing this book, the negative reception it has received in some communities, and whether the author is achieving his goal. Many group members felt quite strongly that the book was valuable, as it gave them a clearer understanding of gangs, and the worldview that is part of the community gang membership. A couple readers said they understood why some communities might ban the book (even though they were quick to say they disagreed with such censorship), because the graphic details and the bitter tone in the book would certainly generate fear in those seeking to deny a problem exists or in those who seek to maintain the status quo.

The group had a great deal to say about a wide variety of topics:

- Rodriguez' family struggle
- discriminatory practices in the author's school and community
- the author's perception of police as "just another gang" and the relationship to current police problems in U.S. society
- reader frustration with Rodriguez' self-destructive behaviors
- the book's language and style, as well as its biases
- the influence of socio-economic class on values, beliefs and behaviors
- factors contributing to the author's success in leaving gang life

One group member shared the "Hidden Rules" from the 1998 book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby K. Payne, PhD. These "hidden rules" reflect the worldview of the members of three basic socio-economic groups: generational poverty, middle-class, and the wealthy. For example, according to Payne's book, the

world is "defined in local terms" by the poor, in "national terms" by the middle-class, and in "international terms" by the wealthy. Decisions are grounded in different values as well. "Survival, relationships and entertainment" are behind the decision-making for those in generational poverty, while "work and achievement" motivate those in the middle class. "Social, financial and political connections" are the "driving forces" for the wealthy. These ideas sparked a discussion of "class", of our image of America as a "classless" society contrasting with the realities of our socio-economic groups, how capitalism or consumerism may contribute to or exacerbate class differences and problems, and the responsibilities of the more privileged for those with fewer resources and opportunities. (I'd highly recommend that other group leaders & discussion groups take a look at Payne's "Hidden Rules" which can be found both in her book on p.59, and in the March 1996 *Instructional Leader* on p. 42.) It was a great evening's conversation! (The next day I read "Is Our Society Making You Sick?" in the Feb. 26 2001 *Newsweek*, p. 14 in which the author suggests the size of the gap between the rich and the poor in America has a direct influence on public health. That article took up where our group's discussion left off, so I plan to share it with them next month.. Other discussion leaders may find it intriguing as well.)

Ebba Stedillie

Our discussion of *Always Running* was animated and full of empathy for the young people of the barrio gangs in Watts and East LA in the 60s and the "crazy life" they lived. We looked at gang life as a distinct American culture and how they provide 'protection and power in a dangerous world.' We discussed whether the East LA police were "just another gang," as Rodriguez says, and decided in some cases they were. As discussion progressed we began to understand that all the characters in the story were caught in situations where they had little or no control over their lives. We tried to relate the foreign world of barrio life to life in Upton, Wyoming without much success, but our sympathy remained with the young people.

One big question for us was whether we agree with Rodriguez that the primary defense of mainstream culture against marginal cultures like the barrio gangs is "the use of deadly force against those it cannot accommodate." We looked at the structure of Luis' own family, with an educated father who could never find skilled work and a mother, an Indian woman, who never wanted to come North in the first place but who continued to take care of her family in the ways she knew. For all their problems they were an intact family. We looked at other societal structures in East LA too: the schools, school sports, and churches. The story showed how the school system lost children like Luis immediately upon arrival because they didn't have bilingual programs. (This is where we are again, alas.) The Upton group nonetheless considers English-only programs to be best.

We were touched by Luis' recognition late in the story that his father was a janitor not a biology teacher, and that it

was okay with him, that he had begun to have some awareness of his father's immigrant dilemma, too. I shared some of the author's biographical information and the sad tale of his own oldest son who seemed to be on the same track in Chicago gang life as Luis had been in LA fifteen years previous. We traced Luis' passage from his first gang, Thee Impersonations to the larger and tougher Animal Tribe and finally to Lomas and its deadly battles with the rival Sangra. We were struck with how personal mediation can be, in the story of Luis meeting Chente Ramirez, the Chicano recreational leader at the youth center who changed his life. With direction and some consciousness-raising, Luis and others like him began to gain some authority over their own lives. They could make better choices. Where family, schools, and churches didn't do much to change conditions, the activist community centers and groups like Cesar Chavez' farm workers movement did. This discussion was one of our most complex and satisfying in the series, *Many Americas*.

Connie Brown

As I expected, most readers found this a dreary book. I have to admit, even I felt a little beat up by it, battle-hardened though I am, or like to think of myself.

I think the group did a great job of bringing out the salient issues it contains, however. We spent a lot of time talking about choices, about the ability to make them and how it feels to believe you don't have choices. We talked about making choices as political acts, signifying accordance with specific sets of ideas.

A reader pointed out how all the authority figures seemed inverted. We talked about how authority figures play roles in kids' lives and what happens when destructive forces are substituted for positive models.

"What would it be like if you were raised to loathe yourself?" one participant asked. Although it tended toward the speculative, we spent some time talking about how minorities have to battle negative self-images imposed by culture.

A reader felt the narrative didn't explain why this young man (Rodriguez) decided or managed to change. Another pointed directly to the passage on page 185 in which his understanding seems to come as something of an epiphany. We debated whether that was a believable moment.

Another reader wanted to place more responsibility for his actions on the narrator himself (and by extension on his family). She felt strongly that poverty by itself doesn't cause hate, a notion definitely at issue throughout this work. This reader observed that an awfully large percentage of people who grow up in dusty, rural Wyoming towns live in poverty, but one doesn't see problems emerging as they do in this book. Ensuating discussion points: (a) whether the anger is there (in rural Wyoming), but just harder to express because of the transparency of small-town culture, and (b) whether problems in Wyoming are just more "individual" because

population is sparse, and (c) whether poverty for white people in Wyoming feels the same as poverty for Mexicans in semi-urban barrios, for instance.

Issues surrounding language -- language as power structure; teaching languages; English as the "national language"; Hispanic kids living between languages, neither part of one or the other culture -- became an area of fruitful debate.

I pointed out that this book is one of the most often censored books in high school libraries in this country. We spent a lot of time debating whether we would assign this book to teenagers as a way of teaching the issues it contains. A majority of the group felt the answer would have to be no, because of its language and graphic scenes. Others felt inclined to say no because they believe the book might have a tendency to actually glorify gang-life, or at least make it understandable. A few thought they would include it in reading lists for advanced teenage readers, or at least make it available to them.

Peter Anderson (Dubois group)

We had an animated discussion of *Always Running*. Tobi indicated surprise at the large number of people who attended [19] because several folks who picked up the book returned it because they didn't like it. That prompted me to emphasize the purpose of the book discussion program. A couple of participants had lived very near the Watts area some years ago and offered some insights. There was general discussion about what we as individuals can do to help at risk kids in Worland. Although the violence as described in the book is not here, other elements are. We do have a sizable Mexican population--and my years in the school system make me know the prejudice was there--and is yet. All participants appreciated the book--even if they were saddened by the conditions described.

Norma Christensen (Worland group)

The group had a good discussion of this memoir. I think all participants found the book distressing. Some felt this was acceptable given the author's intent and subject matter but others simply felt it was not a well-written book, that the plea could have been handled more powerfully and elegantly without beating up the reader quite so much.

Some comments that emerged from the discussion:

- Where does the violence come from? It seems to be so "uselessly" directed internally at others within the gangs members' own community instead of where we think it should be "appropriately" directed, at the oppressors.
- The violence seems to be a result of a lack of things to do, which means a lack of parenting, lack of community, lack of resources.
- Readers noted that the gang members seemed to view the police as simply another rival gang.
- A reader cited the psychological work of (I believe) Erik Erikson, who built a list of basic building blocks that all human beings see to employ or fulfill, including trust, autonomy,

initiative, identity, intimacy, generativity and others. It was pointed out that the gang became the source of all these things for the kids. We discussed at length what we surmised are the positive aspects of being included in a gang and what it provides for its members.

- Violence must be overcome by learning, one participant noted. Education – about history, culture and what it means to be civilized – is the only way around the very natural tendency to form jingoistic gangs.
- We all seek to join “gangs” at some level.

Peter Anderson
11/30/2005

We discussed this book during the same week that Tookie Williams was executed in California, which lent a certain sharp sense of relevance to our reading. One participant called attention to the phrase “hurrying toward death” as the key theme of the book.

In the discussion we considered Rodriguez’ audience -- not only his son as he announces but also, we thought, the sons of all his dead friends so that they would understand the brief lives of their fathers.

We also raised the issue of the book being banned. One participant argued, and the rest agreed, that banning the book for its sex and violence was just a cover for the real reason, which is that the book condemns the public education system, the police, and the entire economic and social structure for creating the conditions under which gangs flourish.

The police, one participant commented, “were just another gang.” Another participant came close to tears as she spoke of Rodriguez’ salvation through his discovery of the world of books. “Books really do change people’s lives,” she said softly.

At the end of the discussion, one man said that this book (the fourth in our series) had revealed the whole purpose of the series for him. That the “Many Americas” was not just about ethnicity and race but about the wide range of disparities among Americans.

Barbara A Bogart

Extra Innings

Sheridan Fulmer Public Library

This was a particularly interesting discussion for me because I was ready for the group to not like the book. They loved the book. Three members of the group said it was their favorite book so far (we have two to go – A Lesson Before Dying and Ellen Foster). Another wonderful comment, to which many in the group agreed: “I would love to have Doris over to dinner for a good long chat”. No one was offended by her tone, did not see Grumbach as

elitist, and no one was overwhelmed by all the names, books or quotes included in the memoir. In fact the groups’ reaction was – wow! What a fascinating life and what a well read individual. Rather than be frustrated or overwhelmed, they all wanted to know more about the people and authors mentioned in the book. Everyone had lots of questions about who was who and the group all contributed to a discussion of who was who in the book. They accepted her musings as just that – sharing the process of aging and questions faced in retirement, pondering spirituality and creating partnerships. The singular gentleman in our group is going through the process of retiring and considering where he wants to live, as well as what he wants to do and found the book very helpful as he is on the same journey.

Many commented that they would have preferred to read *Coming into the End Zone* as they found it challenging to discuss *Extra Innings* as a reaction to the “cranky” tone of *Coming into the End Zone*. I explained that, as I remember from a comment within the archives, that book is no longer available.

The group was a ready to discuss her relationship with her daughter and how distanced Grumbach seemed from her daughter during her illness. Several members thought she was a bit unfair to her partner who was not ready to leave Washington. When we entered a discussion of how the memoir explores Grumbach’s sorting through life and possessions everyone jumped in and had terrific comments about how we all sort through the process of aging and change – in material, spiritual and partnership terms. We also had a good discussion of her spiritual life, yet her lack of spiritual certainty.

The group did feel the memoir was a little disjointed and asked me about the “construction of the memoir”. GULP. I thought about this possible question because as I read the book I wondered about it myself. Well here is what I came up with – open for debate!!!! I presented the idea that the memoir’s chapters begin with a quote which leads to a sequence of circumstances experienced, reflections, people Grumbach is reminded of, and then wrapped up with a final reflection or event. Now this does not work for every chapter but our discussion about how the memoir was put together was good fun.

One constant in the book that everyone liked was her play with words and her use of a dictionary.

Good discussion! One of those moments when the group took me in directions I had not imagined.

Katie Curtiss, Dec 18, 2003

I began discussion by noting my initial discomfort with what I labeled Grumbach’s ambivalence. I then asked for instances and an explanation. The group, judging by their varying interpretations of her feelings (about death, aging, the world at large, her writing etc.) and her motivations (fear, ego, capitulation to critical responses to her first book, cultural expectations as regards our relationship to death, etc.), seemed to agree that the author is at the least

a complex person. However, there was much discussion as regards whether or not she is representative of what the series purports to explore--the dispossessed and invisible. Many suggested that her preoccupation with aging as loss and her lack of certainty about what happens after death, if anything, in spite of her otherwise spiritual approach to living were examples of speaking what most either do not have language for or do not bring to the level of consciousness but nevertheless feel. But others pointed out that her class made her different than the majority of the aged, that she can travel and have two homes which would indicate that she will have the means that will allow her to live with dignity if she becomes infirm. The discussion about class was as interesting as our discussion about growing old in America, the land of youth and the denial of death generally, to be honest. According to one long time group participant, this was one of the more lively discussions we have yet had. I would have to agree.

Michael McIrvine (Cheyenne group)

I began this session with a look at this year's theme, "Many Americas"--which everyone is excited about. "We're not really a melting pot, are we?" said one participant. . . and so we're off. This first book we decided could represent several Americans--female, privileged, literate, ("cranky."), elderly, and gay, though she never directly spoke about being the latter. She probably did speak most on aging. We discussed how she handled it (judgmental, cranky, etc.) but fitting for our culture which doesn't respect the elderly as do other cultures?

We all delighted in her witty observances of life, quoting several passages to one another for comments. The group was also interested in the information I provided about her and her other works.

