

# American Voices



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## Reading Materials

This document provides information about the reading materials for this theme, including a complete list of available titles, as well as book summaries and author information for each.

## Complete Book List

Included below is the complete list of books which have been vetted and recommended for this theme, and which are available in inventory from the ICfL.

- *Unaccustomed Earth*, by Jhumpa Lahiri (Indian American). Published 2008, 352 pages.
- *A Woman is No Man*, by Etar Rum (Palestinian American). Published 2019, 368 pages.
- *American Born Chinese*, by Gene Luen Yang (Chinese American). Published 2006, 240 pages. \*This title is a graphic novel.
- *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Native American). Published 2013, 390 pages.
- *The Refugees*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen (Vietnamese American). Published 2017, 224 pages.
- *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*, by Kim Michele Richardson (Appalachian American). Published 2019, 320 pages.
- *Bless Me Ultima*, by Rudolfo A. Anaya (Mexican American). Published 1994, 262 pages.
- *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko (Native American). Published 2006, 243 pages.
- *Love Medicine*, by Louise Erdrich (Native American). Published 1993, 384 pages.
- *My Grandmother Smoked Cigars*, by Sabine Ulibarri (Hispanic American). Published 1994, 167 pages.
- *The Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan (Chinese American). Published 2006, 352 pages.
- *The Women of Brewster Place*, by Gloria Naylor (African-American). Published 1983, 192 pages.
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston (African-American). Published 1937, 219 pages.
- *Woman Hollering Creek*, by Sandra Cisneros (Mexican-American). Published 1992, 192 pages.

# American Voices



- *Call Us What We Carry*, by Amanda Gorman (African-American). Published 2021, 240 pages.
- *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive*, by Stephanie Land (American/Economic Hardship). Published 2019, 288 pages.

## Book Summaries & Author Information

Included below are the detailed summaries of each book available for this theme, as well as background information about the author.

**Unaccustomed Earth**, by Jhumpa Lahiri (Indian American). Published 2008, 352 pages.

*Unaccustomed Earth* is a 2008 story collection by Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri that follows the lives of Bengali and Bengali-American characters in the 1980's and 1990's. Part 1 contains four stories with distinct characters and plotlines, while Part 2 follows the story of Hema and Kaushik through three different stories. Each story chronicles an important phase or event within the lives of the characters it addresses, taking the reader from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand as they enter the lives of sisters and brother, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends, and lovers.

### Author Information

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri, the daughter of Indian immigrants, was born in 1967 in London and moved to the United States when she was three years old. She grew up in Rhode Island, where her father worked as a librarian. Lahiri received her B.A. in English literature from Barnard College of Columbia University in 1989, followed by multiple degrees from Boston University: an M.A. in English, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. Lahiri has taught creative writing at Princeton University, Boston University, and the Rhode Island School of Design.

After facing years of rejection from publishers, Lahiri published her first collection of short stories about Indian-Americans, entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*, in 1999. This debut book went

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

on to sell over 600,000 copies and received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (only the seventh time a story collection had won the award). Her 2003 novel, *The Namesake*, was made into a movie in 2007, and her 2013 collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, debuted at #1 on the New York Times Bestseller List. Her 2015 novel, *The Lowland*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. In 2014, Lahiri received a National Humanities Medal and in 2017 won the Pen/Malamud award for excellence in the short story.

**A Woman is No Man**, by Etaf Rum (Palestinian American). Published 2019, 368 pages.

Palestine, 1990. Seventeen-year-old Isra prefers reading books to entertaining the suitors her father has chosen for her. Over the course of a week, the naïve and dreamy girl finds herself quickly betrothed and married and is soon living in Brooklyn. There Isra struggles to adapt to the expectations of her oppressive mother-in-law Fareeda and strange new husband Adam, a pressure that intensifies as she begins to have children—four daughters instead of the sons Fareeda tells Isra she must bear.

Brooklyn, 2008. Eighteen-year-old Deya, Isra's oldest daughter, must meet with potential husbands at her grandmother Fareeda's insistence, though her only desire is to go to college. Deya can't help but wonder if her options would have been different had her parents survived the car crash that killed them when Deya was only eight. But her grandmother is firm on the matter: the only way to secure a worthy future for Deya is through marriage to the right man

But fate has a will of its own, and soon Deya will find herself on an unexpected path that leads her to shocking truths about her family—knowledge that will force her to question everything she thought she knew about her parents, the past, and her own future. Source: Harper Collins Reading Guide (rackcdn.com)

## Author Information

The daughter of Palestinian immigrants, Etaf Rum was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. She married at 19 and had two children before going to college to earn undergraduate degrees in Philosophy and English Composition, then a Master of Arts in American and British Literature. Rum teaches undergraduate courses in North Carolina, where she lives with her children. She also runs the Instagram account @booksandbeans and is a Book of the Month Club

# American Voices



Ambassador, showcasing her favorite selections each month. *A Woman Is No Man* is her first novel.

