

Journey Stories

Overview

Journey – The Wyoming Humanities Council wanted to create a book series around the most recent Museums on Mainstreet event so we asked several humanities scholars to suggest & then recommend a series of books related to “journeys.”

Ragtime

by E. L. Doctorow

Journey Stories
February 18, 2014
Worland Library
Leader: Claire Gabriel Dunne
8 attended

One member who had valued the pointed and poignant first book in this series, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, dropped in long enough to say she didn't finish *Ragtime*, because it was "seamy." I agreed with her but thought it was an entertaining way of weaving historical personages into a novel of the early 20th Century. I introduced the idea that our journey stories are stories about Americans' freedom to travel, to find a better place for ourselves in this diverse society. I asked how travel shapes the narrative arc of both nations and individuals. Someone responded by asking how many of Doctorow's characters were themselves immigrants: Harry Houdini? Evelyn Nesbit? Jacob Riis? We each had a favorite juxtaposition of historical couples: e.g., the financier J.P. Morgan pursuing his delusion of grandeur down the Nile looking for a site for his pyramid, contrasted with plain spoken manufacturer Henry Ford.

Since *Ragtime* was published in the 7y0s, we asked if it reflected the racial tensions of that decade. All of us remembered the Black Panthers and Malcolm X so we all had an opinion.

On Friday, Jan. 17, at 2 p.m., nine of us gathered in Baggs at the Cowboy Corral to discuss E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, published in 1975. It is a historical novel, covering the period from about 1900 - 1917 in the US, and incorporating many historical figures and events such as escape-artist Houdini, actress and Gibson-girl beauty, Evelyn Nesbit, and her husband Harry Kendall Thaw who murders her lover, the architect Stanford White.

The novel centers on a wealthy family living in New Rochelle in NY, simply named "Father," "Mother," "Mother's Younger Brother," and "Grandfather." Their young son is not named at all, and may well be the

narrator who tells us the story. This everyman family is mirrored by a broken black family, Sarah, an unmarried mother who abandons her child to be found by "Mother." Mother locates Sarah and reunites her with her child by employing her in their household. She also welcomes the father, Coalhouse Walker, into the family and picture, and soon it seems all will be healed, and Coalhouse and Sarah married. However, fate and a group of rascists intervene, and soon Sarah is tragically killed and Coalhouse determined to avenge her and find his own justice through terrorist activity. Younger Brother gets involved with Coalhouse's gang, and finds his own true calling in life, that of a guerrilla activist.

We had a cozy, fun discussion in the comfort of the Cowboy, with hot tea at our elbows! Most people enjoyed the book, but there was plenty of room for criticism and discussion. For example, we discussed the function of the general, family names for the central family, which differentiates them from the dysfunctional but real names and history of Evelyn Nesbit and her fatal love triangle.

The novel is multi-faceted, and even readers who didn't like the book as a whole had parts they enjoyed and approved of. It is a fascinating blend of history and fiction, of real and imaginary characters, all convincingly contributing to this lively pre-World War melting pot in America.

Story Library
September 15, 2015
15 Participants

Since this was our first meeting of the Journeys series, I began about briefly discussing general themes, notably the kinds of "journeys" we would be looking at, and briefly introduced the 4 books we would be discussing.

I then gave a brief bio of E.L. Doctorow and his writing noting particularly how he plays with history and the structure of the novel, breaking the rules of literary conventions, and certainly of traditional historical fiction. This moved us right into *Ragtime*, and frankly, I was amazed at how well received the novel was by this fairly large group. I had a list of discussion points I wanted to bring up, but the group sort of took over because they were anxious to talk. Our long discussion ended up being a little like the novel - jumping from one thing to another. One person noted that it was like ragtime music, sort of disjointed but with an eventual pattern!

Some of the questions we eventually considered are as follows:

- Why is the period of the novel (1900-1917) known as The Progressive Era?
- Who is the narrator in the novel? Why is this so complicated?
- Which particular societal groups from the period is Doctorow illustrating? What seems to be the author's social and political perspective?
- What social injustices from the period do we see?

-Which of the characters, if any, might be considered successful in their "journey"? What frustrates the ones who aren't?

-Why the title "Ragtime"?

-Any humor? If so, what kind of humor is it?

-Who were your favorite characters? Which characters confounded you?

-What kind of journeys are depicted in the novel?

-How can we relate our contemporary world to this novel? What about the time in which it was written (early 1970's)?

As we were finally closing our discussion (so the library could close), I asked if anyone had something they wanted to point out or talk about that we hadn't covered, and that got us going again! Admittedly, I had not expected the response to this novel that I got from this group. They really liked the book, and I learned a lot from the discussion. One person said she liked it so much she intended to read all Doctorow's other novels. I'm not sure I'm willing to go to that extent, but I'm more inclined than I was initially! -- Norleen Healy

Monday, November 2nd, seven folks gathered around a table in the basement of the Niobrara County Library to spend some time discussing Doctorow's *Ragtime*. As I have said many times in the past, our group has been together for some time, and as a result, we tend to spend more time than the norm in socializing, catching up on events and activities, and just being a convivial group. This, I think, is also a purpose of Reading Wyoming, in the creation of communities. And while Lusk, and most towns, are small and rural, I would guess that there is a larger sense of community being created throughout the state as a result of book discussions. Likely, in a sparsely populated state like ours, it would not be hard to find someone from another community who would have the shared experience of one of these many books.

