

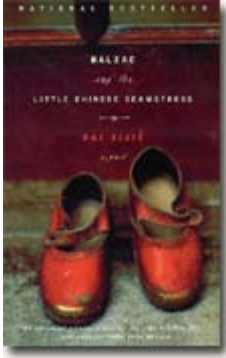


Across Cultures and Continents

Book List Books:

- 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]

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Dai Sijie



Originally published in French, this short novel takes place during the period of Mao Tse Tung's Cultural Revolution in China during the early 1970s, when hundreds of thousands of scientists, artists, teachers, and other intellectuals were sent into the countryside for re-education. The novel, which occasionally touches us with the qualities of folk lore or fable, opens with the first-person narrator watching astonished as a village headman pronounces his violin to be just "a bourgeois toy." The speaker's 17 year-old friend Luo, like him a doctor's son, promptly suggests that he play a "famous" (obviously nonexistent) sonata, "Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao." The two young men suffer through the harshness of village life in a remote area of China, and they are forced to perform the most demeaning chores. They survive partly because they become storytellers, narrating to the peasants the plots of novels they have read and movies they see in another village. When the tailor's beautiful daughter shows up, they read to her from a copy of Balzac, which they have stolen from a pampered boy from the city who lives briefly in their village. A gentle romance develops between the seamstress and Luo. Dai Sijie offers vivid descriptions of the natural settings, an occasional touch of fantasy, and a generous supply of humor in this prize-winning novel which has been translated from the French.

Author Information

Dai Sijie was born to an educated middle-class family in Fujian, China, in 1954 and was sent by the Maoist government to a re-education camp from 1971 to 1974. After returning, he completed high school and a university degree in art history. He migrated to France in 1984, where he wrote screenplays and directed films including *China, My Sorrow* (1989) and *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* (2006). He adapted for the screen and directed the movie made of his first novel, published in French as *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*, in 2003. His second novel, published in French in 2003, has been translated under the title *Mr. Muo's Traveling Couch*. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* spent twenty-three weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.

Discussion Questions for Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress

1. In a mostly negative commentary, the reviewer for the New York Times conceded that the novel “delivers an important message: any system that fears knowledge and education, any system that closes the mind to moral and intellectual truth, is evil and will prove in the end to be impotent.” How does this message come about in Sijie’s novel? That is, how does he go about making this point? 2. In a very positive piece in the San Francisco Chronicle the reviewer notes that in the West readers tend to discount fables, but in other cultures “the fable remains a respected literary form.” Typically the fable comes off as a deceptively simple tale, often involving magic or the supernatural, intended to embody some important message or truth. What aspects of the fable do you detect in this novel? 3. At one point the narrator copies passages from a novel by Balzac onto the inside of his coat, and eventually he and Luo steal a suitcase full of books from Four-Eyes; they are that desperate for good reading. In this respect the novel may remind some readers of Azar Nafisi’s nonfiction “Memoir in Books,” Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003), in which the women must do their reading surreptitiously in the newly formed Islamic Republic. Do we in the West take our free press and public libraries too much for granted? 4. In the third part of this novel Sijie introduces three very short narratives entitled “The Old Miller’s Story,” “Luo’s Story,” and “The Little Seamstress’s Story” (pp. 145–156). Of these three variant accounts of Luo and the Little Seamstress skinny-dipping, which do you find most appealing? 5. What role do you think her exposure to literature has on the Little Seamstress’s eventual decision to leave Phoenix mountain for the city? Do you think hearing the stories has freed her from ignorance and prepared her for the outside world, or do you see her departure as perilous, “inspired” as she is by Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (p. 191), in which the protagonist ends up committing suicide? Has she learned a realistic and sensible lesson from Balzac? 6. Given the narrative viewpoint in this novel we don’t often get inside the Little Seamstress’s head; that is, we are rarely informed of what is on her mind. Do you think you understand her from what you are told? What might you like to know about her that you do not? 7. Does your reading about the writings of Balzac, Dumas, Romain Rolland and other writers (mostly French) prompt you to want to look into their work? Do you feel attracted to any one of these writers or books in particular?