**American Born Chinese**, by Gene Luen Yang (Chinese American). Published 2006, 240 pages.

In this graphic novel, Gene Luen Wang presents three initially unrelated stories about Chinese culture and the stereotypes applied to Chinese-Americans. The first story follows the adventures of the classic Chinese character The Monkey King. The second explores the experiences of a second-generation immigrant named Jin Wang who is trying to fit into American culture. And the third tells the story of a white American named Danny who dreads the annual visit of his Chinese cousin Chin-Kee, who embarrasses him and embodies every racial stereotype about Chinese. The novel then brings the three stories together in a powerful and surprising way. It is a coming-of-age story that offers powerful ideas about identity and belonging. This novel offers a complex portrayal of young multicultural Americans trying to forge their own cultural identity.

## Author Information

Gene Luen Yang started creating comics and graphic novels while he was still in elementary school. He has written and illustrated many comics, such as issues of the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* series and DC Comics' *Superman*.

His graphic novel *American Born Chinese* was published in 2006 and was the first graphic novel ever nominated for a National Book Award. It also won the Printz Award from the American Library Association, the first graphic novel to do so, as well as an Eisner Award for Best New Graphic Album. *Boxers & Saints*, a two-volume graphic novel about the Boxer Rebellion, was published in 2013. It won the LA Times Book Prize and was also nominated for a National Book Award.

Yang teaches creative writing at Hamline University in the MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults. He was also appointed a National Ambassador for Young People's Literature in January 2016 by the Library of Congress, Every Child A Reader, and the Children's Book Council.



# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
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ABOUT IT**  
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**Braiding Sweetgrass** by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Native American). Published 2013, 390 pages.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's book is a mixture of science, folklore, and memoir that focuses on the lessons humans can learn from other living beings--including plants and animals--on our shared planet. She structures her book around the five steps of using sweetgrass, a sacred plant in the author's Native American culture.

"Planting Sweetgrass" introduces the concepts of reciprocity, gratitude, and gift-giving as elements of a healthy relationship with one's environment which she witnessed from her indigenous family and culture growing up.

"Tending Sweetgrass" explores the bounty of the earth and what it gives to human beings. It establishes the fact that humans take much from the earth, which gives in a way similar to that of a mother: unconditionally, nearly endlessly.

"Picking Sweetgrass" dwells on the responsibilities attendant on human beings in relation to the earth, after Kimmerer already establishes that the earth does give gifts to humanity and that gifts are deserving of reciprocal giving. She sees these responsibilities as extending past the saying of thanks for the earth's bounty and into conservation efforts to preserve that which humanity values.

"Braiding Sweetgrass" delves into reconciling humanity with the environment, dwelling in particular upon the changes wrought between generations upon the way in which one considers the land one lives on.

"Burning Sweetgrass" paints an apocalyptic picture of the environmental destruction occurring around the world today and urges the reader to consider ways in which this damage can be stemmed. The chapters reinforce the importance of reciprocity and gratitude in defeating the greed that drives human expansion at the expense of the earth's health and plenitude.

Adapted from Braiding Sweetgrass Summary & Study Guide at [bookrags.com](http://bookrags.com)

## Author Information

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Her first book, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for outstanding nature writing, and her other



# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

work has appeared in *Orion*, *Whole Terrain*, and numerous scientific journals. She tours widely and has been featured on NPR's *On Being* with Krista Tippett and in 2015 addressed the general assembly of the United Nations on the topic of "Healing Our Relationship with Nature."

Kimmerer is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, and the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, whose mission is to create programs which draw on the wisdom of both indigenous and scientific knowledge for our shared goals of sustainability.

As a writer and a scientist, her interests in restoration include not only restoration of ecological communities, but restoration of our relationships to land. She holds a BS in Botany from SUNY ESF, an MS and PhD in Botany from the University of Wisconsin and is the author of numerous scientific papers on ecology. She lives on an old farm in upstate New York, tending gardens both cultivated and wild.

**The Refugees**, by Viet Thanh Nguyen (Vietnamese-American). Published 2017, 224 pages.

*The Refugees* is a collection of eight short stories, all centering around the experience of refugees from the Vietnam war and their descendants. The stories are narrated in both first and third person and occur during the years from the 1970-2001.