At this point, I'll step down from the soap box and spend a few lines explaining our discussion. The first question considered was what in the world the journey is in this text. The first two books we read and discussed represented obvious, physical journeys, but *Ragtime* is more psychological journeys of discovery. Yes, there are journeys to the North Pole, to Mexico, from New York, and other trips, but we seemed to agree that the important journeys are those the characters make in finding a sense of self and place. Mother certainly grows and becomes a much different person by the end, but all characters journey through life-changing experiences.

We also looked at alienation as a theme. Many characters find themselves alienated, such as Coalhouse and Mother's Younger Brother. And I would suggest that this may have been a theme of the time. This novel involves rapid progress, but there was also a sense of being left behind by that progress. I explained the Wobblies and the IWW for those who were not aware. This alienation led us to a discussion of dramatic and rapid change in our own times and a discussion of how quickly people from our grandparent's and parent's ages had to adapt to a new and different world. I suggested Todd Gitlin's *Years of*

Hope: *Days of Rage*, a sociological text about the 1960's as a text which looks at the alienation of the WWII generation from their children, the Baby Boomers. I think many of our readers can relate to that period in our history.

Related to that, the presentation of Henry Ford's assembly line as people simply being replaceable parts in the same way as the car parts is a manifestation of this alienation of man from his creations. And does this trend not continue? There seems to be a longing for the human touch in what we use and buy as we see "artisanal" products, which are ironically highly mechanized and alienated creations made to look or feel like home made.

In general, about half the group found the book most interesting and a text which held their interest. A pleasant evening and a pleasant discussion. -- Wayne Deahl

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

Journey Stories

March 18, 2014

Worland Library

Leader: Claire Gabriel Dunne

8 attended

I handed out the lyrics to Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land," which we all sang together. Growing up, we thought it was a paean to our beautiful country, but we had never heard the last three stanzas, the complaint of the dispossessed Depression and Dust Bowl migrants. Even our members who had lived through the Thirties has never heard those lines:

As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?

Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.

Most had seen the 1940 film, *Grapes of Wrath*, and noted much of the dialogue was straight out of Steinbeck's book. I urged them to also watch Ken Burns' *The Dust Bowl*, and read *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of those who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*, by Tim Egan, a wonderfully engaging, informative, eye-opening and well-written book, which won the National Book Award for non-fiction in 2006.

One of our older members, age 83, remembered in 1956, signs on farms in Worland saying "Stockgrowers Bank Farm" that were being farmed by the former owner, who had lost the land when he borrowed against it. Another, born in 1929, remembers her father turning the key on his young law office in Casper, and taking a job building the reservoir system for the city of New York. She says her mother fed him the entire meat ration, since he was working physically hard all day.

We were all very moved by *Grapes of Wrath*, and learned details about the Depression we hadn't known, that the federal and state governments weren't providing much relief to the migrants, and that each country in California hired deputies to push the people along so they couldn't qualify for relief in their county, which couldn't provide for their own people. We also were surprised that farmer organizations forced their members to continually push down prices paid to the labor, from 30c to 25c a day. Any small farmer who wanted to pay a living wage risked not getting his own line-of-credit renewed. That realization sparked a discussion of our current debate on raising the minimum wage to a "living wage."

I ended with a quote from the book: "If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones."

Three of us braved the subzero temperatures in Torrington to meet at Eastern Wyoming College to discuss John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. None of us in the group had re-read the book in a long time (high school, for example), and we all seemed struck by how downbeat the book is. We remembered thinking when we originally read it that, yeah, it was a tough story about some folks enduring tough times, but now, with a whole lot more life experience under our belts, we were confronted with a story where, practically the only positive, meaningful action any of the characters took was a woman who just gave birth to a stillborn infant offered up her breastmilk to a dying man. And meanwhile, they were still trapped in the barn while the floodwaters rose!

The very grimness of the tale led us to wonder to what degree the novel reflected actual reality. I had done some googling around and Steinbeck certainly has his critics, including those who say that he vastly exaggerated the number and desperation of "Okie" migrants to California. Whatever the case may be, we also discussed how, at the time of the book's writing, there was not yet a clear end to the Great Depression in sight, and the prospects for an armed uprising, as heavily hinted at in the interstice sections of the novel, might seemed like it was still a realistic possibility. We wondered, too, what would have happened had World War II not occurred – would things have gotten better? How would the Joads have gone on?

We tried to see if there was anything they Joads might have done different to better their situation, or if any part of

the predicament was there fault. Reasons were hard to come by; Steinbeck has a pretty water-tight narrative in that case. We did think that both Al and Tom should have looked for mechanic jobs in a town somewhere, but the odds of finding one were probably not very high. Other than that, it was hard to think of anything they might have done differently.

We also talked about how *The Grapes of Wrath* is a "hard" book to read. We tried to figure out why this was so, since the subject matter consisted of simple people, often grappling with complex ideas. Certainly the form of dialect the dialogue is written in plays a part, but it was also clear that Steinbeck had ambitions of literary originality, thus stretching his language in many ways beyond mere reportage. We all agreed that the book would probably be better without the heavy-handed interstices; these days, they read too much like propaganda tracts. The 1940 movie version, by way of contrast, leaves them out completely, and hardly suffers for it.

On the whole, while I doubt any of us were prepared to say the reading was edifying, exactly, it certainly did make a great counterpoint to some of the current economic hard times we're experiencing. None of us thought a *Grapes of Wrath* would be possible today – there are too many safety nets and we've come too far. We all agreed that was a good thing.