Disgrace by J. M. Coetzee

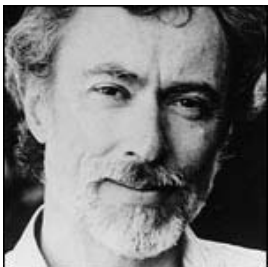


J. M. Coetzee (pronounced cut-SEE-uh), of Dutch Boer descent, won his second Booker Award for *Disgrace*, a novel set in South Africa of the near future. Initially the novel may strike us as a rather conventional academic tale about a professor of literature and modern languages at Cape Technical University who coldly seduces one of his students, but that story line quickly ends and the novel heads elsewhere. The arrogant David Lurie finds himself at 52 teaching basic composition courses instead of the humanities or his beloved Romantic poets; he would prefer to be writing a libretto about Lord

Byron's last years. Unrepentant after his affair is made public, the twice married and divorced Lurie is fired, but that action covers only about a quarter of the novel. It is when he travels to his unmarried daughter's small farm and is forced to come to grips with the bitterness of post-apartheid South Africa that Lurie's disgrace is made complete. When they are brutally attacked by three black men, he and his daughter Lucy are forced to make compromises and to accept what shelter they can find in the harsh rural world. In describing the novel, critics have used terms like "deeply disturbing," "searing," "at times almost unbearable," and "compulsively readable." If at the end Lurie appears to be headed toward redemption, readers will perceive that the way to grace begins at the very bottom.

Author Information

Born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1940, Coetzee, a descendant of Dutch colonialists, received his bachelor's degrees with honors in English (1960) and mathematics (1961) from the University of Cape Town. After working briefly as a computer programmer in London, he received his master's degree in



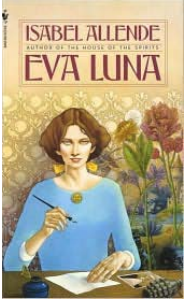
1963 from Cape Town and went on to earn his Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Texas in Austin, after which he taught at the State University of New York in Buffalo until 1971. When his application for permanent residence in the United State was denied because of his anti-Vietnam War protests, he returned to South Africa where he taught at the University of Cape Town until his retirement in 2002, after which he immigrated to Australia, becoming a citizen in 2006. Married and

divorced (a son died in an accident), Coetzee is considered reclusive. He does not drink, smoke, or eat meat, and he is known for his rigorous self-discipline. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003. His first novel, *Dusklands*, appeared in 1974; his most recent novel is *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). In addition to ten novels, Coetzee has published eight books of nonfiction, including *The Lives of Animals* (1999), which examines the ethics of human-animal relations and which one reviewer has described as "a moral argument within a fictional framework." Another reviewer refers to the book as a "postmodern metafiction."

Discussion Questions for Disgrace

1. The protagonist of this award-winning novel may strike us as the worst sort of professor and as little more than a sexual predator, yet after what some would call his comeuppance, his just punishment, we may (or may not) feel some empathy for him. If the study of the humanities, and particularly of literature, is supposed to “humanize” us, to make us more thoughtful and sensitive human beings, what has gone wrong with David Lurie? What do you make of his behavior at the hearing in the sixth chapter? 2. What “literary” justice do you find in the manner of Lurie’s punishment? After all, it is his daughter Lucy who suffers the rape, and while his temporary blinding may be symbolically appropriate, her burden is considerably heavier than his. Why does she refuse to report the rape? Why does she agree to accept the protection of the neighbor Petrus, who appears complicit in the attack? Are we to assume that Coetzee intends to assert some sort of social justice for the suffering of black Africans under apartheid? 3. Does David Lurie’s suffering and humiliation dispose you to forgive him, if that is the correct verb to use in a literary context? Does he appear to be headed toward some form of redemption at the book’s end? How does his involvement with Bev Shaw and the dogs figure in here? It is said proverbially that “suffering builds character.” Is that the case with Lurie? Is he a better man at the end of the novel than he was at the beginning? 4. While it has become increasingly popular for writers to use the present tense in their fiction instead of the traditional past tense narration, this may be the first novel in which you have encountered that narrative perspective used throughout. Do you like that, or would you prefer the traditional past tense? What would you say is gained or lost in Coetzee’s choice of the present tense? 5. While this novel does not necessarily presume much knowledge of Byron’s life and poetry, it might prove worthwhile to investigate, perhaps via the internet. You will discover that Byron himself suffered disgrace in his brief life (1788–1824), that after a painful divorce he was ostracized from British society. Lord Byron’s possible liaisons with his half-sister and later with the Countess Teresa Guiccioli, then a married woman, added to the scandal. What do these literary allusions (the new critical term for it is “intertextuality”) add to the novel, if anything? 6. What appears to disturb Lucy most about her rape is that it was “so personal” (pg. 156), even though the perpetrators did not know her. Her father (she refers to him by his first name) suggests that it “was history speaking through them.” Do these two perspectives on the violence make sense to you? Does it seem to you that Lucy tries to justify what has happened to her? That is, if she can understand the rationale behind her rape, can make sense of it, then she can live with it. Why doesn’t she just sell the farm and leave?