Ann Noble (Big Piney group)

Participants were eager to share their responses to Extra Innings, identifying and explaining why they liked or disliked the author's voice, the book's content, or the book's structure. Comments varied as some greatly appreciated the author's dry wit and envied her anecdotes of travel and literary life. Others found that same wit to be "too dry" - which they felt detracted from the memoir, resulting in a "distancing" sensation, with the reader being kept at arm's length. Another agreed with this response, but for a different reason: that reader had wished she knew more about the author's personal life, her family and children. This conflict did generate some animated discussion on what a memoir should and should not include. (Upon reflection, I wonder if the author's gender played a role in reader expectations. If Grumbach had been male, would we have anticipated personal rather than professional memoirs?)

One reader commented that she most enjoyed the narrative voice, which did not seem "old" to her, which led to a very thought-provoking discussion in which members

quite frankly examined their own stereotypical images of the elderly. Most admitted to a perception of the old as weak, fragile, inactive, intellectually confused or dull - none of which might describe the author! (It should be noted that the group members also admitted to ranging in age from 50 to 82, and laughingly agreed that there are many who might consider us to be "old" even though that is not the image we hold of ourselves. Of course, we didn't fit that stereotypical image! Like Mairs notes in *Waist-High in the World*, we keep "moving the line", changing the definition, as the situation of our lives changes. Ironically, we tend not to be so generous and open-minded when it comes to others.)

The book's structure generated quite a bit of discussion, as some disliked the "disjointed" approach of this memoir, while others found the variety to be thought provoking and often entertaining. One reader suggested that the book's structure paralleled Grumbach's sorting through possessions as she prepared for the move from Washington to Maine. As such, the book is the record of the "sorting through" process, in which the author is sifting through her life as an artist, pausing to examine the moments, anecdotes, and reflections that have accumulated over the years, just as one sorts the physical treasures and "junk" gathered over a lifetime. (We wondered if the book is a collection of all she sees as valuable, or if the reader is to do some of the sorting.)

The group also discussed which of the "many Americas" the author might have been illustrating. A variety of groups were mentioned: the elderly, women, gays and lesbians, intellectuals and literati, the privileged wealthy. Some readers felt the book might illustrate more than aging Americans, but may also reflect the artist or the intellectual, neither of whom are generally part of the image we hold of "an American".

Not all liked the book, not all enjoyed reading it, but those differences of opinion led to a really lively and thought-provoking discussion. A great evening!

Ebba Stedillie

This book was a great one to end the series at the Senior Center. At first we discussed the "commonplace book" aspects of the book. Then we discussed the memoir form in general as being an important means of sharing information about everyday life over the generations. Many of the participants were journal keepers themselves, and related their experiences of keeping daily or at least frequent account of their lives. They also shared stories about family letters and memoirs and how valuable it was for them to have and hold such documents. Most of us felt that Grumbach's memoir took an enviable leap forward as being not just an account of the unexceptional, but of the ruminations these events triggered. We all envied her exciting literary life! Perhaps because the group members are of "senior" age, they had strong opinions about Grumbach's portrayal of aging, at least her own aging. Several readers ran out of patience for her because they were several years Grumbach's senior and weren't complaining. Others were inspired by her independence

and felt seniors' political and economic power was just getting started. We also speculated as to what disenfranchised "groups" Grumbach and her book were intended to represent in the series. We concluded it was both her writing as an "older" person, and as a lesbian writer. I shared information with the group about her biography, and about honors she's been awarded by gay and lesbian organizations. Overall, the readers enjoyed the book and as one participant stated "This group gets me to read books I wouldn't ordinarily read." We all agreed that was a good thing.

Julianne Couch

Doris Grumbach's EXTRA INNINGS stands in stark contrast to the other books in the "Other Americas" series. It was apparently chosen to give a perspective on the elderly population, but the consensus of the group was that Grumbach's gentrified, literary perspective did not especially qualify her to speak for the segment of that population who face real struggles and survival issues. Nor were the issues of homosexuality developed enough in the book for her to be "speaking for" that group. Despite the fact that we couldn't quite see how the book fits the series, we had a spirited discussion about Grumbach's attitudes and perspectives.

Rick Kempa

I began the discussion by asking about the significance of the title and whether the title fit the book. The group thought the title was very appropriate, especially since her previous book *Coming into the End Zone* was about the end of life. The group all thought this book was fairly upbeat and not as bitter as *End Zone* seemed to be. Many readers commented that they wish they had read *End Zone* before reading this book. Some readers thought *End Zone* sounded too bitter. We spent quite a bit of time going over our favorite anecdotes, reading them out to the rest of the group. One reader said she got more from the quotes at the beginning of every chapter than anything else in the book. Another reader was very interested in learning about Grumbach's life as a writer living and interacting among other writers.

Fitting the book into the Many Americas theme brought about discussions on the elderly. One reader who spends a great deal of time working with the elderly said she is always listening to discussions on what the elderly are now (poor health) and what they no longer have. The group decided Doris Grumbach did not represent a typical elderly person because she was much more privileged. She also didn't appear to have any health problems. A few readers also didn't think the book represented the gay community as part of the Many Americas theme because it was not discussed specifically in the book.

A few comments were made on Grumbach's choppy style of writing, with comparisons to journal writing. Grumbach's dry sense of humor was the high point of the memoir for the Kemmerer readers.

Hilary Barton Billman

I had expected that *Extra Innings* would be a good book with which to end the series *Many Americas*. I thought that for many Upton group members it would be closest to home in subject matter (i.e., aging, rural living, etc.). Yet, paradoxically, it was perhaps the hardest book in the series for Upton readers to get a handle on. About a third of the 15 members present really enjoyed the book, while many others had trouble reading it because "nothing happened." Even those who enjoyed it had serious questions for Grumbach on some of her assertions and examples. Some members questioned why we hadn't read the first of her memoirs, *Coming Into the End Zone*, and they didn't like her many comments about it in *Extra Innings*. They felt she did, indeed, complain a lot, and that she was, indeed, grouchy. They didn't see why she complained so much about aging when she didn't appear to have any real problems such as health or poverty, etc. We discussed the idea brought up in a study question about women being culturally encouraged to "make nice" about things and not disclose the 'shadows' in their lives, but many of the Upton women did not see this as an issue. Grumbach's many allusions to other authors and literary works and the literary life escaped most readers, too. One of our most accomplished readers said she didn't recognize anybody Grumbach was talking about and this annoyed her. One member, a lady from Maine, brought in a map so we could see the cove and environs, and it did seem that the eastern seaboard and Doris' literary life were perhaps a bit too remote (foreign?) for us. I didn't have much success either in leading us into discussion of some of the many themes Grumbach reflects on such as truth/facts in fiction, autobiography, memoir; the normalcy of a homosexual life and its many facets. I had specifically introduced Grumbach's homosexual relationship with Sybil to the Upton group in previewing the book, but many readers did not seem to remember this and did not detect the homosexual themes in the text, simply identifying Doris and Sybil as housemates (which of course they were, in addition to being a couple). One of our most lively points of discussion concerned whether Grumbach was a good mother since she often let the events in her own life keep her from being at the side of her children in crisis, etc. We did not wade into the question of whether the best and highest role for a woman is always motherhood either. There was disagreement as to whether Grumbach was a feminist. Members didn't seem to see her as having much of a spiritual life, either. Finally, I'm not sure we really appreciated the quite striking fact (to me, anyway) that even in her 80s she is an ACTIVE professional woman. Alas, we may have missed the boat on many points about the book, swimming along in its wake; yet as usual, the tone and tenor of the discussion was lively, friendly, and full of laughs. And I suspect some readers are still reflecting on these topics, as I know they have done in the past.

Connie Brown

fyi--Coming Into the End Zone is no longer in print in paperback--that's why it wasn't chosen--it's definitely the scrappier book--in case other groups ask. J.

Extra Innings by Doris Grumbach was thought by most to be a downer, boring, uncomfortable. A few didn't finish it because of her pessimism. It was also questioned why it was a selection for this series. It was suggested they didn't get to know her and reading End Zone or another of her books would have been helpful. Others didn't want to get to know her. These feelings were unusual for this group. The majority of those attending were 75 or older. Two women argued which was older--they were both 89.

Everyone read a passage they had selected, and others responded. We discussed how recalling memories differ, health problems of aging, and came to the conclusion that the American culture does not treat their elderly well. We discussed prejudices felt toward lesbians and gay men, and why older women might turn to others of their gender.

The group liked best the quotes of other people. The discussion ended on a positive note with all the wonderful references expressing, ". . . be grateful for the time you have left," and "live all you can, it's a mistake not to. The right time is anytime that one is still lucky to have."

Our centerpiece was creams that fight the seven signs of aging from Olay, Lancôme, and Estee Lauder. After the discussion ended, the group was given samples of Liz Claiborne's new fragrance "Mambo" to make them beautiful (thanks to a cosmetic clerk at Herbergers.)

Bunny Shurley (Newcastle group)

We had a smaller turnout than normal for this session [8] due to other scheduled events and apparently the fact that many were turned off from the book due to the first section or two. Once the discussion began though the participants took off with the book with several concluding it was their favorite. The discussion was initiated with a survey of everyone's favorite nuggets of wisdom, insight, or wit in the book, which went for a good half an hour. Everyone had multiple favorites, and for most each was different. The author's humor and curmudgeonness seemed to come across most strongly for the participants. Others enjoyed her vivid imagery and fascination with the small things in life. The discussion then shifted to her take on aging and the place the elderly have in our society, but what seemed more important to the group were her various interpersonal relationships and her assessment of the American community. The group was extremely interested in her assessment of the impact of technology upon our lives, histories, and social ties. The loss of the written word for much of modern Americana was lamented by several. Most liked her powerful observations upon the major themes of human existence--life, death, love, friendship, relation to nature, spirituality, etc. Our discussion was dynamic though a bit shorter than normal (1 1/2 hours), but several kept the book to reread or finish reading, and others expressed a desire to read further examples of Grumbach's works.

Erich Frankland

Our first comments went straight for the throat. Some readers felt the author was hyper-critical, hypocritical and essentially unoriginal.

Other readers felt the book was simply tedious.

Some of our best discussion came in a debate about what it's like to live in Dubois.

Many readers said the book sort of grew on them as they progressed through it. At first they disdained her grumpiness, but later came to feel comfortable with it, and even to like it.

Of course, we spent a lot of time discussing aging (to the accompaniment of many hilarious anecdotes and insights). We talked about our society's varying perceptions of aging and the aged, and how it differs (we believe) in our mainstream culture from elsewhere. We also talked about how aging as an experience differs for women and men.

Home, and what it means to go home, became our final point of discussion.

Peter Anderson

A Lesson Before Dying

There seemed to be an initial reticence about the book from the group which surprised me, but as the discussion got underway, it livened up. After a brief introduction to Ernest Gaines and a shared review of the civil rights movement in the United States in order to place the time of the novel, we discussed the obvious related issues: the lesson(s) learned and by whom, the implication of the use of words to demean or redeem people, qualities of a real teacher, religion, capital punishment (including statistics about the racial implications of capital punishment), community values, gender issues, racism both within and from without the culture, etc.

One person commented that the group seemed more sympathetic to the victims of racism in this novel than they did in our discussion of Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. This launched into arguing, explaining, and rationalizing if and why this was the case.

We tended to agree that the attitudes concerning racism, at least in the form seen in the novel, have improved about younger people, at least. But then someone mentioned the Jena 6 case...

On the whole, it was a good, meaty discussion.

Norleen Healy
Tongue River Library
October 22, 2007
15 participants

Initially, I gave a brief introduction to the theme of the series and to Ernest Gaines. We reviewed together a brief history of the African American movement in the US and what the status quo was in the period after WWII, the setting of the novel. I asked them to think about how much has changed and how much has stayed the same as we talk about the book.

The actual discussion of the novel was one of the richest we've had. We discussed the characters in depth and the environment and culture specific to Louisiana (then and now with interesting observations about the whole Katrina aftermath and how some of the issues there took us right back to the novel). The book lends itself naturally to discussion of religion, education, racism, ethics, and more. Some of the heated discussion concerned whether or not things have really changed all that much. I asked whether they think there is blatant racial bias in Wyoming. While they didn't see much prejudice toward African Americans (because we don't have so few in this part of the state), they agreed that Native Americans still are victims of deeply ingrained prejudice.

This part of the state is quite conservative, so the whole capital punishment issue is touchy, but I did bring in (without comment) some of the statistics about the ratio of minorities to whites who are executed in this country.

There was a lot of energy last night talking about this book. We could have gone on for two more hours when it was time to close.