Seven of us gathered at Guernsey-Sunrise High School to discuss *The Grapes of Wrath* (TGOW). All of us, I think, found the book to still be quite contemporary in certain respects, with more than one participant making reference to the recent subprime loan and banking crisis as having important parallels with the exploitation of labor and land as portrayed in the book. We noted, also, how those responsible for the exploitation of workers both nationally and locally during the era of TGOW were never held accountable for their actions, just as no one - other than Bernie Madoff - has been held responsible for the fiduciary wrongdoings of the economic crisis of 2008-9.

We were struck, too, by how old the matriarch Ma seemed, despite the fact that she was only in her late forties. The matriarch held the family together, but only at great personal sacrifice, which of course is one of the main themes of the book, but we marveled at Steinbeck's ability to make the sacrificing mother motif, so common throughout Western and indeed human culture, so singular in the person of Ma Joad.

This is the fourth or fifth time I've read TGOW; several other participants were also re-reading, but we were definitely struck by the very dismal, almost apocalyptic, tone the book took. We discussed recent articles that indicated that many of the leading families of California's Central Valley trace their lineage to "Okie" immigrants (several participants who had relatives who participated in the migrations at that time were at pains to point out that many of the "Okies" did not come from Oklahoma), leading us to wonder if we would be willing to endure such great tribulations if we knew our grandchildren and great-children would ultimately prosper. (It struck me that the

hope of successfully making this bargain was precisely what motivated many, perhaps most, of migrants and immigrants in American history, in the past and today.)

A couple participants found the Okie dialect in use by the characters initially off-putting, but enjoyed the twang as they read along. While everyone grasped the symbolism of the book's conclusion with Rose of Sharon offering breastmilk to the starving man, some found it a little difficult to grasp just *why* Steinbeck ended on that particular note. A standard reading has it that it was the only efficacious thing a Joad managed to do throughout, but I would disagree with that conclusion, particularly in regard to the sacrifice of "preacher" Casey and also the way Ma held the Joads together - nothing that woman did lacked efficacy. In short, I didn't really have a good answer to give, although I wasn't quite sure I agree with the participant who felt that maybe Steinbeck was just tired of writing the story, and just decided to quit there. Perhaps some on this list have an idea?

Court Merrigan

A convivial group of 7 met at the Niobrara County Library to begin the Journey Stories series on a Tuesday, the night after Labor Day. Attendance was not bad, but as most of the discussions are on Monday and as this was the day after a holiday, it may have been smaller than what might be expected. Also, as I first began doing book discussions in Lusk 21 years ago, missing only the five years I served on the WCH Board, there is a distinct possibility that folks are getting tired of my comments. One would hope not, but that is always possible.

Regardless, I began the evening discussing the role of the WCH, book discussions, and the series for consideration. I spent a few minutes talking about the four books to be discussed, and then we were off. As explained earlier, this group has been meeting for many years in one form or another, and the group is very self-directed and ready for discussion.

The group began by looking at the timeliness of the text and made the comparison to what is under discussion in the country right now, immigration. This led to some lengthy discussion of the definition of immigrants, what happens to them in many cases, how they are treated, and what it means to be an outsider. I also asked them to consider what it is that immigrants (legal, political refugee, social refugee, economic refugee, etc.) are outside of in their new locations. Why is it that being Californian is so vastly different from being an "Okie?" How does that compare to being Mexican, to being Latino, to being Syrian, to being from a different religious background?

There are many comparisons to be made here to any diaspora, and Steinbeck is very revealing of human character in the interactions of the Joads with various groups on the road, as well as the insightful chapters which put general ideas into specific instances.

We then got to the idea that homesteading the West was a journey and an immigrant movement. This led to many

personal stories of family, friends, and acquaintances and what happened to them. These more personal stories are often very enjoyable and help to put broader ideas into perspective.

Finally, when we discussed economics and how they are often motivators for journeys, one member mentioned how she was struck by the Joads and the preacher being able to move so many people and all their belongings in a single load. Her brother had come to live with them some time ago, leaving a Salvation Army homeless shelter. His life possessions amounted to the contents of a single plastic bag. He died not long ago, and she had finally looked into the contents of the bag and was struck by how personal the items were, but that a single life could be compressed into one small pile of things was interesting and heartbreaking at the same time. Wayne G. Deahl

Story Library, October 5, 2015, 13 Participants

I started the discussion by going around the group and asking each person to respond in some way to the book...pointing something out that they found particularly interesting, provocative, confusing, etc. or asking a question that occurred to them in reading the novel. This garnered a wide range of discussion, much of which centered around how, though most had read it at least once before, rereading it brought new perspectives. I admitted to the group that, even though I had read the book a couple of different times in the past, I knew I needed to reread it for this discussion but kept putting it off because I knew how grim the book is. But when I finally started reading it again, I was surprised at how much I enjoyed it AND at the notion that it really can be seen as much more positive in some ways than I remembered.

I provided some information about the Dust Bowl migration, and we talked about what it means to be a migrant. What migrants leave behind...their sense of place, their history, their identity. We looked at the characters who couldn't face this (Muley, Grandpa, and Grandma) and those who had no choice. Of course this evolved into a discussion of the Immigrants both in the United States and worldwide today who are forced to leave their homes behind, many, as someone [pointed out in looking at what we're seeing on television, with nothing but the clothes on their back. At least the Joads had their truck!

We discussed the discrimination aimed at the "Oakies" - why the people in California felt threatened by them and how they were able to dismiss their treatment of them by referring to them as less than human, even as "gorillas."