Eva Luna by Isabel Allende



With a light infusion of magical realism, Isabel Allende tells the picaresque life story of Eva Luna (both elements of her name indicate she embodies the essence of womanhood) in an unnamed Latin American country that undergoes historically predictable rounds of dictatorships and revolutions. At times Eva, who becomes fascinated with storytelling at an early age, resembles a character out of Charles Dickens. Orphaned at age six, she is raised by an alcoholic madrina (godmother) and runs away from a cruel patrona when she is nine, falling in with the streetwise Huberto Naranjo, who is destined to become a guerilla leader and her lover. Meanwhile, in post-World War Two Austria Rolf Carlé is being raised by an abusive father who is eventually hanged by his students. Sent to a pseudo-Bavarian village in Latin America known as “La Colonia,” Carlé, who will eventually emerge as Eva’s true love, learns to make cuckoo clocks. In alternating chapters Eva comes of age and maintains her innocence even while living in a brothel, as Rolf rises to prominence as a revolutionary and later a television cameraman. Allende generates a large cast of quirky and fascinating characters, from the kind, hare-lipped Turkish businessman Riad Halabí to the transvestite Mimí, and she involves Eva in menacing adventures that verge on melodrama. In this welter of romance and adventure Allende makes important statements about the human condition and the shifting nature of Latin American politics and revolution.

Author Information

Isabel Allende was born in Peru in 1942 but raised in Chile, where her uncle, the socialist Salvador Allende, was to become president. Her father and stepfather were both diplomats. She attended English boarding schools and worked as a journalist and in television for ten years in Chile (1964–74). After her uncle was assassinated in a CIA-backed coup in 1973, Isabel migrated to Venezuela where she worked as a journalist for another ten years. Her first novel, *House of the Spirits*, appeared in Spanish in 1982 (it was translated into English three years later and has now appeared in nearly thirty languages). Her second novel, *Of Love and Shadows*, appeared in 1984. Both novels have been made into successful movies. Allende had a daughter and a son by her first marriage (her daughter died of a rare blood disease in 1992). In 1988 she remarried and moved to California, where she now lives (in San Rafael). Two years after publication of *Eva Luna* in 1987, her *Stories of Eva Luna* was published. Her ten additional books include a memoir, *My Invented Country* (2003), and a trilogy for young adults. Her most recent novel, *Inés of My Soul*, appeared in 2006. Allende acknowledges Colombian novelist and father of magic realism Gabriel García-Márquez as her mentor. She is regarded as the most widely read Latin American woman writer in the world.



Discussion Questions for *Eva Luna*

1. In an interview published in 1991 Allende defined Magic Realism as “a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, passions, history.” Why do you suppose she includes history in this list? Where do you see evidence of Magic Realism in *Eva Luna*? Do you think this technique or “way of seeing” makes her writing more “literary” (that is, more likely to be regarded as “serious fiction”) than would otherwise be the case? 2. An avowed feminist, Isabel Allende often critiques male dominance in her fiction, but she generally balances favorable with unfavorable male characters. What kinds of behavior does she tend to criticize even in male characters she does not portray as out-and-out villains? What traits does she celebrate most in her male characters? Why do you think she ends up with Rolf as her lover instead of Huberto? 3. Do you think of *Eva Luna* as a credible character, or does she strike you as some sort of stereotypical female superhero, perhaps a heroine drawn from TV soap opera (very popular throughout Latin America) or melodrama? Or is this really a useful question to ask about her? What do you think Allende intends to achieve with this character? 4. Aside from *Eva Luna*, what would you say about the parts played by other female characters in this novel? Consider, for example, her mother Consuelo, her madrina or godmother, La Señora, and Zulema. What do you have to say about Mimi’s role in the novel, particularly with respect to gender? 5. If you happen to read *Eva Luna* as a commentary, of sorts, on life and politics in modern Latin America, what does Allende appear to be saying? To what extent does revolutionary activity, as she depicts it, appear likely to produce positive results? What do you make of her characterization of Colonel Tolomeo Rodriguez? 6. Throughout the novel we are reminded of *Eva*’s desire to be a writer. In fact, her mother’s most important gift to her appears to be her capacity to tell unusual stories, and Allende dedicates the book to her own mother “who gave me a love of stories.” Aside from the novel itself, which we are presumably expected to think of as *Eva*’s work, what evidence do you see of her commitment to writing? Both this novel and *The Stories of Eva Luna* are preceded with an epigraph from “A Thousand and One Tales of the Arabian Nights.” What does this tell you about *Eva Luna*’s (or Isabel Allende’s) views about the importance of stories?