Norleen Healy
STORY LIBRARY
SEPTEMBER 11, 2006

I made use of a newish book of Gaines' essays and short stories, *Mozart and Leadbelly*, to share information on the writing of *A Lesson Before Dying*. The book also contains talks Gaines has given in which he shares information on his upbringing, the importance of music to his life and writing (hence the title), and what he hopes to accomplish through his books. We then proceeded around the room, with each person commenting on the book in general or on one or more specific subject. I find that readers love this and one person leaving tonight commented that she comes to hear what others think. I am always amazed that when we get to person #16 there is still a new comment. In this case, the readers said, "But no one has mentioned the role of food in the book!" And indeed we hadn't. But the group chimed in with mentions of food as comfort (for whom?), as generosity, as custom, and as a show of community. We spent most of our time on Grant: why was he such a mean teacher and did he change, did he teach more or learn more from his relationship with both Jefferson and the preacher, was his relationship with Vivian shallow, and above all, why did he return to the quarters? Readers were fascinated by the role of both the black and white women in the book. We examined how a "look" can have an impact, a look by an aunt, but also a

look by a white jailer. I kept bringing the group back to the characters of the preacher and of Paul, wanting them to see the importance of each. I was more successful with Paul! We talked about the religious overtones of the book and the group as a whole was skeptical and asked if Gaines had intended this. Of course, I didn't know. Several readers appreciated Gaines' descriptions of the quarters and of the surrounding area. We ended by projecting where Vivian and Grant are today; did they stay in the community and make life better, building on what strength the community derived from Jefferson's death, or did they flee to California as Grant's old teacher argued was the only way to survive? This book was a wonderful choice for the Many Americas series.

Barbara Gose , Riverton

There was an unusual unanimity regarding this book. Everyone thought it very moving and compelling, finding the simple, detailed evocation of time and place very convincing. Some felt that it had the sweep and the scope of Shakespeare, in the range and type of characters and the depth and diversity of feeling.

A myriad of issues were raised during our two hours. We discussed the motivations for the oppression of a people and the effects on the oppressed and the oppressors alike. We looked at the multiple means used by the oppressors...the humiliation, the imposition of "the blanket of ignorance, the ghettoization, the intimidation and the fear. Several commented that many of these practices continue today and gave evidence from their own experiences and observations.

We discussed the emasculation of the men, the perceived necessity of convincing them of their inferiority and thus leaving them unable to protect their women and families...and in turn, leading to the women becoming the strong ones, who hold the families and the community together. It is this emasculation that requires healing.

We noted the role of family relationships, obligations and duties, the importance of the extended family as a support system and as a bulwark of protection. We talked of the parallels between the African-American and the Native American experience in the US. observing that to significant degree the Native American condition has remained hidden. Some thought that this book is a far more optimistic picture than the one presented in "The Lone Ranger..." We asked ourselves "What is the lesson?...who learns it and who teaches it?" We decided the Grant and Jefferson taught each other the meaning of heroism, the importance of resistance, of 'standing up'. This led to a discussion of Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement in America...and the effectiveness of 'passive resistance' as a means of political and social change.

Some wondered how much has actually changed and how much still needs to change.

Carol D. Wauters, Jackson (filling in for Stephen Lottridge)

Whenever I enjoy a book as much as I enjoy *A Lesson Before Dying*, I am always disappointed when others don't like it as well. All but one of the Medicine Bow group said they somewhat liked the book (they said it was better than *Waist-High*), but no one seemed to appreciate it as much as I. The one person who disliked the book disliked it vehemently. More on that later.

We began the discussion by talking about the three choices that Grant said were available to black men in Louisiana--to die violently, to be brought down to the level of beasts, and to run. We talked about the causes behind these choices and the systematic emasculation of black males and the motivation for that emasculation. We contrasted the treatment of black females, talking about their roles in the white community and the black community. We discussed the idea that they are often the backbone in black families and communities. We looked specifically at some of the female characters in the book.

From that point, we explored the reasons Grant had difficulty convincing Jefferson that he was a man, a difficulty arising because Grant is grappling with a definition of manhood. We talked about the use of the word "hog" by various characters and the implications.

We discussed the sense of obligation that ran throughout the novel--obligations between blacks and whites, among the blacks, among family members. We noted Grant resented obligations but usually fulfilled them.

We looked at the role of religion and Grant's rejection of church. We talked about the paradox that Ambrose's faith (based in a white culture's religion) allows him to be strong in the face of the white culture's justice system. We discussed the analogies between Jefferson and Jesus, including the fact that Jefferson was able to accomplish in death what he could not accomplish in life.

Group members weren't sure what the lesson was that was learned and gave me the sense that they did not understand how Grant and Jefferson grew in the course of the novel.

They also did not pick up on the sense of place that I think Gaines creates so effectively.

Towards the end of the discussion, one group member mentioned that the electric chair was used in that time period because it was considered more humane than hanging. Somehow from there, the discussion became very animated with some group members proclaiming that executions of criminals should not be humane, and they strongly advocated capital punishment. How a discussion of *A Lesson Before Dying* could lead to a pro-capital punishment "discussion" still baffles me.

Now back to the person who strongly dislikes the book. She did not say anything until the end. Then she said that she totally dislikes the book for three reasons:

she dislikes Grant because he isn't nice to people;

she thinks his and Vivian's relationship is wrong because she isn't yet divorced;

she thinks the plot is a total fairy tale and stupid because no one would think himself sub-human; in her mind, that is impossible (even if people have been told that) so the whole book is unrealistic and thoroughly unlikable.

I think the book is so moving and well written that I was disappointed that others thought otherwise.

Maggie Garner, Medicine Bow

"Lesson" opened this year's book discussion for the Lander readers. Reaction to the book and the series was positive. I opened the discussion with a brief biography of Gaines and we then proceeded around the room with each person stating a reaction to the book. Following this, we talked about the characters, what lessons were learned, who the hero was, the sense of community, language, religion, racism, and contemporary examples of invisibility. Of particular interest were comments by an ex Peace Corps worker who argued that the "quarter" displayed a sense of "what can the world do for us" attitude and by an individual who experienced the same sort of racist treatment as Grant did at the hands of the white "elite." I had little luck in convincing the group that the minister was a powerful force in the change that came to Grant. We tried to project what Grant's future might be. Several in the group had held out hope that Jefferson might be freed. We agreed that Gaines was successful in creating a sense of time and place, but disagreed as to how much better things are for minorities today. I ended by giving a brief overview of our next book.

--Barbara Gose

"I was not there, yet I was there." The opening sentence of the novel was enough to sustain the group for an evening of insightful and interesting discussions. The group began with the author's view of segregation and servitude in Cajun country Louisiana in the late 1940's. Black humility versus white superiority bothered several readers, until Emma's love and dedication to her grandson began his short, but powerful, lesson before his death. Grant was selected to be the teacher, but the lesson was learned by many others including Grant himself. Next, we discussed the injustices--daily mistreatments in life, arrests, trials, and executions--experienced by Blacks. Finally, the relentless resistance of Jefferson, Grant, and Miss Emma proves to be the catharsis of the novel. Jefferson's lesson, which is quietly learned by others, shows that heroism is not always experienced through action; resistance to the inevitable can also work. One reader commented that she was very impressed how Gaines taught so much about the Black social condition in the 1940's and developed strong, unforgettable characters as well.

Jim Fassler

Sheridan Fulmer Public Library

As one of the scholars suggested I gave considerable background on Gaines' life and writing; it was a great suggestion. Then I moved into a question as to why the term hog was central to the book and then set the platform: how did Emma's decision reverberate through the characters and the various communities with in the book. How did her decision reverberate through the expectations characters had of other, and the conflict and resolution that evolved within the story. The group discussed what it means to be a teacher – Grant, Ambrose, Vivian, Jefferson; who made who a teacher? How and why? Who was educated? What does it mean to be educated? We discussed the conflict between Grant and Ambrose and what lessons were learned by both.

I asked the group to consider the idea of what it means to kneel and stand? And presented the quote: "There is dignity and value in service and humility when there is dignity and value in the person who exhibits them and the cause them calls them forth".

The group discussed who is the catalyst for change in an unjust and inequitable system?
What role do individuals and communities play in change?

The discussion was good but when I asked about the role of Creoles in the book the discussion took a curious turn. No one had picked up on the prism of color and the Creole presence in the book. This led us into a good discussion but with difficult angles.

We discussed who learned what lessons, the role of females within communities and the choices of African American men.

We ended by discussing the biblical implications - time of executions, Paul and who was transformed.

Interestingly the group had significantly divergent ideas on the America represented in this book. Some felt it was a clear and significant view, others thought it was too stereotyped, stylized and not believable.

Katie Curtiss, January 2004

A good group. Topics discussed were those that other groups have covered, as noted in scholars' reports. Comparisons were considered with contemporary racism issues, including Native Americans and reservation isolation and scapegoating. Also the questions: What if trials and executions were done in the local community? Who are the prisoners? What is a civil society, and can it be found in this book? What were the lessons, and who the learners? How is language used as a weapon in the book? Is a scapegoat individual or group always necessary? Given our institutionalized racism, our use of capital punishment, our degradation of learning/teaching, etc., what is an American? How do we (the group) see ourselves? How do others see us?

Bob A Brown, Torrington group, 12-1-03

It's hard not to be impressed with Ernest Gaines. Everyone found *A Lesson Before Dying* to be a powerful and evocative piece of literature. The book brought about a good discussion about how most Wyoming-ites are sheltered from serious racial strife. One of the most powerful books in the series, the group concluded.

Sam Western 02-3

Many participants wanted to date the experiences of African Americans as they are portrayed in the book, to say "things are better now." However, I reminded them of the differential rate of incarceration and of the application of the death sentence for capital murder, and offered statistics regarding single parent households and the possibility for early death for this population. Thereafter, the discussion was much more lively: the positive and negative aspects of education as presented in the book, what is manhood? personhood?, is this a positive or terrifyingly bleak book in the end?, etc. Excellent discussion to base our future talks on.

Michael McIrvine (Cheyenne group)

The Kemmerer group had a lively discussion on Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*. The group enjoyed reading the book and most said they could not put it down. We discussed how this novel fit into the *Many Americas Series* and had quite a long discussion on racism today and racism in the south. When I asked whether they thought the book was positive or bleak, the group decided it was bleak with a positive theme (if that's possible!). The theme of the lesson got us talking about Grant and what he learned from the experience. It is apparent that Jefferson learned to walk like a man, but Grant's situation warranted more explanation. One reader decided Grant cried at the end of the book because he felt guilty about not attending the execution. Most of the other readers decided the tears represented everything, the injustices in his life, his questions of religion, his relationships, and the loss of Jefferson.

Some of the questions we tried to answer were:

1. Is this a positive book? A bleak book? Why?
2. What does Grant learn in the end? Why does he cry?
3. Who learned the lesson and what was the lesson?
4. What is the relationship between setting and theme?

With this question we discussed how different the situation might have been in a different part of the country. When we discussed setting, the readers were quite interested to know about the 1940 Louisiana law that prohibited blacks from attending high school or entering public libraries.

5. Why did Grant return to Louisiana from California to teach?

This brought us to the relationship between Grant and his former teacher and the situation of teaching in the south in a plantation town. We also discussed Grant's relationship to the white characters (an educated man waiting for 2 ½ hours in the kitchen to speak to the white plantation owner) and how this seemed to affect him.

6. Why is Jefferson's death so disturbing in this book and what does Jefferson's death accomplish that his life could not?

This question and a couple of the others are straight from the Oprah's Book Club questions, which I found very helpful. This particular question was important because it made us talk about the term "hog" and how that was the key to everything that happened in the book. Jefferson never would have stood out had he not been caught in a bad situation and sentenced to death. Jefferson was able to teach all of the other characters about dying with dignity.

Hilary Barton Billman (Kemmerer group)

Since we were scheduled to meet on Nov. 8, the last time this group met we thought we'd know who the next president of the United States would be by this session. (!) Naturally, the confusion and uncertainty related to the balloting in Florida (and other states) colored our initial discussion, as well as our closing comments. All in all, our evening was full of intriguing questions and lively conversation!

The Glenrock group members expressed general enthusiasm for Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* and also noted the depth of their various emotional responses to the novel's language, to its mood, to its spirituality, and to characters' situations. Our conversation touched on a number of topics including:

- how language is used to humiliate and to motivate characters
- the analogies drawn (in images and in action) between Jefferson and Jesus, and how those analogies affect the novel's "lesson"
- the role of women characters in motivating male characters, in playing central roles (leadership) in the community, and in preserving and transmitting cultural values
- the pervasiveness of death in the novel, as well as the effect of Jefferson's death on Grant, on the community, and on the reader
- the relationship between understanding others' expectations, the emotional toll those expectations may exact, and the rewards or benefits (or costs) experienced in attempting to fulfill those expectations (This also led us to discuss the "games" people play when they know

they must live up to certain expectations, but really do not wish to do so. We talked how these games are illustrated in Grant's interaction with his aunt and with the whites in the jail and those who live in "the big house" on the plantation, and how the games are depicted in the judge's wife's relationship with Tante Lou and Emma)

- what causes a person to be emotionally isolated, how one develops a "heart" or "soul", the risks or costs involved, and the subsequent benefits for having a "heart"
- various "-isms" including racism and sexism, their influence on human behavior and possible causes. One group member shared an observation that the "-isms are actually founded in a human interest in rank." (The member spoke about a book on rank discussed in a Star-Tribune article; I'll try to get more specific info. on that, as it stimulated a great deal of interest and discussion.)