What is this reminiscent of? I asked. But I didn't need to ask. We saw that patterns of discrimination are similar, no matter what the time period.

We agreed that American was undergoing great change during the period of the novel, and talked about changes it is still undergoing, many of which relate to one of Steinbeck's major themes about depersonalization, the lack of human connections. Other themes we discussed

were the power of the community to affect change, the consequences of greed and self interest, and the sacredness of allowing dignity to people.

We talked about religion in the novel in our discussion of the characters and agreed that Steinbeck was debunking organized, traditional religion in favor of the "holiness" of everyday life and everyday people. We looked at the collision of different values in the interactions of the people. Also, we found some great examples of humor, and we argued about whether the ending offered any hope for the future of the Joads.

In tying with the theme of this series, we looked at the various kinds of "journeys" and movement depicted in the novel. We agreed that, with that in mind, it was an interesting way to read this book. Ultimately we agreed probably the reason that the novel has remained popular is that it remains relevant.

As we were concluding, one person asked "Why didn't we have this good a discussion about this book when we read it several years ago in the Pulitzer Prize series?" I was at sort of a loss there. Norleen Healy

On the Road by Jack Kerouac

Journey Stories
On the Road and A Moveable Feast
April 15, 2014
Worland Library
Leader: Claire Gabriel Dunne
2 attended

I knew no one was interested in Keroac's *On the Road* so we added Hemingway's *A moveable Feast*, but still only two showed. So we talked about the few series left to us and the idea of creating one of our own. We looked at he book kits at the library in case we can use them to augment those on the Humanities Council collection, and can borrow kits from around the state. I will compile some ideas and send a large email to everyone who has every participated in Worland. The series idea "Modern American Wars" attracted some interest. I will also canvas any 30 or 40-somethings I meet to ask what they are reading, with the idea of attracting younger people. Those of us who have been in this group for twenty year started in our thirties or forties, and are wondering where the younger crowd is.

In sum, we all valued and appreciated *The Warmth of other Suns* and *Grapes of Wrath*, but could do without *Ragtime* and *On the Road*.

Have a fine spring everyone. If you are traveling be sure to visit Worland's fabulous new \$16 million dollar Washakie Museum and Cultural Center. washakiemuseum.org. Call if you'd like the cooks' tour.

On February 28th, at 2:00 in the Cowboy Inn, 8 of us met to discuss *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac. On the Road is thinly-disguised autobiography, following Kerouac's relationship and travels with "Dean Moriarty" (real life, Neal Cassady) as they travel the country from NY to the Bay Area, by way of the South, the West, and even Mexico. Carl Marx (Allen Ginsberg) and Bull Lee (William S. Burroughs) are good friends who play a part in the story, though not the central part of Dean Moriarty. For soul mates, Sal and Dean spend lots of time traveling and promising to get together to open their hearts and minds and discuss the universe's secrets, yet they never seem to get around to it.

Dean seems a failure to almost everyone, including the three wives he gains throughout the story. However, to Sal, Dean is a hero and even more, perhaps a saint, the "holy goof," the angel "terrifying in his energy."

The discussion of the book was lively and in agreement; no one really liked the book, and there were many comments on the immaturity and selfishness of Kerouac and his friends. One lady said that as a member of the same generation, she felt that Kerouac's group betrayed the values of hard work and responsibility that came out of WW II. Most agreed that Sal (Kerouac) and Dean were users, who took advantage of everyone they met, from the women in their life (girlfriends, wives, mothers, aunts) to each other to those who offered them rides or hospitality. The aimless quality of the driving across country was frustrating also, as well as the lack of description and appreciation of the country's qualities. One time, Sal and Dean drove from Denver through northern Colorado and down Rabbits Ears into the Yampa Valley, without one comment on its breathtaking beauty.

Nevertheless, the account is a window into the development of the Beat Generation; Neal Cassady later became the prime mover (driver) off Tom Wolfe's *Electric Acid Kool-Aid* bus. And though Cassady may never have changed much, Kerouac, a more sensitive and explorative character, does.

On The Road proved not to be much of a hit in Guernsey, as evidenced by a few members of the group voting with their feet and not putting in an appearance. Three stalwarts and I discussed Kerouac's book but I believe only one of the participants besides myself actually finished the thing, and I confess that upon a re-read (third or fourth time, I think?) I found myself skimming quite a bit. I loved *On the Road* when I was nineteen (it was one of the reasons I ended up going to live abroad), but at thirty-eight, I confess the book has a lot less of a hold on me. None of the participants had read the book when they were younger, and consequently did not even have that sentimental attachment to it. Their experience of the 50s was utterly unlike Kerouac's; they viewed Kerouac as a rudderless nihilist, which in some respects, I suppose, is true. The vaunted "spirituality" of the book is hard to detect when the first thing you notice are general fecklessness and irresponsibility displayed by the characters, their selfishness and disregard for the consequences of their

actions upon others. All the participants were women, and they were particularly disturbed by Dean's treatment of women, and they wondered what would become of the children, particularly in that more conservative time when there was still a rather strong social stigma to growing up in a single-parent household.