The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

This novel deals with events in Kabul, Afghanistan, between 1975, when the first person narrator Amir, from a wealthy and socially privileged Shiite Pashtun family, was twelve years old, until the spring of 2002, the supposed time of this narration. Amir, now a successful writer, reflects on his close boyhood friendship with Hassan, the son of a valued family servant and a member of the largely disenfranchised Sunni Hazara ethnic group. The devoted Hassan served as Amir's kite-runner; that is, he retrieved the kites that Amir defeated in the annual contests. Amid the political turmoil in Afghanistan that led to the assassination of Daoud Khan in 1978 and the subsequent war with the Soviet Union, Amir and his father Baba escape to the United States. Part of the novel concerns their difficult adjustment to life in San Francisco and Amir's marriage to a fellow Afghan émigré. But most of the action occurs in Afghanistan, first when Amir and Hassan are growing up, and later when Amir returns to Afghanistan under the Taliban rule to rescue Hassan's son, Sohrab. The Kite Runner is both "beautifully written," as various reviewers have observed, and "gripping." The images of Afghanistan are vivid and memorable, and the shaping of the plot, with its theme of betrayal and personal redemption, constitutes, as one reviewer has noted, "a haunting morality tale." *Cover reprinted with permission from Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Author Information

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965; his father was employed in the Foreign Ministry and his mother taught in a girls' high school. As a boy he read literature in Farsi (Persian) and taught a Hazara servant to read and write, somewhat as Amir does Hassan in *The Kite Runner*. In 1976,



after Daoud Khan took power in a bloodless coup, Hosseini's father moved the family to Paris, and after the Communists took power the family moved to San Jose, California, in 1980 at first subsisting, as Amir and his father do in the novel, on welfare and food stamps. After graduating from high school in San Jose, Hosseini received his bachelor's degree in biology from Santa Clara University in 1988 and his M.D. from the University of California at San Diego in 1993, practicing medicine until after the success of *The Kite Runner*, his first novel, in 2003. Early reviews of his second novel, *A*

Thousand Splendid Suns (2007), which also takes place in Afghanistan, have been strong. Movie rights to both novels have already been acquired, and the movie of *The Kite Runner* is slated for release in the fall of 2007. About a year after his first novel was published, Hosseini visited Afghanistan for the first time in 27 years. Hosseini is married and the father of a son and daughter.

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Discussion Questions

1. In an interview concerning *The Kite Runner* Hosseini says he wanted readers to see how Afghanistan was before the war with the Soviet Union and the rise of the Taliban and to get some sense of the collision of “various ethnicities” in his native land. Can you follow the historical events fairly well in this novel? If not, you might want to look up some sites on the internet. What do you make of the ethnic tensions, particularly between the Pashtuns and the Hazaras? 2. Hosseini also indicates that he was “brought up on a tradition of storytelling.” What evidence do you see of his love of storytelling in this novel? Do you think this sort of tradition is common in the United States today, or is it being usurped by television and other media? Is yours a storytelling family? 3. Eventually we discover that Amir and Hassan are half-brothers. Were you surprised to learn this, or did you think Hosseini was intimating as much all the way? Do you find that element of the plot, and perhaps other episodes as well, to be credible, or does that sort of thing strike you as exotic, something from the “Tales of the Arabian Nights”? 4. One obvious reason for the very positive response to this novel involves the time and setting: it comes at a time when Western readers are eager to learn something about recent events in Afghan history and about the people and culture. What do you think you have learned along that line from your reading of this novel? Do you think this sort of novel is a fairly reliable source of that kind of information? 5. In one of Amir’s early conversations with the woman who will become his wife, Soraya says, “Sad stories make good books” (147). Does this rather simple statement seem valid to you? Does it apply to this novel? Can it be equally said that “happy stories make good books”? Why do you think so much of what is presented as Great Literature is, as Soraya might say, “sad”? 6. *The Kite Runner* might be described as a novel about loyalty and betrayal. What sorts of loyalty and betrayal(s) are involved? Does Hosseini seem to suggest that betrayal can be made right? Do you the virtue of loyalty is more important in some cultures than in others?

The Road from Coorain by Jill Ker Conway

Described on the dust jacket as “Recollections of a harsh and beautiful journey into adulthood,” Conway’s memoir retells her life story beginning in a remote sheep ranch (or station) in west Australia. Jill Ker is just eleven when her father is killed in an accident and her mother takes over the ranching operation. With her mother she moves as a teenager in 1948 to Sydney, and for the next dozen years they run the station from long distance. “Coorain,” is the aboriginal word meaning “windy place,” which her father named their property when the family settled it in 1930. Describing herself as “intellectually precocious” but shy and “socially inept,” Jill heads for boarding school in Sydney and then on to the university there. By the end of her first full year of studies at the University of Sydney, she has proven herself an excellent student in both English and history, and her study of Australian history proves particularly mind opening. The memoir deals more with Jill Ker’s intellectual evolution than with her inner emotional or romantic life. Her greatest challenge turns out to be her mother, a bright and capable woman who had to drop out of school and who widowed at an early age and does not remarry. When, despite her excellent credentials, Jill is turned down for a position with the Department of External Affairs, apparently because of her gender, she embarks on a trip to Europe with her mother, after which she opts to go to graduate school not in England, as most Australians would have done at the time, but in the United States.

