

# Across Continents and Cultures

## Overview

The term “global village” appears to have been coined by Wyndham Lewis in his book *America and Cosmic Man* in 1948. As intelligent and concerned citizens of Western nations, we are increasingly being called upon to expand our cultural horizons. Aside from travel to other lands for business or pleasure and the study of foreign languages and world history, surely the best way of coming to an understanding of the world beyond us is through reading the best of what accomplished authors from other nations have written. Often writers of fiction and memoir not only convey the most direct and authentic sort of information about what life is like, for example, in India or Nigeria, about the sights, sounds, and smells of the place, about the beliefs and customs, but also they offer the most sensitive and powerful insights into their world. In reading the books in this series we will be taken outside of ourselves, perhaps outside of our comfort zones, at least temporarily, and we will leave the books feeling that we have been invited in, that we have become, briefly at least, insiders, citizens of another place and ethos, participants in another culture.

"Across Cultures and Continents" theme materials created for Let's Talk About It by Ron McFarland, University of Idaho, 2007.



## Book List

- Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, by Dai Sijie (2000) [China]
- Disgrace, by J.M. Coetzee (1999) [South Africa]
- Eva Luna, by Isabel Allende (1988) [Chile]
- GraceLand, by Chris Abani (2005) [Nigeria]
- The Kite Runner, by Khaled Hosseini (2003) [Afghanistan]
- The Road from Coorain, Jill Ker Conway (1989) [Australia]
- The Space Between Us by Thrity Umrigar (2006) [India]
- Waiting for Snow in Havana by Carlos Eire (2003) [Cuba]

## Theme Essay

The term “global village” appears to have been coined by Wyndham Lewis in his book *America and Cosmic Man* in 1948 and popularized by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962. It is appropriate that I have gleaned this information from the Internet, specifically from the still somewhat controversial Wikipedia website, because the words describe “how electronic mass media collapse space and time barriers in human communication, enabling people to interact and live on a global scale.” The concepts of “multi-nationalism” and “cultural pluralism” have acquired a positive connotation for many Americans, and investors find themselves being advised to expand their portfolios to account for international economies. Environmentalists troubled by ominous signs of global warming remind us that local, regional, or national remedies are not likely to prove sufficient: we must be as concerned about the Amazon rain forests, the mangrove swamps in Southeast Asia, and desertification in Africa as we are about wildfires in California, the ongoing drought in Florida, and threatened salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest.

The premise that the World Wide Web might somehow transform the globe into a village, with something of its welcoming familiarity and intimacy, may strike us as optimistic, even idealistic, a metaphor at best. At this writing, in fact, the world appears to be every bit as strange and estranging, as uncertain and dangerous as it ever was. The term “Third World,” as it applies to industrially underdeveloped nations with respect to quality of life as well as economy, was first used by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952. Today some refer to Fourth World in order to describe the least developed among those nations, just as some sociologists have adopted Charles Murray’s “underclass,” as popularized in his book *Losing Ground* in 1984, to account for those whose status appears to fall below what has conventionally been called “lower class.” Lashing out against European colonialism and racism, the Marxist essayist Franz Fanon may have suggested an apt name for these people in his 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. While world wars may have lapsed, more localized wars continue to rage from Afghanistan to the Sudan and from Iraq to Sri Lanka. International terrorism shows no signs of abating.

As intelligent and concerned citizens of Western nations, most of which are of the First World, we are increasingly being called upon to expand our cultural horizons. How have we in the United States done that? Since 1961 nearly 200,000 have served in the Peace Corps in some 140 countries. New emphasis has been placed on bilingual education, particularly in states bordering Mexico, but will U.S. citizens ever approach those of Canada, where French has been declared a second official language and public school education in that language made mandatory? Given the recent declaration of English as the “official” language by the Idaho state legislature, one suspects not. We remain suspiciously proud of our insularity, all but nostalgic for the isolationism of a former era. Nevertheless, recent statistics indicate that Hispanics outnumber all other ethnic or racial entities (Native American, African-American, and Asian-American) combined in Idaho, and that demographic fact is becoming common throughout the nation. In effect, the world is coming to us whether we wish to come to it or not.