We compared Sal's journeys back and forth across America to that of the surgeon Robert Foster. While Sal got drunk and caroused and generally had himself a good ole time, Foster had to drive across whole states before he found a place where he could even get a hotel room. The difference between them, of course (besides the fact that Foster, a veteran, was vastly better-educated and more wordly): Sal was white, Foster was black. Sal was able to set out upon the road because he was able to. Participants noted that Sal was a dilettante, really; every time he got in trouble his aunt bailed him out. He had access to resources that Dr. Foster simply did not, for example. Sal knew that, short of a fatal car crash, nothing **really** bad was going to happen to him. Others from less fortunate circumstances would not have had that assurance and our participants noted this.

I still think the book has its merits, especially in the vast influence that it wielded and continued to wield. We also discussed how, at the time, jazz could still be construed as rebellious, right on the cusp of Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry blowing the doors off the world with rock 'n roll. We wondered how different the book would have been had it been written only a few years later. We also talked about how the counterculture Kerouac was instrumental in founding survived long after him (still survives, in some respects) even if he, in later life, disavowed the connection. In short, I don't think there are any new Kerouac fans in Guernsey ... but I imagine Sal would have found that quite amusing, indeed.

Court Merrigan

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration by Isabel Wilkerson (selected readings)

Journey Stories
January 21, 2014
Basin Library
Leader: Claire Gabriel Dunne
8 attended

What an important book! All of us had lived through the Civil Rights era and knew Jim Crow laws were bad news for blacks, but we really had little idea just how dangerous it was. For a period of four decades, a black man was lynched every four days! No wonder that half of the black people in the South, six million souls, migrated North and West. The author interviewed 1200 of these domestic migrants and settled on the life stories of three of them. Interspersed with their stories are factual sociological vignettes; e.g., the black migrants were actually less likely than those born in, say, Chicago or New York, to be unemployed, unwed or involved in crime. The Reading Wyoming website suggests, since the book is long, that

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Series: Journeys
Book: The Warmth of Other Suns & On The Road
Place: Torrington
Date: March 18, 2014
Discussion Leader: Court Merrigan
Participants: 3

Three hardy souls gathered in Torrington to discuss these two books - we ended up doing two because weather cancelled our last session. As for On The Road, we had some decided mixed opinions. In some sense we were a little appalled by the obviously reckless behavior of Sal Paradise and his crew of merry romantics, but compared to the sort of irresponsible behavior displayed by many youth today, it didn't seem so bad. Having said that, we did think about the women, particularly those left behind by Dean, and all the kids he left scattered behind him. What would happen to them? The Beats seemed to live a life free of consequences - for themselves. We did compare and contrast Sal's freewheeling voyages across the continent with, say, the migration of black folks in The Warmth of Other Suns - especially that of Robert Foster, who was far more educated, experienced, worldly, and wealthy than was Sal Paradise, yet made his voyage in constant fear, because he was a black man, while Sal Paradise was, of course, white.

We discussed how Kerouac consciously modeled his prose after jazz (speculating further that, had he taken the voyage just a few short years later, a rebel like Sal Paradise would almost certainly have been rocking out to Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis). We listened to a bit of the jazz mentioned in the novel, such as Night in Tunisia, as blown by Dizzy Gillespie. You can listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQYXn1DP38s>

There are definitely some great passages in *On The Road*, and we honed in a few of them. One member was particularly struck by the description of Dean's tattered old cardboard suitcase, as emblematic of the sort of life he lived, and also just great writing. Another member, who grew up in England, remembered having met a "Beat" in her childhood there, and how he carried a sort of romantic, bohemian air about him, and so she remembered him even all those decades later. We wondered how these somewhat crazy guys would have been perceived by those around them. Another aspect we noted was that the kids of the Beat generation, they were definitely rebelling and on the lookout for spiritual purity, and we wondered, well, why kids aren't like that anymore. It seems that the sort of rebellious spirit Sal and his buddies exemplified has been more or less subsumed by video games and cell phones. Would Sal Paradise just have stayed home and played Grand Theft Auto if he hadn't wanted a "straight" job, today?

As for *The Warmth of Other Suns*, as has become my experience in these groups when reading books that deal with the South and / or African-Americans, we wished we could have a bona fide Southern and / or African-American to bring a useful perspective to the discussion. As it stands, we discussed how the Jim Crow treatment of blacks in the South led directly to the huge black populations in cities like Chicago and Detroit (we were struck by the demographic note that there were more blacks in Chicago and the entire state of Mississippi by the end of the Great Migration), and wondered how it was that such a situation had arisen in America, the land of the free. As per usual, we didn't have any answers.

None of the participants had gotten all the way through the book (it is a pretty lengthy tome, after all), and it is a credit to Wilkerson's writing that they were eager to find out what happened to all those folks, in the long run. We discussed Robert Foster's friendship with Ray Charles and the sad but dignified ending of Ida's dream of finding a better life in Chicago. It is a story that were all glad to have read about because, as we discussed, it is not one that is well known, despite the many millions of people it involved. We also enjoyed the narrative style, though we did wonder a bit about the accuracy, especially during those sections where Wilkerson put herself in the minds of those whose journey she was chronicling.

We have one more book to go in this session and hopefully we'll have a bigger group to discuss it with!

On the afternoon of March 28, nine of us gathered at the Cowboy Inn in Baggs to drink tea, coffee, and chocolate, and discuss *The Warmth of Other Suns*. I presented an introduction about Isabel Wilkerson, her research, family background, and the honors her reporting and writing has won. Then we moved on to discussing the book.