Author Information

Currently a Visiting Professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Jill Ker Conway was born in Hillston, New South Wales, in the Australian outback, and grew up on Coorain, an isolated sheep station her father developed in 1930, following his combat service in the First World War. She had no playmates except for her two older brothers. Her father died in an accident when she was eleven, and when she was fourteen, the family moved to Sydney where Jill Ker went to boarding school and the University of Sydney, majoring in history. While at Harvard University working on her doctorate, which she completed in 1969, she married a Canadian professor, John Conway (he died in 1995). She taught for about ten years at the University of Toronto before being named the first woman president of Smith College in 1975, a post she held until 1985. In addition to her memoir, *The Road from Coorain* (1989), which was made into a movie for television in 2001, a partial list of Conway’s published books includes *Women Reformers and American Culture* (1987); a memoir of her life in Toronto entitled *True North* (1995); *Modern Feminism: An Intellectual History* (1997); a scholarly study of autobiography entitled *When Memory Speaks* (1998); *Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Humanistic Studies of the Environment* (2000); and *A Woman’s Education* (2001), which concerns her years as president of Smith College. She also writes murder mysteries with a friend under the pseudonym Clare Munnings.

Discussion Questions for *The Road from Coorain*

1. Only about a quarter of Conway's memoir is located at the sheep station in Coorain; most of it concerns her teenage and college years in Sydney. Which locale engages you most? When she leaves Australia for the U.S. in the last pages of the book, she tells us it was hardest for her to leave Coorain, yet she has not lived there for some fifteen years. What does she think she will miss about that place? Why might she regret leaving Coorain more than she does leaving her native Australia?

2. Reflect some on Conway's developing relationship with her sometimes difficult mother. At the end of the book Jill is about 26, her mother 62 and addicted to alcohol and tranquilizers. Jill comes to see herself as having been something of an enabler. Do you agree? Does it seem to you that she is deserting her mother at her time of greatest need? How does Conway deal with her decision?

3. Unlike the writers of some memoirs with which you may be familiar (Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, Mary Clearman Blew's *Balsamroot*), Conway's includes no dialogue. Why do you suppose this is? When a writer of memoir uses dialogue supposedly remembered from thirty or more years ago, he or she must fabricate it, so most readers do not assume people literally said just what the author writes. What do you think is gained, or lost, by Conway's decision not to employ dialogue?

4. Jill Ker Conway opens her study of life narrative writing, *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography* (1998), with a question: "Why is autobiography the most popular form of fiction for modern readers?" In what sense might that question be considered "provocative"? Conway also asks, "Why is this drive to engage in scrutiny of one's own life so characteristic of the West?" Assuming that her observation is correct, how would you respond to that question?

5. Other books in this series deal with cultures quite unfamiliar and perhaps even exotic or alien to most of us, but this one deals with a modern, industrialized, democratic nation with a sizable middle class, and a high standard of living. Moreover, we share a common language. So, what, if anything, do you see that differentiates life in Australia from that in the United States? What characteristics does Conway connect with Australian values and self-concepts?

6. Conway's memoir concerns mostly the 1940s and 1950s, whereas other books in this series concern more recent decades. Do you have more of a sense of a historical past when you read this book than you do with the others? An exception might be Carlos Eire's memoir of growing up in Cuba during the late 1950s. If you have also read that book, which of the two do you prefer, and why?

The Space Between Us by Thrity Umrigar

In Bombay (some now prefer Mumbai) 65 year-old Bhima, a low-caste (but not an “Untouchable”) illiterate Hindu cleans house and cooks for the well-to-do Sera Dubash, a Parsi woman, whose daughter is pregnant and apparently happily married. Bhima’s granddaughter, whose college education has been paid for by Sera, is pregnant out of wedlock, and her hopes for an improved lot in life appear doomed as a result. Umrigar deftly oscillates between Bhima’s and Sera’s worlds, and she vividly depicts their variant life-styles and class conflict, but she also suggests important parallels. Both Bhima and Sera are widows, in effect, and through flashbacks we learn that both suffered from spousal abuse, though in very



different ways. In her comments about the novel at the end, Umrigar indicates that Bhima is “real,” that she was “a shadow flitting around our middle-class house,” a “nebulous presence in our home, our world, our lives.” Like Sera’s daughter Dinaz, however, Umrigar admired Bhima and “could sense her essential goodness and dignity and stoic heroism.” In some ways this novel is a tribute to Bhima, but Sera also emerges as a sympathetic sister protagonist. In addition to her detailed description of conditions in the slums of Bombay, Umrigar refers to various Indian foods, and she sprinkles words in Hindi throughout the text, creating a powerful sense of verisimilitude and giving readers an intimate familiarity with the setting.