There was quite a bit of discussion on the racism and sexism in *A Lesson Before Dying*, the origins of these "-isms", causes for their perpetuation (economics of the "-isms"), and the effects on white and black members in the community. This also led members to speak of evidence of racism in their community, in Wyoming, and in the Rocky Mountain region.

We closed our evening with Gaines' response to his black students who question the value of reading Hemingway ("that white man"):

"All Hemingway wrote about was grace under pressure...Can you tell me a better example of grace under pressure than our people for the past 300 years? Grace under pressure isn't just about bullfighters and men at war. It's about getting up every day to face a job or a white boss you don't like but have to face to feed your children so they'll grow up to be a better generation." (found at http://www.oprah.com/obc/pastbooks/ernest_gaines/obc_p_b_19970922_bio.html)

The emotional power, the pervasive sense of foreboding or darkness, and the final (and unexpected) sense of hope in *A Lesson Before Dying* were probably most often noted by readers. High praise all around for this novel!

Thanks to WCH staffers who supplied great resources on the WCH website and to other group leaders for their insightful and inspiring comments and questions.

(Info. that I found intriguing was Gaines' comment that reading 19th century Russian novelists -- Gogol, Turgenyev, Chekov-- had probably the greatest influence on his writing. Possibly some connection between that "dark mood" in this novel and that often found in those writers' works?)

Ebba Stedillie (Glenrock group)

The group thought this was an excellent book for the series ("Many Americas")--representing "prisoners," but more than one on death row, also the prisoners of our culture, the black people. Gaines, everyone thought, did an excellent job at "explaining" the cultural prison in this book, including the many complexities within black culture. Discussion included the role of the mulatto in America, black humiliation perpetuated by the whites, and how Grant was a prisoner of his own self-hate. There was little disagreement in this discussion, including on what the "Lesson Before Dying" was.

Ann Noble

FYI: On the March 15th [2001] NPR Morning Edition, there was a story about the entire town of Rochester, NY reading Ernest Gaines *A Lesson Before Dying* to help race relations. If you go to <http://search.npr.org/cf/cmn/cmnpd01fm.cfm?PrgDate=03%2F15%2F2001&PrgID=3> you can listen to the story.

Rochester Reads 'A Lesson Before Dying' (14.4 | 28.8) -- Brenda Tremblay of member station WXXI reports that many people in the city of Rochester, New York, are reading the same book. People in supermarkets and malls wear pins that say they're reading, *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines. Its the story of a young black man wrongly sentenced to death. Rochester's mayor says its allowing residents to talk about race relations in a way they'd usually avoid.

Hilary Barton Billman

Gaines's "A Lesson Before Dying" was very well received by the group members, and our discussion was one of the very best of the series. We discussed at length the various "lessons" that the book contained, including:

- the necessity of action--both individual and communal--to combat injustice
- the importance of bearing witness (Paul the prison guard)
- the importance of self-expression (Jefferson's diary)
- the inevitable tension between belief and knowledge

We explored the character growth of Grant and Jefferson. We examined the nature of prejudice, noting how it is not bound by color lines, how it seems to be one of the natural attitudes of mankind. I shared some very good source materials from Volume 86 of the Contemporary Literary Criticism series in particular (available at many libraries, and drew some comparisons to some of Gaines's other notable work, especially the much anthologized short story "The Sky is Grey." We agreed, I think, that Gaines is a great American writer.

Rick Kempa

I took a bit more time than usual on Gaines biographical details; his life is such a good example of how a professional writer of imaginative literature actually works. My thanks go to WCH scholars who mentioned the good material on Gaines in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 86. The Upton group will read Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* next season, and it is a book that Gaines mentions a number of times as an influence on his work, along with that of other Russian greats. We talked about the universal humanity lying beneath all the characters Gaines constructs-i.e., that in *Lesson* both whites and blacks have depth and complexity.

A new member has joined the Upton group, a law enforcement officer who has extensive experience working on Indian reservations; she shared her firsthand view that reservations today are in even worse shape than the South was in the forties, the time period of *Lesson*. There was confusion among some members as to what the book was actually "about." They had read it with the idea that something might happen to get Jefferson out of his death sentence. This, in turn, resulted in their missing some of the complexity of the story. While most found *Lesson* a page-turner, some complained that it "didn't go anywhere." We briefly discussed the differences between a psychological story and an action story.

These kinds of comments reminded me, as scholar, that often our BDG members' "reading" abilities are at varying levels. It seems useful to spend time on actual plot and character structures before moving on to the issues, themes, and meanings in these richly nuanced books. One question that intrigued us: what would be different today if executions were held in local communities as they were in Louisiana in the forties? What would be different in Upton if a local person were to be executed for murder right there in the jail? This brought us briefly to the McVeigh execution and the hullabaloo over who should witness it, and why people might want to witness an execution. Most members said they would have no interest in seeing an execution themselves, but they were also careful to say they might feel differently if someone in their family was a victim. One theme in *Lesson* I had hoped to discuss was what one critic calls the 'morality of connectedness' in communities, specifically in Upton. The group did not take off on this issue, however. Members focused more on the individual relationships among characters. Another question that raised varying interpretations was whether or not Jefferson got "saved." This allowed us to talk about the "place" of the preacher in the story. Some had been surprised and pleased at the wisdom of the preacher in the interchange with Grant. The scene at Vivian's house after the Rainbow fight confused one member. It made her question the veracity of Vivian' and Grant's relationship. Several conclusions offered were that Grant was emblematic of many men in his range of emotions: anger and sex, only! We were joking, of course... This gave us an opening to discuss the structural role Vivian plays in the novel, as foil to Grant. Another focus of discussion was Grant's relationship with Paul. Some members saw it as a symbol of hope for future race relations. We discussed it as a foreshadowing of the Civil Rights movement, also.

A good discussion of a great book; we went overtime and still didn't finish.

Connie Brown

Some of the group members were moved to tears by the story; others were not. One member said, "Oh, it's only fiction." I think she changed her mind about that statement before the evening was over. Several of the readers did not like Grant, even though they acknowledged how he changed through his growth. The "dissenters" recognized that Grant, too, was a victim of his social environment. We discussed the role of women in the Quarter, in Grant's life and in Jefferson's life and their importance for any future change in the status of the black people.

We have read enough books now that the group members easily recognized the plight of minorities then--and now. The members appreciated the opportunity to read this excellent book; they really enjoyed the author's style and skill in portraying the dismal situations in which the black people have been existing for many years.

Norma Christensen (Worland group)

[Bunny usually creates some kind of thematic visual display (pictures, objects, music, texts, etc.) to accompany the discussions in Newcastle, hence the pictures mentioned in the first line. J.]

A 9" X 13" black and white picture of an electric chair (Gruesome Gerty) was the focus point. After information about Ernest Gaines' life and his achievements and awards, we watched five minutes of the HBO movie *A Lesson Before Dying* (excellent). The selection covered the crime scene and court scene where Jefferson was called a "hog."

The discussion was lively and varied. Everyone thought it was a great story. Only one person, our only male, thought the premise of the story was not believable.

The main subjects addressed were:

- Biblical references and their significance
- Sexism in the Quarter and the strength of the women there as well as in our community, especially in women's job
- market, differences in pay, and deadbeat dads.
- Racism as portrayed in the story, among Americans, and in our communities.
- One member, a first generation American with roots in Czechoslovakia, had strong feelings of how Eastern
- Europeans were looked down on by Western Europeans and Americans.
- Terrorism. The Attack on America received much attention.
- Treatment of children--by Grant and in school generally.
- Capital punishment

- The death penalty as carried out in different states and states that do not have a death penalty
- The time spent before sentence is carried out and limited time for appeal.
- A Newsweek poll showed 73% support the death penalty; 38 % say only most brutal murderers should be executed.

A small book with a big impact.

Bunny Shurley (Newcastle group)

Many participants stated before and after the discussion that this was their favorite book, and we devoted nearly two solid hours to the discussion of it. In particular, the group was interested in exploring the different relationships, communities, and tensions expressed in the book (e.g., black-white, mulatto-black, men-women, old-young, educated-uneducated, etc.) Also there were many successful attempts to relate the book to others in the series. There was a fascination with the vivid portrayal of the landscapes and the period in the book as well as a near unanimous sense of hopefulness that emerged from the progression of the story. The theme of transformation as well as the dilemmas one faces in finding one's place in one's community and the general society also seemed to draw intense interest. We also had a fruitful dialogue on the commonalities of this story with the others as well as some of the group members' own life experiences. One conclusion that was reached was that perhaps economic factors transcended the differences of race and ethnicity explored in this book and the others. We also explored whether and how much American society has changed since the late 1940s. We also had an interesting debate about the relevance and meaning of home, family, and community for the different characters and ourselves. There seemed to be an intense interest among some in the group to read other examples of Gaines's work. We full circled the discussion with a brief expression of sentiments about what it means to be an American and how we evaluate American society.

Erich Frankland (Casper College group)

This was perhaps the first book in the series that a majority of the Dubois group seemed to like. The previous books have tended to be characterized as "real downers." The group liked the characters, liked the style of narration, liked the book as a whole.

We discussed the religious structure of the narrative at some length.

Participants pointed to the hopeful quality of the story and the fact that it didn't seem to self-victimize. We talked a lot about capital punishment and our incapacity, ultimately, to truly know what's real and what's right.

Peter Anderson

The discussion focused at first on the "lesson" that was being learned -- whose lesson was it and for whom was it intended. Consensus was that Grant was the one for whom the lesson was unintentionally intended -- if that isn't too wrenching a phrase. We agreed that he seemed at first to be an odd choice for narrator and central character -- unlikeable, arrogant, and miserable in his life, especially as shown in his treatment of his pupils. But it was his role as an educated person and a teacher that made him the obvious choice for the duty of making a man of Jefferson. By the end of the story, we believed that he had been changed by carrying out that responsibility.

We spent some time comparing Grant with Rev. Ambrose who seemed to be a more logical choice to work with Jefferson, a man completely comfortable with his position, including the necessity of lying frequently to those who called on him for wisdom and comfort.

Participants especially enjoyed reading Jefferson's journal which provided a window into this otherwise opaque character. One woman said that she read the book hoping that there would be no execution at the end. For her, that hope made the gruesome scenes of bringing the electric chair into the courthouse all the more poignant.

Barbara A Bogart

The group enjoyed a lively discussion of the book. Reactions to it were, in general, very positive.

Participants began by asking about the race and background of the author, which information I filled in. Several members of the group commented that the book began slowly but seemed to change pace, speeding up and intensifying as it progressed. At the beginning of the book, it was noted, the lead character seemed kind of whiny and complaining, but later "took ownership."

In fact, a number of comments came out about the evolving nature of the book. For instance, it was pointed out that the book seems at the outset to be about justice, but then turns into a story of personal emergence, and in the end seems to be about both.

The group discussed the role of religion in the novel, in relation to the lead character and in the lives of the people in the story. A teacher brought up the subject of learning -- no matter what stage we are in, it was generally felt, we can learn and change, and this seemed to be a principle element of the novel. Much discussion focused on the lead character as a teacher -- why did he teach, who did he teach, what were his feelings about teaching? Each member of the group related stories of their own pertaining to teaching formally or informally, the acts of teaching and of learning.

Peter Anderson, Alta

Waist-High in the World

Sixteen of us met Tuesday night at the Albany County Public Library to discuss Nancy Mairs's *Waist-High in the World*. People really enjoyed the book and were enthusiastic, so I didn't have to ask any of the questions I had prepared. A few liked it so much they had already bought copies to distribute to friends and family. As expected, this book did invoke many personal stories, and a discussion of how different people handle situations. The group really admired Mairs's approach to life. A couple of people read specific passages from the book that they found beautifully written or especially funny. I showed a picture of the Birth of Venus so that people could see where the front cover came from.

Many thought that this book would be useful reading for officials making decisions about accessibility. Others with disabled friends or relatives felt it provided great insights into their loved ones' experiences and reactions. Most were moved by Mairs's conclusion that faced with the choice to mourn the loss of her abilities or enjoy what she had, she would choose joy.

We also were curious about when Mairs came to visit Laramie; does anyone out there know?

Carol Deering of the Central Wyoming College Library was able to obtain a dvd of Nancy Mairs from the University of Arizona. I had the dvd running when people were gathering for the discussion, as I wanted them to see her, see George, and hear Nancy speak. To my mind, this visual made her more likable, although I realize that is not the purpose of her book. One reader brought a visual aid, showing how the myelin sheath is destroyed and slows down and stops the brain's messages. I also gave some background information, including the fact that Mairs has a new book coming out in 2007, so she is obviously working. Virtually everyone was glad to have read the book and felt they learned from her. They were surprised at her candor, both about her own and George's body and about both their infidelities. Did she make a map for us, as she wanted to do? It really depended on your assessment of her work. Some readers found her to be self-pitying, although she claimed not to be. Everyone liked her more in the last few chapters of the book, when they felt she got less pretentious. We talked about the role of care taking, depression, suicide (when will Mairs feel she has had enough; George's death, or will the line continue to move?), government responsibility, abortion and the right to die. To what extent is the message of the book diminished by Mairs' economic situation; after all, she has means, social outlets, care-taking from family. What of those who don't have her advantages? And yet, in the end we felt that we had been immersed, at least for a while, in another America that most of us don't know anything about and prefer not to have to deal with. And we at least acknowledge that this is a world that we will come to know personally, if we live long enough. We ended by debating the use of language - Native American or Indian, crippled or disabled or differently abled - how is one to decide? And how does one approach the

disabled, how do we offer help, when one person may take all the help she can get (Mairs) and another may be offended? We learned from this book and left pondering answers to the above questions.