I think we were all shocked by the enforced cruelty of the Jim Crow laws and the difficult conditions the characters

lived under. The reports of lynching and burnings of black men accused of various crimes (like speaking to white women) that the characters lived among must have been terrifying. But for me, the tormenting of a young boy at a drugstore brought home the casual, humiliating cruelty: he went in for a milkshake, waiting politely till all the whites were served, then approached the counter. The waiter grinned, called his dog onto the counter, then asked whether he would rather be [black] or dead. All laughed hilariously when the dog rolled over waving his paws in the air, and the boy left with a burning face.

Her dual perspective we thought was effective, the sweeping historical one combined with a more personal narrative of the lives of her three characters, Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster, as they decide to leave behind their various horrific conditions in the South and try for a better life further north.

We discussed also the social, historical, and economic forces that encouraged migration. Irish, Jewish, and Scandinavian immigrations followed similar patterns, and we discussed the similarities and differences of these movements.

Wilkerson based her research primarily on firsthand eyewitness accounts, gathered through 15 years of research and more than 1200 interviews. There were many strengths to this approach, in particular the immediacy and vividness of the accounts.

Since it is such a long book, few of us completed it before the meeting -- but some did, even though the participants were assigned only the first 200 pages. Most of us who hadn't finished it plan to do so -- it is both readable and valuable, plus you can't help caring about the stories she follows.

Mary Karen Solomon

Seven of us gathered at Guernsey-Sunrise High School to discuss *The Warmth of Other Suns*, by Isabel Wilkerson. After our last session with *The Grapes of Wrath*, the group seemed to find this work a lot more redemptive, if not exactly optimistic. I think the group had the feeling that I did the first time I read the book - "Wow, I really did not know *any* of that." I mean, I think everyone there might have at one time or another vaguely wondered what happened to all the black folks following emancipation (we talked briefly about some scenes from *March*, which most of us read last year, how former slaves, once given freedom, were simply turned loose to their own resources with absolutely no further assistance from the federal government which freed them), but I don't think any of us had given it any concrete, organized thought.

So I think all of us found the book fascinating from that perspective, filling in a major gap in American history that, as all white folks in the room, none of us personally knew much at all about. How did it come to pass, for instance, that more black Americans live in Chicago than in the entire state of Mississippi? We talked a good deal about how so much of the book took place within living memory -

as in how the trains coming up north into Illinois had to totally be uncoupled in order to move from segregated cars to integrated cars - and this was in the 50s! One participant suggested how this book offered a lot of insight into that phrase you sometimes hear - "angry black man." If these were the stories that you either grew up with yourself - being hounded in Florida by a corrupt racist sheriff, or being afraid to stop your car for 1500 miles of desert because you were black (compare and contrast with *On The Road*), or being ripped off year after year by your sharecropper boss for coffee you never even drank - or heard from your parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles, perhaps you'd be a little upset yourself. And indeed, although we have a black president and things are certainly vastly improved from the Jim Crow days, Ferguson, MO, was on fire not too long ago, and the news remains filled with young black folks, mostly men, being shot down by cops, who seem always to be white. So I think the whole group really appreciated the way *The Warmth of Other Suns* shone a lot of light on how all this came to pass in America. It didn't seem to offer much direction as to what comes next, however; like Wilkerson herself, we were pretty stymied on what to do about it. It would seem that each passing generation has a bit less of the prejudices that their parents had, and yet, racism persists, particularly in the South, but throughout America. What can be done, after all? We speculated that one of the prime vehicles for this type of social change will be interracial marriage - after all, no one can really be racist against their own grandchildren, right? But we wondered also whether this happens on a grand enough scale to effect the sort of change that would make America truly colorblind. In any case, we were glad for the insights gained from Wilkerson, even if we were a bit at a loss as to what comes next.

Court Merrigan

A group of six gathered on a Monday evening at the Niobrara County Library to discuss the second book read in our discussion of the *Journey Stories*, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. This was a small group, likely because of the size of the text. I had suggested some strategies for approaching this text without feeling the need to read the entire book, but it was apparently still intimidating.

However, those of us in attendance jumped into discussion. Most had anticipated not reading everything, but found it to be so interesting and worthwhile that they had, indeed, read the book in its entirety. A couple suggested that they found unnecessary repetition, which may have added to the length, but could still see a place and need for some repetition.

Jim Crow laws, while generally understood, were the one thing that readers found surprising as a result of their reading. Most had not understood the length to which Jim Crow affected lives of blacks in the United States. As this group likes to jump in and offer ideas, I let them go. This led to many personal stories of racism in Wyoming. One involved the perception of racism. The participant had attended UW in the 60's and there was a young, black man in their group. She remembered his being included in

events, and that he danced with young ladies and was part of the group. Of course, no one dated him. Upon having a reunion many years later, she was surprised to find that he felt excluded from the group as a result of his race.

This allowed us to discuss perception and the differences between being included and excluded. One participant wondered why ethnic and racial groups commingled in the American experience, but blacks and others did not do so until recently in history, and still not in particularly significant numbers. I don't believe we ever came to any sort of consensus regarding this question.

A most enjoyable evening, even if we did not get to large issues and ideas presented in the text. -Wayne Deahl

Story Library, November 2, 2015, 12 Participants

I began the discussion with a bit of background on Isabel Wilkerson. Particularly, I suggested they might be interested in an interview she did with NPR that can be found online where she addresses some of the critics who question her approach to her subject. She emphasizes the migrant's personal feelings and motivations over some of the other forces that induced the "great migration" of the Blacks from the South. We agreed that she does acknowledge that the coming of the machines to pick the cotton and the opening up of the wartime labor market in the North helped the urge many of these migrants felt to leave the South, but she contends that their need to escape the "violent, humiliating confines of the segregationist South" and their hope for something better was the real force that drove them.