Author Information

Born in Bombay, India, in 1961, Thrity Umrigar took her bachelor’s degree at Bombay University, a Catholic university in the predominantly Hindu nation; like Sera Dubash in her novel, Umrigar grew up as a Parsi, a religion that evolved from ancient Persian Zoroastrianism. At age 21 she immigrated to the United States, where she pursued her master’s degree in journalism from Ohio State University, working as a journalist in



Akron for about fifteen years. Umrigar is now a U.S. citizen. She wrote her first novel, *Bombay Time* (2001) while at Harvard on a Nieman Fellowship for mid-career journalists. The success of that book enabled her to change careers in 2002; she now teaches creative writing and minority and ethnic literature at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Umrigar holds a

doctorate in English literature from Kent State University. Her memoir, *First Darling of the Morning*, was published in 2004, and was followed by the bestselling novel *The Space Between Us* (2005). Her most recent novel, *If Today Be Sweet*, was released in June 2007 and concerns a Parsi family living in Cleveland, where she currently resides. In a blog posted on the *Powells Books* website (May 5, 2006), Umrigar asserts that as the only child in a family of businesspeople, literature literally “became a kind of religion” for her: “Books taught me about love and honor, acts of kindness and selflessness, about good and evil, about the paradoxes of human behavior. I learned about the largeness and smallness of the world from books.”

Discussion Questions

1. Perhaps the cardinal achievement of this novel is Thrity Umrigar's ability to cause readers to feel compassion for the stoic, downtrodden Bhima even though most of us have little choice but to identify personally with the upper-middle-class Sera. The task may be easy enough as middle-class Americans do tend to side with the underdog. But how does Umrigar go about making Sera a sympathetic character? Which of her traits complicate her character, even as those traits make her more credible or more "realistic"? How do you feel about Sera at the end of the novel?

2. Throughout this novel much is made of education as the potential salvation of the poor. Even marginal literacy grants a certain status to Bombay's slum-dwellers, and Bhima's total illiteracy costs her deeply. But does this novel suggest anything about the nature of education that you haven't thought of before? How admirable are the best educated of the characters in the novel? Consider in particular Feroz, Freddy, Dinaz, and Viraf.

3. One might argue that any novel in which overt villainy plays a key role may tip in the direction of melodrama. To what extent, if any, is that the case here? Who are the villains of this novel? Melodrama tends to polarize good and evil and most often to reward good at the end, to assure the reader (or movie viewer) that justice prevails. Does Bhima strike you as a melodramatic heroine, too good to be true (or credible)? Is she an Indian version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom?

4. What important roles do minor characters play in this novel? Consider the Afghan balloon-seller, the doctors, Aban and Pervez Driver, and the Muslim Hyder. To what extent might you regard Bombay itself as a "character" in the novel? And what do you make of Umrigar's portrayal of her native city, current population about 18 million and expected to replace Tokyo as the world's most populous city by 2020? Where does she show Bombay at its best and at its worst?

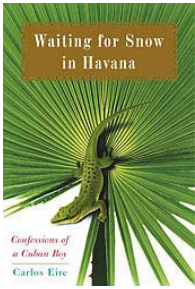
5. Do you find the sprinkling of Hindi words in this novel to be valuable, or do you find them distracting? Why do you think Umrigar uses so many words like ghatias, janu, jaado, bai, agyari, and chalo? While the meanings of most of these may be apparent from the context, some are not, and some you may find yourself having forgotten when you come across the word later in the novel without that context. Would an index be advisable, or do you find yourself skipping over those foreign words?

6. Aside from social class or caste, what do you make of the gender issues in this novel? The significant negative characters in the novel, with just one or two exceptions, are males and the most admirable are females. What are those exceptions (positive and negative, male and female)? Are the flawed male characters cut from the same cloth? Do you think Umrigar is unfair to men in this novel?

7. If we read *The Space Between Us* as a novel of social class conflict or of gender conflict, it could be argued that we avoid the vital matter of personal agency. Are Umrigar's characters in a position to make personal choices? Are they constrained or limited by their lot in life as it pertains to gender and class? Does Umrigar hold out greater hope for the next generation, that of Maya and Dinaz?

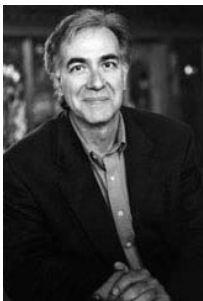
Waiting for Snow in Havana by Carlos Eire