Barbara Gose , Riverton

Three people said that they did not like the book because they did not like the author. They experienced her as angry and abrasive. Whiney, petulant and irritating were some of the adjectives used. Others, however, found the book to be moving, positive, sarcastically funny and well written. A few distinguished between the book itself, which they appreciated, and the situation of the author, which they found almost unbearably depressing. We identified part of the issue as being that the first part of the book is expository, with a thesis and a polemic intention. "This is not a feel good book, but a feel real book." The last three chapters, however, are essentially narrative. Some were relieved to get to the narrative; others put off by it.

We proceeded then to discuss some of the ideas in the book, especially the question of exclusion of those who are different, in a variety of ways; the question of fear of our own mortality and disability when we meet others who are disabled; the impulse of many species to exclude those who are different or impaired, and therefore a danger to the survival of the species or tribe. One participant mentioned *The Painted Bird* and the impulse of species to destroy what they do not recognize or what they fear. We then spent some time on the issue of disability itself, and what constitutes disability. We responded to Mairs' argument that we might better focus on the ability of people, rather than their disability. We widened the discussion to the view that all of us have varying abilities and "disabilities," but only some disabilities are considered disabling. We widened the discussion again to talk about the fact that all of us need help of one sort or another, and that none of us thrives without the support of a facilitating environment. We also discussed the issues of body image, sexuality and physicality, love and romance and their place in human, and especially female, life. Lastly, we discussed the three books in relation to each other, the others being *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *A Lesson before Dying*. Many people found some hope in *Waist-High* and *A Lesson*, while little or none in *The Lone Ranger*. We engaged the idea that the native American experience involves the complete destruction of what was once a thriving, independent culture, while there was not a comparable culture for blacks or the disabled as a separate, independent group, so the loss for native Americans is different, and perhaps less repairable.

As always, the discussion went the full two hours, and could have gone longer.

Stephen S. Lottridge, Jackson

The first discussion group of this session went well. We had a lively 90-minute conversation about *Waist-High in the World*, discussing the issues raised in the book and relating the comments to our own experiences.

I brought with me a copy of an interview of Nancy Mairs by Susanne Skubik ("*Body, Mind, and Soul: An Interview with Nancy Mairs*") and at various points in the discussion read parts of that interview. It is especially helpful in understanding Mairs' spiritual ideas.

We talked about Mairs' purposes for writing the book and discussed its use as a guidebook to her "country." We talked about people's reactions to disabled persons, the causes for those reactions, and what we can do about our attitudes. We had an interesting discussion about the superior care and concern in the UK for disabled persons, speculating on the causes. Mairs mentions that the large number of disabled persons in the UK after WW II may have made the British more concerned with such difficulties. We also speculated that the American propensity towards personal independence and doing things on one's own diminishes our awareness of the need for interdependence and especially the needs of the disabled.

We spent much time looking at the various issues that Mairs brings up in her book--caregiving and care receiving, euthanasia, abortion, healthcare, and the rights of the disabled.

Several people did not like the cover (in fact, they were offended by the cover) so we spent a little time talking about the painting from which it was taken.

Maggie Garner, Medicine Bow

Riverton: We had an emotional discussion of this important book. Fourteen people, including two men for the first time, gathered to discuss Mairs' work. I began by discussing Mairs' recent work on death and how this book continues her conflicted views on euthanasia and abortion. I shared interviews with both Nancy and George done for public television. These furthered the book's discussion of care giving and the need for getting away - on both their parts. Then we proceeded around the room, giving anyone who liked a chance to comment on the book. Several people found it tough to read because of the subject matter. Often it hit close to home.

We benefited by comments from a teacher, who felt that mainstreaming had a beneficial effect on students and teachers. She confessed that she often did not know how to handle disabilities emotionally. Many of us of a certain age agreed, and felt that this was the main benefit of the book, in that it helped us to really SEE people with disabilities. A woman who grew up with a sister with polio commented on the difficulties of being the sibling of a disabled person. And finally, a woman with MS discussed what the book meant to her. She, and we all, agreed that everyone should read the book. We talked about language, about the role of government, about genetic testing, abortion, and euthanasia. And we talked about

what MS brought to Mairs' life. It was a great discussion and we all agreed that this is a book we would have never read on our own.

--Barbara Gose

A somewhat subdued discussion of Mairs's book. One member suffers from MS and related her experiences and her gratefully positive response to *Waist High*. The discussion picked up as the group considered pros and cons of mainstreaming; people's personal reactions to the disabled (including how most of us older members had been taught "not to stare") and issues of abortion, assisted suicide, and how much our sense of self is linked to our physical attributes and limitations (both real and imagined). The member with MS helped other group members more fully understand and accept Mairs's anger.

Bob A Brown 1-4-04

The group began sharing stories about experiences with disabled people they've known, and exploring the changes in their own comfort level after knowing these folks. One participant was severely disabled and was very forthcoming sharing her experiences with the group who, in turn, was not shy about asking. The very personal nature of the discussion may have hampered our taking broader view related to the series theme. However, the group discussed "disability" as a broader condition than presented in their book. They also discussed mental disability, for example. When I was preparing for this session, I wondered how the "senior" context of the group would play out in their views about disability. They were able to offer a good 60+-year cultural/historical analysis of how our society accepts or discriminates against disabled people (both physical and mental). With the exception of the physically disabled participant, no one raised the issue of how their own aging may have interfered with the physical abilities. I didn't want to irritate the group by asking (!), but did comment on the point related to my own aging.

Julianne Couch (Senior Center group, Laramie)

This book brought about very personal discussions for the Kemmerer group. Participants shared stories of people they know with MS and how it affects everyone. One reader has a sister who was recently diagnosed with the disease and she found the book very helpful for her in understanding the life of a disabled person, but she wasn't sure her sister was ready to read about the harsh realities Mairs describes. When I asked the group their general reaction to the book, the answers ranged from thankful and to scared, but all of the readers were glad they had read the book.

I had several question to ask the group, ranging from the issues of sexuality to independence to how this book fits in the series, but the group took off on its own with the discussion, bringing up certain instances in chapters and

discussing how the chapters made them feel. It was a fascinating discussion and I sat back and listened most of the time.

One point I thought was interesting is that a few readers found the book hard to get into at first, but the more they read the more they enjoyed the book. The second half of the book certainly has more interesting "stories," such as the scam with the Byrne couple and the trip to England (the U.S. should be ashamed it is not as accommodating to the disabled as England!), but we discussed how the opening few chapters were necessary. A few readers wished they had more time to reread the opening. One reader said, "I think I would have enjoyed the opening more after finishing the book because I felt like I knew Nancy so much better and I could understand more of what she was talking about in the beginning."

As far as how this book fits into the "Many Americas" theme, the group was glad the WCH had chosen this book as a part of this series because the disabled population in the U.S. is often overlooked.

Hilary Barton Billman (Kemmerer group)

An insightful, lively group met at the Glenrock Branch library to discuss Nancy Mairs' *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled*. Prior to discussing Mairs' book, we briefly reviewed closing comments from our discussion of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist-fight in Heaven*, recalling how the characters in that book have been relegated to an existence in the margins of American culture, in the borderlands of our consciousness. I introduced *Waist-High in the World* as a book that allows readers a glimpse into a landscape foreign to the "nondisabled." Our group was especially blessed in that one member has dealt with his own MS for over 20 years, and was very willing to not only share his reactions to Mairs' book, but to offer his own story and philosophy, which enriched us all.

Questions we used:

1. One critic suggests that Mairs is very "truthful" because her book includes the joy as well as the grief and challenges of her daily life. Would you agree, or do you see her differently?

2. What is your reaction to Mairs' use of the label "cripple"? How does language shape our ability to perceive others -- and the world--accurately? How can it affect one's self-image?

These questions led to a discussion of media language, and to Mairs' comments on her desire to "look good", to be fashionable in the face of our cultural emphasis on youth and health. Group members reflected on the very real impact a comparison one's "less than perfect" self to those media ideals may have on one's self concept.

3. One complaint Mairs' reports is that the "nondisabled" assume she lives a stunted and hence intolerable existence. "You're amazing" "I could never do what you

do." How well does her book argue against the myth that the disabled are useless and despairing? What is your reaction to Nancy Mairs herself? Do you see her as "heroic"? How do you think she'd react to your response?

4. Mairs speaks of herself as a "privileged" person, as her slowed-down pace allows her to focus on the moment, to cherish it, but she also reports a sharp anguish at her loss -- most frequently when she is outdoors and spies something interesting, but cannot move closer as she once could: "I can no longer move on and sometimes I think I will die of the loss." How does her shared grief affect you, the reader?

5. Mairs frequently speaks of the "boundary of suffering and loss beyond which...life is no longer worth living" as a constantly shifting line drawn in the sand, an image oft referred to. Do the "nondisabled" do this? Is this behavior common to humans? (Group members responded at length and in depth to questions # 4 and 5, referring to personal experiences and noting how Mairs' book illustrates the human condition, and not just the situation of a special group.)

6. What is your reaction to Mairs' argument that rather than helping people end their suffering via assisted suicide, we should instead work to remove all the barriers that make existence insufferable? (Many reported that Mairs' comments helped them to understand the need for the ADA, but many also reported chagrin in the realization that simple design modifications could eliminate many of the barriers, yet our cultural mindset prevents such design considerations. Our group member who has MS spoke a great deal about how his own house is difficult to navigate --his knuckles bear ragged testimony--, and how expensive adaptations are. Another shared a story of the challenges involved in having a wheel-chair bound neighbor to dinner, while yet another spoke of the difficulties she experienced while helping her elderly mother. All agreed that Mairs is "right on" in her recommendation that we consider her plight could become our own at any time...)

7. Mairs set out to provide readers with a "map" so we could "journey" to her "landscape". How effective or useful is her map for you? Has she accomplished what she set out to do? Why do you think so?

Several group members were profoundly affected by Mairs' emphasis on the relationship between spirituality and physical experience, and on her belief that physical experience is crucial one's spiritual life. We did not go into that idea too deeply, as it was getting late, and the group seemed to be tiring. However, I can see that idea as good bridge to A Lesson Before Dying, our next selection.

We enjoyed a terrific discussion, one that kept my mind humming" for days!

Ebba Stedillie (Glenrock group)

Waist-High in the World was the first book discussed in the WCH Many Americas series at Upton on January 11.

Several participants commented to me beforehand that they weren't sure how we were going to discuss such a book. Mairs' sometimes in-your-face 'voice' in the text had made them apprehensive. Happily, at the end of the evening all members agreed that the book had indeed been worthwhile, and they had learned a lot from it about the world of the disabled and the issues surrounding that world.

I introduced the series by likening us to a tour group exploring worlds unknown. Susan, the P.D., is the bus driver and I'm the guide who offers a few pertinent background details as we approach each site. The group got a kick out of this analogy, and it seemed to allow us to begin an inquiry into worlds outside our immediate experience.

One point Mairs makes in much of her writing is how words define us. For instance, she proudly calls herself a cripple because it exactly describes her condition. To begin the Upton session I asked everyone to jot down a few definitions of themselves on index cards and then share them around the table. My caveat was that descriptors had to be outside the usual family labels of wife, mother, etc. This made the task more difficult for participants but they eventually came up with descriptors such as reader, cook, lifelong learner, horsewoman, etc.

Most of our early discussion centered on disabled children and the cruelty they must endure from their peers. We discussed why children seem to label each other in this way and decided that constant pressures of fitting in cause us all to look for ways to differentiate ourselves from others. One argument that Mairs didn't seem to win with our group was the need for mainstreaming disabled children and providing them with the services they required to do this. One teacher summed up the general view, "why do disabled kids use up so many financial resources when there are plenty of kids-in-the-middle who need special services also but don't qualify."

Several group members shared stories about disabled friends and relatives, and we discussed the question of identity again—are we defined by the disease, or is the disease defined by our response to it? Apparently there are two MS victims in Upton who cope with their conditions in very different ways—one as a 'fighter' and the other as a more passive victim. One group member has an adult daughter with MD and we discussed how she seemed to have the kind of personality that allows her to cope well with it (or is it the other way around?). Other topics discussed included severely disabled "freaks" such as twins joined in one body; how small communities accept and participate in the lives of the disabled people among them; and about travelling with a disabled companion. We enjoyed Mairs descriptions of travelling in England and in the national parks and group members had similar stories to share. We discussed the ADA and came to some better understanding of its importance, although again we questioned whether the cost/benefits were fair to business and taxpayers. (We could not quite get into the hard question of whether this kind of right was an inalienable one of citizenship or not.) Everyone agreed

that they'd also learned a lot from Mairs in reference to accessible home design for the physically disabled.