Aside from travel to other lands for business or pleasure and the study of foreign languages and world history, surely the best way of coming to an understanding of the world beyond us is through reading the best of what accomplished authors from other nations have written. Often writers of fiction and memoir not only convey the most direct and authentic sort of information about what life is like, for example, in India or Nigeria, about the sights, sounds, and smells of the place, about the beliefs and customs, but also they offer the most sensitive and powerful insights into their world. A good history book might be essential for a full grasp of French society during the Age of Reason or The Enlightenment (ca. 1660–1790), but to understand the ethos of that time and place, the fundamental spirit of that culture, surely the best reading would be the satiric comedies of Molière and Voltaire’s *Candide*. The books in this series have been selected with that sort of model in mind.

In establishing guidelines we decided to focus specifically on writing from Central and South American (including the Caribbean), Africa, Asia (including the Middle East), and Australia. We have selected books published over the past twenty years that generally concern recent as opposed to past historical events, and we have chosen writing in which the authors have imparted some sense of what life in that particular part of the world is like. What is exotic and wonderful, or strangely familiar, or disturbing, about Cuba, India, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Australia? In reading the books in this series we will be taken outside of ourselves, perhaps outside of our comfort zones, at least temporarily, and we will leave the books feeling that we have been invited in, that we have become, briefly at least, insiders, citizens of another place and ethos, participants in another culture.

## For Further Reading

- The Bone People*, by Keri Hulme (New Zealand, novel, 1984)  
*Catfish and Mandala*, by Andrew X. Pham (Vietnam, memoir, 1999)  
*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, by Gabriel García-Márquez (Colombia, novella, 1981)  
*The Farming of Bones*, by Edwidge Danticat (Haiti, novel, 1998)  
*The God of Small Things*, by Arundhati Roy (India, novel, 1997)  
*The Lover*, by A. B. Yehoshua (Israel, novel, 1977)  
*Midnight’s Children*, by Salman Rushdie (India, novel, 1981)  
*Running in the Family*, by Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lanka, memoir, 1982)  
*Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achedbe (Nigeria, novel, 1958)  
*Woman at Point Zero*, by Nawal Al-Saadawi (Egypt, novella, 1975)

## Discussion Questions for Series

1. What universal aspects of being human do you encounter in these books? That is, if you were to proceed from the premise that all humans have more in common than not, what particulars would you emphasize? To what extent are the basic needs (food, clothing, shelter) a problem in these books? What other issues are involved (love, loss, loyalty, fear, courage, joy, sorrow)?
2. What do you encounter in these books that seems specific to the particular culture or place? Does the author focus on exotic elements? Where and how does he or she impart most effectively the sense of place and the social or cultural values? Do you find the difference to be engaging (attractive) or alienating? Reflect on some time in your life when you have felt like an outsider, a foreigner.
3. Most of the writers in this series, sometimes for obvious reasons, no longer reside in the country of their origin, but even those who appear to be relieved to have escaped their homeland usually express nostalgia over what they have left behind. Where do you see evidence of this? Which of the countries you encounter in this series do you think you would most like to visit? If a “given” of this question were to be that your security would be assured, would that make a difference?
4. Perhaps more frequently than in writing from the United States (generally, that is) these authors tend to focus on class difference and class conflict. Where do you see examples of this in these books? How important are such elements as opposed to more personal kinds of conflict (that is, it’s not upper vs. lower class, but this kind of guy vs. that kind of guy)? Sociologists might argue that in the U.S. we are less aware of this sort of tension or strife because the middle class is so large and well established. Reflect on this premise. Does the middle class appear to be gaining, or losing, ground in the U.S.? Can we (and should we) attempt to promote our middle class values in other countries? If we do that, should our most essential tool be democracy or capitalism, or are they inextricably conjoined?
5. To what extent do the writers indicate possible solutions to the numerous and often complex problems we encounter in their books? That is, do the writers see their role primarily to be one of pointing out and dramatizing the dilemmas of their cultures, and if so, is that enough? In other words, what do you think should be the role (responsibility, perhaps) of a writer like the Nigerian Chris Abani or the Indian Thrity Umrigar, particularly if you accept the premise that they will be read mostly by those from outside their culture (that is, by Westerners)?