Subtitled “Confessions of a Cuban Boy,” Carlos Eire’s memoir looks back to his boyhood on the eve of Fidel Castro’s takeover from Fulgencio Batista on the first of January 1959. The son of a prominent judge, Eire was born to privilege, but he says his family was not wealthy. In 1962, at the age of eleven, Carlos was flown to the United States, along with his brother Tony, two years older, as part of Operation Pedro Pan, and his mother joined them a few years later, but his father remained in Havana with his prized collection of art and Carlos’s adopted brother, the sinister Ernesto. On the cover the publishers describe the book as “both an exorcism and an ode to a paradise lost.” This often humorous memoir mingles lively accounts of boyish pranks with comments on religion that are more than half serious (Eire presently teaches philosophy and religious studies at Yale University). His sometimes doting father considers himself to be the reincarnated Louis XVI, executed during the Reign of Terror in France (1793) along with his wife, Marie Antoinette (by default, Carlos’ mother). The book offers almost equal parts politics (Eire is no admirer of Castro), dysfunctional family dynamics, and religion: “Jesus H. Bungee-jumping Christ, save me!” nine year-old Carlos declares upon being told that Santa does not exist. Spanish culture, Eire concludes, “is built upon one warning: beware, all is illusion.”



Author Information

Born Carlos Nieto in Havana in 1950, a little over three-quarters of the way through his memoir, Carlos rejects his father’s surname for his mother’s, Eire, so it was as Carlos Eire that he received his bachelor’s degree from Loyola University in Chicago in 1973. He went on to receive his doctorate from Yale University, where he presently serves as Riggs Professor of History and Religious Studies. He is married and the father of two sons and a daughter. His many scholarly essays and three books published prior to *Waiting for Snow in Havana* would not have predicted that Carlos Eire would author a National Book Award winning memoir. The books, complete with scholarly colons, are titled *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (1986), *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (1995), and *Jews, Christians, and Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions* (1997) written with J. Corrigan, M. Jaffee, and M. Denny. Eire has said



the memoir was the easiest for him to write and that it was triggered by the Elián González affair in 2000. The seven year-old Gonzalez was rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard after his mother died on a boat smuggling them into Miami, but he was returned to Cuba and the custody of his father, despite vigorous protests from the exiled Cuban community in the United States. In a conversation appended to the memoir, Eire declares that he will not return to Cuba so long as Castro is in power: “As far as I am concerned, Fidel’s Cuba might as well be the deepest circle of hell.”

Discussion Questions

1. As a boy Carlos Eire appears to loathe and fear lizards, even common chameleons. Do you find any explanation for his anxiety about them? He and his older brother Tony enjoy torturing lizards (cutting off their tails and blowing them apart with firecrackers), but why? Does this behavior combined with acts that some would see as harmful to others and dangerous to themselves suggest something pathological, or does it come down to boys-will-be-boys?

2. The father in this memoir plays games with his sons (like car surfing and pea-shooting), but refuses to accompany them to the United States, and he appears to shift his affection from them to the adopted Ernesto, who Eire insists is a “pervert.” Moreover, early in the memoir Carlos calls out, in phrasing that suggests Jesus on the cross, “Father, Father, why did you abandon me?” (88). How do you account for the father’s behavior? Do you think Carlos understands this himself?

3. Playfully, but probably with some serious intent as well, Eire claims he can outdo Thomas Aquinas in his five proofs of the existence of God, and in the course of his memoir he produces seven such “proofs.” What are some of these, and what do you make of them? How seriously do you take Eire’s statements about philosophy and religion?

4. How does American popular culture, mostly in the form of movies, influence young Carlos’ attitudes and behavior? Presumably the Marxist idealism of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara was aimed at the values implicit in such films; moreover, it was aimed at the privileged classes in Cuba, which included the middle class to which Carlos’ family belonged. To what extent, then, is this memoir “political”? Do you agree with Eire’s political views? How well the mass of Cubans have fared under Castro remains a subject of considerable debate, but Eire’s point of view is clear enough. Do you think he’s probably right, or is he simply a victim of his own class bias?

5. Looking back at his preadolescent boyhood, Carlos Eire reveals many fears, not just of lizards, but of certain paintings in his father’s collection (notably of religious figures) and of sexual abuse or molestation by perverts (late in the memoir, in fact, a pervert pulls a knife on him). What is Eire’s point with this sort of thing? Does he see himself as having been particularly vulnerable as a child?

6. Throughout most of the memoir Carlos Eire’s mother, whom he describes as beautiful but crippled, appears to be passive, but it is she who takes the most decisive action when Castro takes over. How much does Eire reveal about this “Marie Antoinette”? His tribute to her appears to be the penultimate chapter (39). Does a review of this chapter affect your sense of her in any way?

7. So what does this memoir come to at the end? How much of it is written out of anger and regrets (despite Eire’s apparent success in the United States)? Is the book in some ways a confession? “I loved to steal,” he tells us at one point. Or is Eire boasting about his boyish misbehavior mostly for the fun of it? And what do you make of his reflections on death at the end of the last chapter?