In an effort to give everyone an opportunity to contribute initially (we had a couple of newcomers to our group), I went around the table and asked everyone to share a reaction they had from the reading. This moved the discussion in many different directions. Some focused on what they learned about the Jim Crow South clear into the 1960's and others talked about how the book brought to mind their own experiences seeing racism and prejudicem in various forms where they grew up. One person said that he came to the conclusion that what went on during the Jim Crow era was not unlike other institutionalized segregations of another race or group that allows for the kinds of mass brutalities we associate with the Nazis or Stalin. We talked about how one of the worst manifestations of living in this kind of environment is creating such fear within the culture or race being victimized that they begin to turn against each other, and we found examples of that in the book.

Of course we agreed that the problems with racism toward Blacks continues to haunt our country with the riots and issues with police and prisons. Some of us alluded to the news just today about the Supreme Court grappling with the problem of an all-white jury convicting a Black man to the death penalty. This is Wyoming so we had some strong (and opposing!) feelings expressed on many related current events, from immigration to the justice

system and beyond. In spite of strong feelings on some issues, civility reined!

Because of the length of the book, I had asked that they read at least to page 224 for our discussion. This is the point where Ida Mae, Starling, and Foster, each representing a different kind of migrant from a different place in the South, reach their destination in the North or West. Interestingly, several had read the entire book and others asked to keep it longer to read more. In spite of how engaged we became in the lives of the three individuals, it was difficult to keep moving the discussion back to the book itself. I think that's OK though because the book does open so many avenues for a rich discussion. –Norleen Healy

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

Three stalwarts and myself discussed *The Handmaid's Tale* on Tax Day on the EWC campus in Torrington. This was actually a rescheduled make-up session, owing to some confusion as to the final get-together date, so I'm glad we had any show up at all.

It was universally agreed that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a real, well, downer. All the participants said they wanted to root for Offred, but couldn't. We discussed the ways in which she had been terrorized and humiliated that would have caused her passivity in the face of oppression but still, folks wanted a hero, someone to root for. We discussed the possible sources of inspiration for Atwood's vision, and how Atwood drew her initial inspiration for the theocratic society of Gilead from the early Puritans. (I cheated and read an interview.) We compared *The Handmaid's Tale* to *1984*, with the participants feeling that *1984* was the stronger book, because the plot was more straightforward. We also spent some time discussing the epilogue, wondering if maybe this wasn't Atwood's route to avoid writing a sequel, and also discussed how it would appear that totalitarian regimes don't have much staying power. In the modern era, we've watched Communist regimes topple, for example, although we did consider that societies that we would consider totalitarian by contemporary standards – such as ancient Rome – might not have seemed that way to the people actually living in them. In other words, you have to have an idea of an alternative, as Offred did, of knowing that there is another way to live, both in her own past and also in the fact that countries such as Canada and Japan as mentioned in the book had yet to fall under the theocratic sway. In some sense Offred had some hope, but in others, she had very little at all, and we couldn't decide which was worse. Of course we wondered what really happened to her and Nick themselves, while knowing thanks to the epilogue that the Gilead regime ultimately didn't last. It seemed an oddly hopeful note to strike at the very end of a book that had very little hope built in. A couple of the participants were not sure they'd have finished the book without having this discussion group to come to, and I'm not sure anyone

will read it again, but we did have a good discussion, nonetheless.

I also took an informal poll for future readings, and a couple of really interesting ideas surfaced. One, how about a popular science theory that paired books with opposing points of view? Global warming, say (particularly relevant in Wyoming these days), or the value of space exploration. It occurs to me that, really, you could pair opposing-view books on any topic, not only in science. Second, how about a book + movie pairing? I.e., books that have been made into movies. Not sure how the logistics of that would work out (movie night?) but that would definitely attract some attention, I think; one participant mentioned that she thought such a format would have the potential to draw in people that might not ordinarily come to book clubs.

Court Merrigan

On Friday, April 25th, nine of us met at the Cowboy Inn in Baggs to discuss Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. It was the last book in our series. First, I gave some background on Atwood's life, achievements and way with words. We read three of her poems, and then began by discussing the genre of dystopian fiction it fits into. Members commented on the state of the environment and the toxic effects of pollution. The potential of having children, rare and valued, was all that kept these young women from a working death at radioactive work heaps. However, even in these bleak, fundamentalist, patriarchal times, resistance developed, and our Handmaid, Offred (a name both nicely utilitarian and symbolically potent at the same time) discovers in it a lifeline.

We discussed the Journeys category in relation to our readings this spring: *The Handmaid's Tale* is a journey in time, spirit and culture; *Ragtime*, a journey in time to our own earlier culture of the 20's. *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac is a narrative of a young man's journeys criss-crossing our continent, while *The Warmth of Other Suns* is the account of a whole people's emigration from the South, represented by three specific stories. The works differed greatly, but that made it a rich experience for us as readers.