Other topics stemming from Mairs' ideas concerned the enormous commitment required from one's caregivers, which in her case is her husband. We discussed the American 'custom' that a disabled person's family is expected to be most responsible for their care rather than societal institutions. We had few answers for these hard questions but we pondered them nevertheless. Other hard questions included should people be allowed to choose to abort severely disabled fetuses, the promises and problems of genetic testing, fetus sex identification through amniocentesis, who can define quality of life for anyone else?

Some things we'd learned from the book and briefly discussed included: sexuality of the disabled; fears of the disabled about who will care for them when their special caretakers die, leave, etc.; the high rate of divorce in situations where one spouse or child becomes disabled; how children of disabled parents seem to accept them at face value; and those lines in the sand that we all keep moving—in the case of an MS patient perhaps it's from brace to cane to walker to wheelchair to bed. In the case of the rest of us, that moving line more often has to do with age and physical condition, e.g., what is an acceptable weight as we get older!

All in all the discussion was educational and reflective. One exercise that I had considered doing that I might try next time was to have small groups (threes, perhaps) review then present the arguments Mairs presents in each of the six essays in the second half of the book. Our discussions ended up touching on most of them but this might be another way to cover ground. Interestingly, I found that my place in the evening's discussion was not so much to lead the group from topic to topic or question to question (happily, conversation moved around the group all on its own) but to bring up Mairs' point of view in reference to the topic. In the end it felt a bit like Mairs was there with us discussing her book.

Connie Brown

I began the discussion by suggesting that in some ways the vision of America depicted in this book might be strangely poignant for us. Given the make-up of the group it is not likely that we will wake up an American Indian dealing with reservation life (as in Alexie's book) or an impoverished African American on death row for a murder we did not commit (as in Gaines's book) or etc., but it is a real possibility that we could find ourselves debilitated--whether by age, accident, or (as in Mairs's case) disease. We started here, with our own uncomfortable relationship to mortality and to our mortal fragility, as Mairs calls it.

Participants were all familiar with someone in such a condition, and all related how these people either managed, or failed to manage, to cope. They also related their feelings about being around the disabled, and most agreed the books offered insight into how someone so afflicted deals with their condition and with the

"nondisabled" world. Our discussion included speculation about the numbers of disabled who do not manage to cope nearly so well as the author, however, and, most interestingly, our cultural preoccupation with what is "normal" and our unconscious desire to either make everything conform to this vision or deny its existence if it does not conform.

In this regard this was an excellent book with which to end the series. Much of our discussion of all the books in the series centered around how the majority constructs categories into which the minority are expected to fit, and the consequences of failing or choosing not to conform. Perhaps because of the opening assertion about how this book might reflect our own experience of America someday, our discussion of conformity, defiance, otherness, and ostracism was especially lively. Many of the members suggested that this was their favorite book in our series.

Michael McIrvin

We spent much of our time exploring the different perspective on life and our world as provided for in the text. A common sentiment was a new awareness of the difficulties, lives, and desires of the disabled. Many in the room knew someone with MS (one member has it) or could personally relate another illness or infirmity to the author's descriptive stories. Many in the group felt an affirmation of the human spirit from the book and our discussion. Others felt that the disabled still have a lot to contend with in this country (some discussion on the situation in Casper as well as their personal homes and businesses). This led to some discussion of whether other countries are any better at dealing with the disabled. Everyone seemed to enjoy the vivid treatment of the author's daily struggles though a few felt that some editing would have helped (they felt some of the essays were repetitive.)

Some of the central themes explored in the discussion were the role/treatment of those on the periphery of our society, the relationship between illness/infirmity and life, the transformed nature of the family, and the obligations of the disabled and others in our society. This session went longer than anticipated (over two hours) and seemed to draw everyone in (even those who regularly do not say much). The series' theme has emerged crystal clear for everyone in the group, who all seem eager to delve further into the series' books.

Erich Frankland (Casper College group)

[Sorry about the confusion in the key sentence of the second paragraph--a word is left out and I'm not sure what it should be--maybe Norma will tell us. J.]

This was a very interesting discussion. It began with two members being very vocal about their dislike of the book, claiming the author was arrogant and they just didn't like it. However, that quickly opened up discussion because,

except for one other person who didn't understand why Nancy Mairs wrote the book, everyone liked it very much. All remaining members were very happy to have had the opportunity to read and discuss it.

One member had spent some time in a wheelchair recently as she recovered from hip repair surgery. In her view all the attitudes expressed about how people with handicaps, those who are confined to wheel chairs, [feel/are treated?] are accurate. There was, of course, discussion about our own reactions to people who are not "normal" in our view.

I personally questioned the part about England being more accommodating to "crippled" folks than the U.S. is. I have spent a part of each of the last 12 years in England, and the places I went did not have any accommodations for folks in wheelchairs. Elevators I saw in hotels, if there were any there, were so small that it would have been impossible to get a wheelchair in one.

There is a woman in Worland with MS whom most of us know. She works for Pepsi and when she reached the point she could not get to the office, they brought the office to her so she now works out of her home and seems to manage pretty well. She has a sister in Worland and many friends so she is not isolated, but folks who know her could relate to the difficulties Nancy Mairs presented. And a former pastor of a local church has a wife whom he has "manhandled" in and out of cars for years--they are, in fact, going to Africa to do mission work for the rest of their lives.

By the end of the evening I think even the dissenters had changed their view of the book and the author.

Norma Christensen (Worland group)

With a wheel chair in the room and a handicapped parking tag on the table, the discussion began with the assignment of finding barriers for disabled in Newcastle. There were many. Hopefully, many of these will be corrected when the highway department renovates Main Street, scheduled to start in 2003, and the new high school is completed. It was suggested architects should pay attention to steps and door sizes when designing building and homes.

Members also presented material from *Waist-High in the World* that was meaningful to them, and the discussion moved on to many subjects. Attending were a mother whose son has been in a wheel chair for years; a member with a similar disease; an older person with a cane; a person with three replaced joints; one who had given long-term patient care; and one who had been a foster parent of a totally disabled child--a group well qualified to discuss disabilities.

While most liked the book, Carol, one of the young people, found it very depressing and did not like it. She did bring to our attention the book *Miracles Happen* written by Brook Ellison and her mother, Jean Ellison. Brook recently graduated from Harvard after being on life supports since she was eleven.

Hal brought "Mulch" cartoons from the Casper Tribune, which were quite poignant [one was enclosed--December 13, 2001/] I read quotes from Mairs' *Ordinary Time*.

Bunny Shurley

This final discussion of the year was also the book discussion group's first meeting -- and I believe the first public event -- in Dubois' beautiful, brand new public library.

Discussion of Nancy Mairs' collection of essays was lively. We seemed to spend a lot of the evening coming back to a single, difficult question: What constitutes a meaningful life? A comment taken by a reader directly from the book seemed to be a recurring focal point: Living a meaningful life means engaging in the profound personal relationships the human spirit craves.

We discussed the roles of caregivers in our society and in our own experiences. (A number of personal experiences with disability, by the way, were shared over the course of the evening. This book demands a personal response from its interlocutors, I think, and I attempted to encourage personal reflections.) We talked about the differing roles and attitudes taken toward caregiving, and toward disability, by men and women.

We debated genetic engineering to some extent. The question of how much control parents should have over the future lives of their children -- in this case referring to the health or lack thereof of their offspring -- proved to be a stimulating topic for discussion.

Peter Anderson

Alta (05): Following are some of the salient topics and comments that came out of the discussion:

- A teacher talked about the ADA and its relatively new requirements that schools provide access across the board. The requirements have the effect of mixing kids together, this participant noted, and kids are very adaptive. They learn at a much earlier age (than in situations in which disabled kids are relegated to special ed) to ignore or accommodate disabilities.
- Of utmost importance is the attitude of the individual -- two different people with the same capability may feel very different about themselves and about their lives, abilities and accomplishments.
- People who become disabled temporarily (or who believe their disability is temporary) have a different outlook than those who must come to grips with permanent disability, even if the temporary disability is more severe. Hope for recovery plays a big role in attitude, and when there is no hope a person has to make up something else to get them through.

- Everyone is disabled. There's perfection, which is a Platonic ideal, and then there's a long continuum of human experience that falls beneath perfection. Thus even people who seem outwardly to have no disabilities may have an acute understanding of the sensation of feeling less-than-able and less-than-adequate.
- Becoming injured can be a gift, or at least it can if the injured person comes to see it that way. Injury can be a great leveler, even a healing agent.
- Several participants shared the experience of having been given handicapped stickers by doctors so they could park close to stores, etc., following injuries or surgery. The simple experience of receiving that sticker is powerfully enlightening.
- The group shared experiences of having people fail to pay attention to you because they perceive something wrong with you.

And here are some discussion questions I presented to the group over the course of the evening:

1. How have your own experiences with disability, your own or another's, shaped your thinking about disability in general? How did it shape your reading of the book?
2. How did you respond the first time you encountered the experience of realizing that your own body failed to measure up in some manner? How has your outlook changed since then?
3. What gifts did you take from the experience of having your body change in unexpected and negative ways?
4. What have been your experiences with giving care to others who needed your help because of disability? Have you experienced benefits as well as burdens in doing so? What do we need more of from the world around us in order to be better care-givers?
5. Is it difficult for you to ask for or receive care from others, and if so what do you think causes this difficulty? What are the rewards of allowing ourselves to be helped?
6. Why do people tend to avoid others with disabilities? What is it that we fear?
7. What did you discover about yourself in periods when you experienced great loss?
8. For you, what makes life worth living?

These were gleaned from several sources, notably a Unitarian study syllabus about *Waist-High in the World* (the book was published by Beacon Press, a Unitarian publisher) augmented by my own musings.

--Peter Anderson

Ellen Foster

Eleven of us met on April 15th (we could hear lots of activity from the meeting room next door where the final day of free tax help was occurring) at the Albany County

Public Library, to discuss Kaye Gibbons' book *Ellen Foster*. After sharing the exciting news that Art Spiegelman is coming to Laramie, we had a good final series discussion.

Most people liked the book (except for our one group member who thinks everything would be better as non-fiction). It seemed that people responded to the style, and felt that Ellen's role as narrator was what made this such a strong book. Many people read lines from the book that they found especially poignant or effective. We talked quite a bit about kids and how they are taught, especially reading (there are quite a few teachers and school librarians in the group). We shared stories of children we know who remind us of Ellen, which made her voice more believable.

The discussion ended with someone asking what we will carry with us from the *Many Americas* series, and what we found most compelling from each book. This was a nice way to pull things together. It was interesting because everyone expressed reservations about each book before they would start it (for example, the people who don't like to read short stories), but then be thankful they had the opportunity to read it.

The group raved about the series, and wanted to send on their thanks to the WHC for choosing the books and sponsoring the discussions.

This book generally brings on a good discussion and this was no exception. I began with some of the details of Kaye Gibbon's own life and of her other novels. That she grew up with an alcoholic father and a manic depressive mother who committed suicide and that she eventually lived with a series of relatives seems to indicate that much of her writing (certainly in *Ellen Foster* and *Sights Unseen*) is autobiographical, or at least "emotionally biographical," as she puts it.

With this background, we talked about Ellen's characteristics and looked at how she managed her life in spite of the awful circumstances. We agreed that her pluck and resiliency save her. We really admire her lack of self pity. A lot of what I guess would be "humanities" issues came into our discussion: racial relationships and attitudes, how much or how little control a person has over her life, definition of family, the culture of money, etc. Several in the group had experiences with foster care and talked about how difficult it is to work "the system" in that venue.

Since this was the fourth and final book in the series, we spent some time tying the books together in terms of the theme "Many Americas". As usual now, there was unanimous frustration over not being able to do the six books instead of four.

Norleen Healy
Tongue River Library
November 26, 2007
11 participants

People generally like this book a lot (only one dissenter), so it wasn't hard to get discussion going. I used several of the Vintage website discussion questions on the novel that previous reports from discussion leaders alluded to. Even though we segued from them in lots of directions, they helped us cover most of the issues from the novel. The group had trouble pinning the time of the novel down, but we finally decided it was purposefully vague, but fairly contemporary so as to not allow us to dismiss the racism and problems with the social system as issues of the past. One of the ladies in the group is a counselor at Sheridan High School who shared information about the children who are in "the system". Several other people in the group have had some experience with foster parenting and talked about the tendency of the courts to put children in homes where they have family or relatives even when those homes are dysfunctional. We talked about Ellen's resiliency and how that saves her. We agreed that unfortunately the same doesn't hold true for many other children in similar situations.

At the end of the long discussion on the novel, we heard about others of Kaye Gibbons's novels from several of her fans in the group. We noted that Gibbons tends to give voice to people who have been marginalized in society, particularly the rural poor and suffering women, obviously a nice tie-in to the theme of the series, *Many Americas*.