Graceland by Chris Abani

In this intense novel, sixteen-year-old Elvis Oke, an Elvis Presley impersonator, struggles to survive in the chaotic Lagos, Nigeria, of 1983. From his deceased mother Beatrice, he retains a journal that includes Nigerian recipes that are inserted between the 29 chapters of the novel, along with comments on the traditional kola-nut ritual. Occasional chapters constitute flashbacks to the 1970s, when Elvis was growing up in the smaller city of Afikpo, where he learned to read to his grandmother (he remains an avid reader) and took dance lessons. His father Sunday and stepmother Comfort offer him little in the way of a home, so Elvis takes up with the streetwise Redemption (such names as “Sunday,” “Comfort” and “redemption” are not uncommon in Nigeria), who gets him involved in the cocaine trade and later in smuggling body parts and children for “harvest” under orders from the sinister Colonel. The novel occasionally approaches allegory as the King of the Beggars leads a rebellion against the corrupt government. The title might be seen to apply not only to Elvis Presley’s estate in Tennessee, but also the protagonist’s search for a land of grace. The complicity of the West is made clear throughout when, for example, the King explains to Elvis how the World Bank operates or when Redemption, speaking of the children to be harvested for body parts, tells him, “No forget de whites who create de demand.” American popular culture, particularly in the form of movies and television, seems to define life in Nigeria as much as the traditional African ways implied by the kola-nut lore and Elvis’s mother’s recipes.

Author Information

Born in eastern Nigeria in 1967, Chris Abani wrote his first novel, *Masters of the Board*, at age sixteen; it won Nigeria’s Delta Fiction Award. Two years later he was imprisoned on political grounds. In 1987, while a student in the university, he was jailed for a year for participation in guerilla theater (political protest), and he was imprisoned yet again in 1990, this time for eighteen months. Nevertheless, he managed to graduate from Imo State University in Owerri, which is located in the Ibo area (formerly Republic of Biafra) with a B.A. in English and literary studies in 1991. In the meantime, he wrote two plays and numerous poems. In 1995 Abani received a master’s degree in gender, society, and culture studies at the University of London, and in 2002 he received an M.A. in English from the University of Southern California. His books of poetry include *Kalakuta Republic* (2000), *Dapne’s Lot* (2003), *Dog Woman* (2004), and *Hands Washing Water* (2006). The author of two novellas, *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and *Song for Night* (2007), Abani won the PEN Hemingway Book Prize and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Debut Fiction for *Graceland* (2004). His most recent novel, *The Virgin of Flames*, was published in 2007. Abani is a professor of English at the University of California at Riverside. He is also an accomplished jazz saxophonist.

Discussion Questions

1. As with nearly any novel in which the protagonist is an adolescent, *GraceLand* concerns coming-of-age and initiation into the adult/real world. In such novels we witness a boy or girl learning (usually) hard lessons in life. What sorts of lessons do you think Elvis learns? Who are his most effective teachers? What does he learn from what you consider to be his most painful lessons? Do you think it is valid in this novel that, as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “What does not kill me, makes me stronger”?
2. While many of the most vivid episodes and scenes in this novel are horrifying and brutal, the novel itself does not come across as unbearably dark. One reason for that is that Elvis comes across as a resilient, even “picaresque,” sort of “hero.” The “picaro” or rogue figure, like Huckleberry Finn, gets into and out of trouble, usually survives on the periphery of society, and often is at odds with the law and social convention, but he possesses an upbeat disposition and gets by on his wits. To what extent does Elvis seem to qualify as such a character?
3. Reflect on the roles of various members of Elvis’s splintered family in this novel: his deceased mother Beatrice, his father Sunday, his stepmother Comfort, his grandmother Oye, Uncle Joseph, Aunt Felicia. What does Elvis acquire from each of these relatives?
4. The names of several of Elvis’s relatives listed above, along with those of his friend Redemption and of many others in this novel, including Confidence and Blessing, the Colonel and the King of the Beggars, may have allegorical status; that is, they suggest a significance that surpasses their individual identity or role. Some of the most violent action occurs at a place ironically nicknamed Freedom Square. What do you make of the political and perhaps even spiritual allegory implicit in this novel?
5. What role does American popular culture play in *GraceLand*, not simply as it involves Elvis Presley, but also as it applies to movies, television shows, and books? Elvis is a voracious but eclectic sort of reader. What writers does Abani mention by way of indicating that Elvis is all over the place in what he reads? What is his favorite book? How does Abani shape his protagonist through such a wide range of reading, or do you detect much evidence of that influence?
6. Most of the dialogue in this novel is offered in Nigerian dialect. As Redemption says of Americans whose child might need an organ transplant, “Like I said, if your only child dey die, you go ask question?” Elvis, however, speaks standard English. Why does Abani distinguish between the speech of his protagonist and that of others in the novel? (His Aunt Felicia, who has immigrated to the United States, significantly speaks standard English but lapses occasionally into dialect.) Does the use of dialect make a positive contribution to the novel?