Six of us gathered in frigid Guernsey (well, it was plenty room inside the room) to discuss *The Handmaid's Tale*. I am pleased to report that this one was a bigger hit than *On the Road* in our last session. All the participants were women, and while they found the explicit sections of the book to be a touch disturbing, they agreed that the book provided some good insights into just how fragile our liberties are, particularly those hard-fought liberties gained by women over the course of the last 150 years or so. Indeed, we reflected that in certain parts of the world – sections of Afghanistan, Iran, and all of Saudi Arabia, restrictions on the liberties of women are the norm, down to when and how men can travel, what they can wear, and in whose presence they may be. While Atwood claimed to

have based her idea of Gilead on certain aspects of Puritan society in early America, we found the parallels to societies such as these to be more telling. One participant also recalled that the Catholic nuns in the school she attended as a little girl wore habits with wings over the sides of the face similar to those described in *The Handmaid's Tale*. To this day, she said, she's not sure how those nuns maintained such strict classrooms when they had absolutely no peripheral vision ... but they did.

We had a wide-ranging discussion about the evolution of women's rights and rights in general, and also the ways and means by which totalitarian states gain and keep their power. We compared Gilead to the regimes of Stalin and Pol Pot, for instance, particularly in the way that they all focused on children as the locus of "purity" – because children couldn't remember what life had been like before the regime took power. One participant related how she'd read about a refugee from North Korea that had lived his entire life before escaping to South Korea in some kind of work camp, and how he simply had no idea about the outside world, so it never occurred to him to rebel. We wondered also if perhaps insidious forms of technology (such as immersive video games that keep college students up until 4AM night after night) might be used to gain a similar level of mind control, although I think we were a little more optimistic that that would not be easy to achieve. Totalitarian regimes focus on crushing their subjects whereas video games, at least, encourage "growth" of a kind.

On the whole, the group enjoyed *The Handmaid's Tale*, although not as much as *The Grapes of Wrath* and far less than the favorite, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. (On the Road trailed in distant fourth.) I found it interesting that we ended up ranking the books in this way, which has not been my experience in previous groups. It was kind of fun, actually – after, all a big part of reading is enjoyment, right? Court Merrigan

Tongue River Library, December 7, 2015

We had a smaller group than usual for this, only 9 people, but, in spite of some of the initial reluctance about the novel some came with, we had an animated, thoughtful discussion. I started with a bit of background on Margaret Atwood, noting particularly her distinction between "science fiction" and "speculative" fiction. One person in the group said her objection to the novel was that she couldn't accept the basic premise about the futuristic world portrayed. In rebuttal, our history expert in the group reminded us that Atwood was writing this book during the Reagan period and that Ayatollah Khomeini was in power in Iran, having overthrown the Shah, and he created a theocracy with a number of similar restrictions, especially against women and "non believers", changing the whole structure of the Iranian society in a very short time.

We also looked at the various places in the novel where we were reminded that "things happened gradually" -- for example, the gradual disuse of actual currency in favor of bank cards (which then allowed the government ability to access the women's accounts). We agreed that the

people in the society before the total take-over chose not to see the signs and the danger of the gradual complete totalitarianism until it was too late and government had complete control over the individual. We talked about the causes and dangers of complacency and agreed that Atwood suggests that in a totalitarian state people will endure oppression somewhat willingly as long as they receive some slight amount of power or freedom and/or some even small advantage over the rest. We talked about the ways that the Gilead government achieved and maintained control-- especially through language. Limiting language limits thinking is a pervasive theme in dystopian literature. We looked at lots of examples of this in the novel as well as the use of fear and distrust as another tool for control. It wasn't a stretch to relate these ideas to actual totalitarian regimes we know of--Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, the Pol Pot regime, etc.

The novel abounds in ironies and we looked at many of these. The one that really struck us was that the staged terrorist attack where the President and most of congress were killed and which allowed a group of the religious fundamentalist to launch the revolution and take control on the pretext of restoring order was blamed on "Islamic terrorists!" Another of the ironies we discussed was the suggestion in the Epilogue that people shouldn't be too quick to judge the Gilead society "too harshly" because it was a different culture Moral relativism at its worst! In our discussion of the characters we agreed that Offred was sympathetic but not at all heroic. She seems to succumb in ways we wish she wouldn't, but in ways that we understand. We felt that most of the other characters were representative of types or ideas in the Gilead world society.

I found this novel, while not one that the readers particularly "enjoyed", to be one that offers wide and rich potential for discussion. It was probably the least "liked" of the novels in this series by many of the partici. but the one that lent itself to a rich discussion on a lot of levels. - Norleen Healy

For the final Winter discussion, seven gathered in the friendly confines of the Niobrara County Library to discuss *The Handmaid's Tale*. I was interested to note that our discussion seemed to parallel Norleen's group in many ways. Yes, the book was not liked by almost all, yet there was, nevertheless, much to discuss. Contrary to some groups, our small group found the book to be disturbing because it is so realistic and possible. When we pursued the dislike of the text, we discovered that it was not as much the abuse of religion for power, but the demeaning of women which was so distasteful. After such a long struggle for rights and equal footing (which has not been achieved), it was depressing and maddening to see how quickly things could change.

We also mentioned the control of language and how powerful that is in controlling and limiting others. Another idea pursued was the shortage, real or created, which allowed for further control. Historically, shortages often create situations in which humans find themselves being controlled by others. We looked at the rise of the Nazis,

for example, as occurring in part as a result of the Great Depression and shortages. When the basic items on Maslow's Hierarchy are in short supply, those who have control of them control the masses.

And our discussion wandered off to stories of sexism and comparisons to today's world. I think we all felt concerned with the loss of civil liberties in the name of security and safety. Eerie parallel ideas from the text to what is happening in the world today.

Finally, I suggested it to be interesting that Canada seemed to be the safe area, where life might not have changed. That is where people wanted to go. Interesting that Atwood's home country is the savior to the north. -
Wayne G. Deahl