Norleen Healy, Story

I began by describing Gibbons' background, especially her efforts to deal with manic depressive illness. This certainly adds to our appreciation of her books. Many readers had read others of her books and several had read the sequel to *Foster*. I noted that Gibbons intends to follow *Foster* throughout her fictional life. So lovers of *Ellen Foster* can do the same. Since this was our last meeting, I asked readers to comment on not only how this book fits into the series, but to evaluate the significance of the previous books. We noted the use of humor to help relieve the depressing circumstances of several of the books. Several people mentioned the dignity and courage of marginalized Americans. It was noted that this series and these books opened readers to cultures and lives that they knew little about. Further, several people mentioned that they would not have chosen to read these books, but were so enriched by doing so. In discussing *Ellen Foster* we discussed how Gibbons handled the males in the book. A reader commented that the sequel explains more about *Ellen's* father. The psychologist came in for a drubbing; he was seen as a voyeur. The issue of mother-daughter relationships evoked spirited discussion. Was *Ellen* angry that her mother didn't/couldn't mother her? What happens in a relationship when neither the mother nor the daughter can protect the other? From this we looked to what constitutes a family and how *Ellen's* view of family changed. I asked whether or not the readers thought *Ellen* was "healthy" at the end, citing *New Momma's* need to calm *Ellen* by holding both her hands and soothing her. Most people jumped in to defend her extraordinary

strength and courage and argued that she was healthy. We talked about the need for *Ellen* to be a child, and that this opportunity is provided at *New Momma's*. Finally, we talked about *Starletta* and the evolution of *Ellen's* racist views and her debt that she "owed" *Starletta*. It was a good discussion.

Barbara Gose - Riverton

Our group loved this book. We enjoyed its charm and humor and the spirit of *Ellen*. One of our members even copied complete pages to share with friends which she calls "The wit and wisdom of *Ellen*."

Our discussion centered around *Ellen's* resilience and we discussed how she could be so capable of bouncing from one adult to another without being so deeply scarred. We discussed adversity and its affects on the human spirit.

As far as *Many Americas* is concerned, this book is an excellent example of displaced children. We all agreed that "*Ellen Foster*" was an excellent reminder of our need to cherish children. We also discussed how wonderful it would be if all displaced children could find a foster home like *Ellen* did. Much of the charm of the book centered around *Ellen's* choosing her "new mother" on her own while she was with her toxic relatives. Was any relative of hers more toxic than that evil grandmother?!! *Ellen's* coming of age and maturation toward her friend was also an excellent aspect of this book.

--Vicki Vincent

Riverton: We had a good discussion of the book. I provided background on Gibbons and information on her new and forthcoming books. Then we proceeded around the group with the question, "How does this book fit into the theme of the series?" Most folks answered that quickly by saying the poor/black/mentally ill or some other group is marginalized and treated as "other" by society and then proceeded to comment on how reading the book affected them. And we quickly realized that it affected us all deeply. We related it to our own childhoods in some ways. We looked at what it means to be a family or not, to be prejudiced, to be mentally ill or alcoholic, to be poor, to be lonely. Themes were mentioned - atonement, search for a childhood, a family. Several of us were intercede in the role reading played in *Ellen's* life - and in our own. Racism occupied a large part of the discussion, especially the issue of any white believing him/herself better than a black (and we broadened this to other groups) and how this largely hidden superiority is so difficult to overcome. Everyone came to love the style of the book which we decided allowed us to get inside *Ellen*, and to occasionally "see" how she appeared to others (as in the scene when she fixes up dead *mamma's* *mamma*).

--Barbara Gose

This book was well-liked; the best so far was the group consensus. One participant said it was a good story but that Ellen, the main character, was unbelievable. The rest of the of group thought the girl was not only totally believable but that many children like her live across America. Ellen Foster was compared to Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. The group discussed the importance of family, family values, and racial bias from the book's standpoint and the experience of individuals in the group. The group was surprised to learn that Kaye Gibbons wrote this book when she was 27 years old. Participants had a theological discussion based on Ellen's nonbelief in God and in a heaven. The only theme there was not enough time to discuss was the way money or wealth was portrayed.

Richard Kalber, February 2004

The discussion was lively, so much so that we never quite circled around to discuss the books place in the series. I began with biographical information on Kaye Gibbons and mentioned that Gibbons said that the book was "emotionally autobiographical" and an artistic exercise: "she wanted to see if she could use a child's voice to talk about life, death, art, eternity". The group immediately jumped on this comment and they were divided in their opinions as to whether or not the voice of Ellen was believable. Rather than corral them back to the series and which America Ellen Foster represented I gave them free rein and let them go. This group is so comfortable with disagreement and never gets contentious in disagreement; instead are intrigued by each person's point of view.

Thus we began discussing various views as to the voice of Ellen. Those that believed the authenticity of the voice led the group into a discussion of where Ellen gained her strength; they felt that it was from her mother and perhaps from an early happy childhood before (as one member read from the book); "Some wild ride broke and the one in charge strolled off and let us spin and shake and fly off the rail" [pg 2]. Others felt that there are some children that do have an innate resiliency, are tough and creative and have the ability to survive. All agreed that if we could figure out from whence it came, how and/or why, we could change the lives of many children who come from difficult circumstances.

Interestingly for this discussion members of the group came very eager to share their favorite passages from the book; everyone had one and this enriched the discussion tremendously. Everyone felt the book was such a page turner that they flew through it so quickly and as a result did not ponder the book in terms of how it fit into the series as they had with other books. As I threw out further discussion questions about Ellen's lists to find order and control in her life, as well as her evolving definition of home, they all said they were going to reread the book because they missed so much in their anxiousness to get to the end of the story. No one found the structure of the book, the interweaving of past-present- past difficult. They all agreed it threw them off at first but it was easy to get into the flow of the structure of the narrative.

I used a discussion of Ellen's interview, so to speak, with the psychologist to get into a discussion of who listens to Ellen and how and why society, the legal system and family all failed Ellen. We ended with a discussion of the last page in terms of Ellen's growth in understanding racism, family, friendship and home.

This was our last meeting and everyone was very excited to know that Kaye Gibbons has two more books in the works - one for April 2004 and the sequel to Ellen Foster for 2005.

Katie Curtiss

After the introductions and my background information about WCH and the book discussion series and other programs, the groups engaged in a thoughtful discussion about Ellen Foster. It was an interesting first book for this year's series, as the contrasting value systems and behaviors of the adults provided ample material for the group members to introduce and debate their own life experiences. Several are retired public school teachers, a few active, and two mental health workers dealing with children, so many points of view were available.

Bob A Brown, Torrington group, 9-8-03

I began discussion by referring back to the name of this discussion series and a review of the books we have discussed thus far. I asked the members what they believed "Many Americas" meant in relation to the thematic connections between these stories and our remaining three titles (which I synopsized briefly). Works like "mainstream" and "normal" came up a lot as did the second person pronouns. The underlying assertion was something like "we get to read about people who are not like us." I pointed out that "normal" was relative and gave examples, and I suggested that what constituted mainstream culture was slippery as well, and maybe a product of the media. I suggested that perhaps our conception of ourselves is ultimately idiosyncratic but carved out (or not) of an amorphous set of values others attempted to get us to subscribe to.

Examples from our first two books [A Lesson Before Dying and Extra Innings] provided a nice segue into a discussion of what Ellen thought was normal initially and ultimately. Discussion about the family, especially our cultural perceptions vs reality, and about self-reliance as the only way to survive (her grandmother provided an excellent example of someone who was tough but lacked other qualities that would allow her to be happy) were the basis of much lively discussion.

The group was in general agreement that it was difficult to sufficiently suspend our disbelief to accept that this little girl could will and connive herself into the situation at the end of the book, that she could seem so apparently unscathed by her horrible upbringing. But one member

offered us examples of her behavior that suggested she would have problems as an adult.

I pointed out that one review I found claims this is about the author's childhood, at least to some degree, and that a major note in her bio. claims that she suffers from depression. Everyone ultimately agreed that we hoped such people exist, the sufficiently tough and intelligent and creative, who can survive it all intact, hopefully sans depression.

Michael McIrvin (Cheyenne group)

Most of the group agreed that while the plot details of the book were painful to read, they "couldn't put it down." Discussion of the various events in Ellen's life led to exploration of racism, power, self-reliance and adult responsibility, in about equal measure. One participant hadn't read the book and so group members spent some time explaining to him both the plot and the reasons his objections to caring about a child narrator were unfounded. Now that the group has read two books, they were able to start looking at thematic issues and discuss whether "American" can be defined as just one thing. So far they seem to believe that self-reliance is a trait of Americans (but not necessarily limited to Americans).

Julianne Couch (Laramie Senior Center group)

This was definitely the liveliest discussion of the series. I found that when I posed a question to the group they took off with it and I hardly had to intervene at all. I used the questions from the Vintage Books Teacher's Guide (<http://www.randomhouse.com/acmart/ellfostg.html>). This site has a lot of information on Ellen Foster and breaks the book down to the basics for discussion. The questions go chapter by chapter and are very specific and the group seemed to enjoy discussing the book this way. Everyone in the group was certainly moved by the book and we discussed the voice of the narrator and the sequence in which she told the story, as well as the different verb tenses

A quote on the front of the book compares Ellen Foster to Holden Caulfield and we discussed the comparisons.

One interesting question was about what makes a novel a novel, compared to a novella and a short story. We talked about Henry James' definition of a novel and a short story: a novel is for the big thing and a short story is for the little thing.

As far as discussing Ellen Foster as one in the Many America series, the group saw the characters in this novel as representing the southern, poor white section of America. One reader commented on the perseverance of the characters in the books as a Many Americas theme.

Hilary Barton Billman

This was a wide-ranging discussion with virtually all the 17 members present taking part at one time or another. We reviewed the "bus tour" metaphor we're using for visiting the different cultures in the Many America's series and noted that we're going to the American South twice, now and with a later book, *A Lesson Before Dying*. Ellen Foster has been an Oprah selection so a few members had already read it.

I was prepared to discuss the book's dual narrative structure (jumping from past to present and back again every few paragraphs), which I thought might have been confusing to some, but there were no problems with either the narrative structure or the sustained first-person voice. Interestingly, nobody in the group expressed doubts about the plausibility of the 11-year-old narrator and her bizarre life experiences. Ellen's voice sustained our interest throughout and some of us plan to read more of Kaye Gibbons work because of this fine book.

We began by reviewing just how many characters there really are in the book in addition to Ellen. Those many characters provided us with a way to discuss most of the themes in the book and the issues they raise. The group seemed most interested in how Ellen related to the two black families in the story and how they exemplified healthy families, and how Ellen came to her own realization about her own prejudices. We also discussed the question, What makes a family? We were all for Ellen "shopping for a new family" in the words of a NYT book review, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/18/bsp/7852.html>. I was prepared to use a reading group question list supplied by the publisher, <http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/ellen>, but found that in our freewheeling discussion we had managed to cover most of the points raised in that good list, and we had done it in a slightly less 'academic' way.

One question the group raised was whether the picture of the foster family was a bit too idealized. Group members discussed some anecdotes of other foster families and the pictures were not as rosy. In conclusion, I would say this was one of our best discussions and believe it was due in part to the easy accessibility of the Ellen Foster narrative; it is a real page-turner. People came to the discussion feeling they had 'understood' the story and wanted to talk about it.

Connie Brown

It seems like everyone was moved by this book! . . . After a quick summary of the book we moved into discussing her style and its effectiveness for her viewpoint. . . which naturally led to a discussion of her viewpoint. All agreed the book presented another critical voice for our series, "Many Americas." It represents southern, dysfunctional family, children, white, poor. We also discussed how this "fit" what we've come to think of as "American traits," such as self-reliant, family values, and racism. The discussion was thought provoking.

Ann Noble

Group members' comments on Kaye Gibbons' *Ellen Foster*, the focus of our final book discussion, echoed those of many others across the state: even though reading about Ellen's life and relationships was often "extremely painful" they just could not put the book down! They agreed the narrative structure played a role in their response, in that many reported –after some initial confusion or misgivings – that they found the past-present-past interwoven perspectives to be intriguing – and revealing. All found Ellen's character –her resilience, her toughness, and her creativity –and her amazing story the center of their positive response. Of course, our very response to *Ellen* illustrates that we are profoundly affected by one traditional image of "an American" – the independent, determined underdog who pulls himself/herself up by the bootstraps, achieving success against all odds. (A few did wonder if the positive experiences *Ellen* reports ever actually took place, if she were fantasizing or daydreaming in response to the horrors of her life– some very interesting speculations which sparked some lively discussion!)

Some noted this story is an especially poignant illustration of some of the very topics raised in our preceding discussion of Rodriguez' *Always Running: Living La Loca*, as race and poverty seemed to be the key to characters' world views, motives, and behaviors in respect to themselves, to family, and to community. Several group members shared their foster family insights and experiences, which added greatly to our perspectives and the discussion of the characters and situations in *Ellen Foster*. Many readers spoke of the Hallmark Hall of Fame television adaptation of the book, and others either reported favorably on some of Gibbons' other works or expressed interest in reading more of Gibbons' work.

This group enjoyed one additional discussion in April, during which we viewed and discussed the film *Smoke Signals*. Some found the film to be a very accurate and poignant recreation of characters and stories found in Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Several commented on how both the book and the film present reservation life in more positive images than mainstream media. Even though our discussion of the situations in the film also dovetailed nicely with a generalized discussion of the entire series and the theme of *Many Americas*, other groups may find the film discussion works better if it occurs at the same time, or more closely in time, to their discussion of the book. (*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was the first book this group read.)

Ebba Stedillie

We liked Ellen's strength of character, self-reliance, and sense of humor. Some of us felt that the evil nature of so many of Ellen's family was unnatural, and one person argued that all the characters were stereotyped. Our reaction to Ellen's discovery of racial equality was mixed--some of us moved by it, others feeling it was forced. We

had an interesting discussion of the book's style as well, which helped us appreciate the difficulty of writing in the first person vernacular. Regardless of our feelings about the book, we agreed that it was a very good "first novel" and that Kaye Gibbons was a writer worth keeping an eye on.

Rick Kempa

After talking about Kaye Gibbons' successes and the problems in her life, the discussion followed closely the summary of the text with matters of racism, prejudice, abuse, and self-reliance brought up following the various events in Ellen's life.

The group was interested in what Ellen's mama's life had been like before her illness. Gibbons will be answering this about her mother in her next book as she tries to recreate her life.

The discussion questioned if foster homes were really that good. I had interviewed mental health, social services, and Focus and had materials on this subject and the help available. A new member works for one of the agencies and could answer questions. It was suggested that kids have too many activities and should be allowed time to be kids and families should have time to spend together.

The narrative style and the grammar were decided to be appropriate to the story. The meeting concluded with the showing of the end of Hallmark's movie of *Ellen Foster*.

Bunny Shurley

In Dubois, I tried an experiment that other discussion leaders have apparently used with some success in the past. At the beginning of the session I handed out blank pieces of paper and asked each person to write down (a) an observation about the novel "*Ellen Foster*," something that struck them as remarkable, or that hung in their minds, and (2) a question for discussion by the group. I gave them about ten minutes to do this.

The outcome of this opening technique was mixed. In this instance, we had a large group (about twenty people), so in order to address everyone's questions I had to hurry through them. This made for a jumpy discussion. We didn't dwell on any particular question more than a few minutes, and this was unfortunate, since many of the questions had raised deep, complex issues which would have benefited from extensive exploration.

Also, I think a lot of people waited anxiously for their own question to be raised, hoping that it would generate interested comments, hoping not to feel foolish. This anxiety caused them to tune out the rest of the discussion to some extent.

Some of the questions raised were not particularly insightful, but I felt obligated to share them all so as not to

leave anyone out. Doing so slowed the conversation and lowered its potential for exploring broad humanities issues.

If I try this approach again (and I intend to experiment with it at least once more in different circumstances), I will spend several minutes culling the submitted questions for perhaps three prize specimens to share with the group which promise to really open up the text. I like the idea of philosophy of drawing the discussion from the interests and insights of the participant readers, but I suspect such an approach has to be handled more as a hybrid between a purely leader-driven discussion and a purely grass-roots discussion. We leaders are on hand for a reason -- to steer the discussion into deep waters of humanities-related issues. I think we run the risk of obviating our own purpose when we rely too heavily on the group to provide all the grist for the mill.

As an addendum, I found some reasonable materials for discussion, including some good questions, at the website for the publisher, Vintage Contemporaries, which I think is under the Random House umbrella.

Peter Anderson

The discussion ranged over a number of issues, beginning with the judge giving custody of Ellen to her grandmother - inappropriately in participants' view. We speculated on the relationships between Ellen's mother and her mother and sisters. We imagined that Ellen's mother, who had been sickly from childhood, had been the coddled child, leading to the sisters' jealousy and the grandmother's anger and bitterness over her marriage. That explained to us why Ellen's aunts were so unfeeling and uncaring.

One participant found the use of the child's voice very inauthentic, and was also annoyed by the apparent slipperiness of the book's setting in time. Other participants also were unimpressed with Ellen although they all readily admitted that the events in the story were "heart-wrenching."

We talked about the role of Starletta in the story as the single thread of continuity for Ellen from her old life to her new one.

finally, we decided that Ellen's qualities of self-reliance and independence were admirable, that they were believable given her early childhood experiences.

After the discussion of the book, the group turned to the series as a whole. Each one had her favorite -- and least favorite -- book. We were a little puzzled by the inclusion of Ellen Foster since the other books all featured groups with a shared culture while each neglected or abused or foster child's experience is unique. There followed an eager discussion of the selection of next year's series.

Barbara A Bogart, Evanston

Although in the past I've found reactions by reading groups to this book usually to be lukewarm, the Alta group seemed to have appreciated it very much. Some

participants stated they felt it was perhaps the best we've read so far in this series.

Some of the subjects of discussion that emerged in our discussion:

- Ellen's self-blame for her mother's death.
- The cruelty of Ellen's grandmother toward her and possible reasons for it, both psychological and literary.
- Ellen's changing relationship with her grandmother, the reasons for Ellen's staying with her and the way her grandmother affects her thinking.
- Ellen's friendship with Starletta and the way it changes during the course of their time together.
- The racism depicted in the novel and each of the character's interplay with racist attitudes and social structures.
- Ellen's views of the black people she works with in the fields and her identification with them.
- Ellen's precocity, and in general her believability as a representation of a real person of her age.
- Depictions of families, both in an internal sense and the way they are viewed by outsiders.

Peter Anderson, Alta

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain

Ten of us met at the Albany County Public Library in Laramie to discuss *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* by Robert Olen Butler. The discussion took off quickly as one person had a really hard time with the fact that a white American man had written about Vietnamese-American culture. This view was somewhat echoed by one other person who was in the Peace Corps in Kenya for two years and wanted to know more details of Butler's language training.

Otherwise, the book was well received. People really appreciated the variety of stories and voices, and the beauty of Butler's writing. Many had written down favorite sentences to share with the group. The discussion also led in somewhat unexpected directions. We talked about perceptions of racist incidents when viewed from afar, both of incidents that occurred to the Vietnamese Americans in Louisiana and the Hmong in Minnesota. This brought us into a discussion of Matthew Shepard, and outside perceptions of Laramie.

The other unexpected tangent stemmed from one person who was particularly interested in the story "Crickets," which was Butler's original idea that led to the rest of the book. This developed into a conversation about kids in general and what they learn about their culture, with a real focus on technology and its effects. Perhaps this was particularly apt considering the Butler e-mail scandal.

Doing a google search on Vietnamese and Louisiana brought up a lot of interesting information that I shared with the group, especially on Katrina and its

aftermath. There is also a nice one page overview, pre-Katrina, through the University of Louisiana's Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism, at http://ccet.louisiana.edu/tourism/cultural/The_People/vietnamesejstyle.html

Tongue River Library
September 24, 2007

15 participants

Because of the Viet Nameese first person point of view he uses in all the stories, I think it's important to establish some credibility for Robert Olen Butler when discussing this novel, so I began with his bio. and some quotes from various interviews he gave after receiving the Pulitzer for this collection. We then launched into a good discussion of the stories and themes. Partly because I love this book and didn't want to dominate or force my views on them, I had asked that people come to this session prepared to talk about any one of the stories in any way they wished, and in their doing this, we covered a range of topics and were able to refer specifically to lots of quotes from the book in our discussion. As it turned out, they liked the stories a lot too. Some said they were initially unenthused about reading a collection of short stories, but found themselves intrigued by the cast of first person narrators and the depiction of the people and the culture. We talked about how we have a tendency to see other cultures as all the same rather than as individuals and how this collection challenges that tendency. The discussion moved to how, in spite of the differences in cultures, we all share many of the characteristics: the generational conflicts where the older generation sees an ebbing of certain traditions and values, the sense of loss and displacement, the need for cultural stories, etc.

Some of the people in the group had family members who served in Viet Nam, and some of the younger group members had only vague notions of the whole conflict, so we had some history lessons incorporated. I find this book to be rich with possibilities for discussion, especially in this particular series.

Before the discussion even got underway, people wanted to know about Robert Olen Butler. I explained his background and his study of the Vietnamese language and his involvement with the culture during the three years he spent in Saigon. Only two of the sixteen people in attendance hadn't read all of the stories in the book. Several people were impressed with, not only the seeming authenticity of voice when he took on the persona of a Vietnamese man, but even when he took on a woman's voice. I had asked last time that everyone choose a story or character they would like to discuss for whatever reason. Most came prepared to do this and their issues facilitated really good discussion that encompassed all the themes, and more, that I had hoped to address. Many of us were of the Viet Nam war era, so the historical details were not unfamiliar, but we agreed that the book moved us to look at that whole experience in a different way. I

love this book for the breadth of humanities discussion it allows. This discussion was one of the longest we've had, a full two hours, and never waned.

Norleen Healy, Story

The response to *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* ranged from positive to indifferent. Some people apparently had not read the book.

We first discussed the collection in general and then began looking at individual stories. We talked about Butler's use of voice and his ability to create believable voices for males and females, young and old. We also discussed that the stories reflect universal human yearnings that transcend culture.

We looked at the stories we liked first of all, and there were a number of "favorites." Readers appreciated the humor and situation in "Love." They liked the poignancy and wonderful ending in "The Trip Back." "Mid-autumn" and "Preparation" were also among the stories liked. The reaction to "The American Couple" was mixed. We discussed the use of fairy tales within some stories.

Some people were really turned off by some of the stories, "Open Arms" being one.

Whether people liked the stories or not, most agreed that most of Butler's characters are believable and interesting.

Margaret Garner, Medicine Bow

A Good Scent from A Strange Mountain was clearly the most well received by the group of all the series books. Uncertain as to how they might respond to a collection of short stories, I had asked everyone to read at least six I had selected for them; they all read all of them. The book evoked memories of the Vietnam War, and Vietnamese immigrants encountered in the U.S., and led to reconsiderations of Vietnamese stereotypes. Group members loved the people and their stories (a la Butler), and the group mood was one of reverence.

Bob A Brown 2-2-04

Any concerns I had about substituting this book for *Extra Innings* in the *Many Americas* series were dispelled last evening in Clearmont. We had a small turn-out, probably partly due to the blizzard which caused us to cancel the scheduled meeting the week before Thanksgiving, but the people there really dug into this book with me. Two of the women had family members who had been in Viet Nam and compared things they had heard about the people and culture with stories and characters in the book.

We talked a bit about the war itself and how the inhabitants of the stories, varied as they were (both Northern and Southern Vietnamese, Catholics, Buddhists, etc.) all represent a telling segment of the culture and of

the effects of the war. We talked about Robert Olin Butler's experience in Viet Nam and his evident love of the country and the people. We looked at most of the stories in our discussion of the themes of cultural assimilation, displacement, loss, memory, the nature of language, and a look at how we Americans appear from immigrant perspectives. Probably more than any book we've discussed in this series, people had particulars from the stories they shared and related to our discussion. This is an unparalleled book for a wonderful discussion of human issues and one which allows us in Wyoming to look at a group of people in our country whom we are unlikely to encounter in places like Clearmont. It's also an opportunity to challenge some assumptions.

Norleen Healy

A smaller group than normal gathered for this last discussion in the Many Americas series. The book of short stories met with a good reception; we felt we learned about the immigrant experience, especially the experience of non Europeans. I began by sharing information on Butler. Interviews with him following the Pulitzer were especially helpful. His background proved to be essential in discussing the book. The readers all assumed Butler was Vietnamese, as he was so successful in getting inside the hearts and minds of Vietnamese immigrants. I also discussed the importance of Louisiana in the stories. We then proceeded to examine individual stories, focusing on myth making, fairy tales, gender roles (men seem to be more distant than the women), assimilation, and just what being an American means. After discussing the book we proceeded to reprise the other five books in the series and what they offered to the theme of Many Americas.

--Barbara Gose

One big question the group had was how an outsider to a culture could write about it so convincingly and compellingly. The author's background as a counter-intelligence officer in Vietnam carried a lot of weight with the group, especially with the retired Navy man. Everyone felt that Butler must be very sensitive and emphatic to create the characters he does in this book.

As members of the group discussed individual stories, some recurring themes began to emerge. One was the Vietnamese notion of family that includes all members past, present and future. A second theme was Butler's ability to create strong and believable women characters. The women in the group all agreed that Butler had extraordinary insight into women's feelings.

The issues of generational conflict and cultural conflict also generated discussion, as well as Butler's skillful presentation of Americans through the eyes of Vietnamese immigrants.

Members concluded that the power of the book lies in the universal human emotions that Butler explores and in the author's compassion for his characters. Several people

commented that the book had changed their ideas about Vietnamese culture and the immigrant experience.

--Barbara A Bogart