In "Black Eyed Women," a 38-year-old ghostwriter deals with memories of her brother's death and the rape she was a victim of. "The Other Man" tells the story of Liem, an 18-year-old Vietnamese refugee in the 1970s, who has a sexual encounter and conversation with his American host. In "War Years" a man recounts his experience as a boy in Vietnam when his mother was confronted by a neighbor raising funds for the anti-communist guerilla forces. "The Transplant" is narrated by Arthur Arellano, a Mexican-American who received a liver transplant from a Vietnamese donor. When he finds a man claiming to be the donor's son, Arthur agrees to help him, but this new relationship brings more trouble than Arthur expects. "I'd Love You to Want Me" follows the story of a professor who is suffering from the early stages of dementia and starts calling his wife by another woman's name. In "The Americans," James Carver, an African American man from Alabama who flew as a bomber pilot during the Vietnam war, visits his daughter who is working in Vietnam. The visit forces him to deal with his past experiences

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

and how they have affected the next generation. In "Someone Else Besides You," Thomas, a 33-year-old man, tells about how his father helped him to reconcile with his ex-wife and take responsibility for his relationships. "Fatherland" tells the story of Phuong, who is the oldest child of her father's second family, which he started after his first wife left him and took their children to America. Phuong meets her half-sister Vivien, who comes to visit Vietnam and seems rich and glamorous. But their time together shows that life in America has not been all that Phuong imagined

## Author Information

Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* is a New York Times best seller and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. His other books are *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (a finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award in General Nonfiction) and *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*. He is a University Professor, the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, and a Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California. He has been interviewed by Tavis Smiley, Charlie Rose, Seth Meyers, and Terry Gross, among many others. Most recently he has been the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim and MacArthur Foundations, and le Prix du meilleur livre étranger (Best Foreign Book in France), for *The Sympathizer*. He is the editor of *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*. His most recent publication is *Chicken of the Sea*, a children's book written in collaboration with his six-year-old son, Ellison. His next book, *The Committed*, the sequel to *The Sympathizer*, was released in March 2021.

**The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek**, by Kim Michele Richardson (Appalachian American). Published 2019, 320 pages.

Cussy Mary Carter works as a librarian through FDR's Kentucky Pack Horse Library Project, carrying books to rural households throughout Troublesome Creek. She spends long days delivering library reading materials and scrapbooks full of useful information to families struggling to make a living in the mountain community. Her job is challenging because of the terrain, but also because of the prejudice she faces as a blue-skinned woman, a color she inherited from her parents that is increasingly rare in her mountain home. As she searches and suffers for a cure for her condition, Cussy Mary also builds strong friendships with the people

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

she visits, and these relationships help her to face the persecution and dangers that come her way.





# American Voices



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ABOUT IT**  
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## Author Information

Kim Michele Richardson, the author of a memoir and several novels, lives with her family in Kentucky. She has spent years visiting nearly every cranny in the state—its rural areas, deep woodlands, and rolling hills—sussing out stories of the people, their histories, and traditions, as well as the hardships and social injustices endured. As Richardson writes on her website: “I write human stories set in a unique landscape. Knowing one small piece of this world, the earth, the sky, the plants, the people and the very air of it—helps us understand the sufferings and joys of others —ourselves.”

In addition to her writing, Richardson volunteers by building houses for Habitat for Humanity. She is also an advocate for the prevention of child abuse and domestic violence, partnering with the U.S. Navy globally to bring awareness and education to the prevention of domestic violence.

Richardson's memoir, *The Unbreakable Child*, detailing her own experience with child abuse, was released in 2009. Her novels include, *Liar's Bench* (2015), *Godpretty in the Tobacco Field* (2016), *The Sisters of Glass Ferry* (2017), and *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* (2019). Richardson also writes for Huffington Post and is a book critic for the New York Journal of Books.

**Bless Me Ultima**, by Rudolfo A. Anaya (Mexican American). Published 1994, 262 pages.

*Bless Me, Ultima* is a novel of childhood memory, magical realism, and pagan mysticism. The book, Anaya's first, was published at a time when Mexican American writing was still emerging into the broader American literary landscape. Making frequent appearances on banned-book lists (even as recently as 2013), *Bless Me, Ultima* tells the story of a young boy who must reconcile the Catholic faith of his upbringing with the Native American beliefs of his heritage.

The novel deals with a sensitive seven-year-old, Antonio (Tony) whose coming of age coincides with the arrival of his grandmother Ultima, a curandera who heals with herbs and magic. Under Ultima's wise guidance, Tony probes the family ties that bind him and finds in himself the magical secrets of the pagan past—a mythic legacy equally as

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
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palpable as the Catholicism in which he has been schooled. At each turn in his life there is Ultima to nurture the birth of his soul.

## Author Information

Rudolfo Anaya was born in 1937, in Pastura, New Mexico. His mother's lineage comes from farmers, and his father was a vaquero. Rudolfo and his siblings were raised in a devout Catholic home where Spanish was spoken. He graduated high school in Albuquerque in 1956 and later dropped out of business school but received his degree and accepted a teaching position in a small town. He was awarded the prestigious Premio Quinto Sol Award for this novel in 1972. Anaya has written several novels, journals, theses, and commentaries and was awarded the PEN Center West Award for fiction for his novel *Albuquerque*.

**Ceremony**, by Leslie Marmon Silko (Native American). Published 2006, 243 pages.

Tayo, the hero of Leslie Marmon Silko's groundbreaking novel *Ceremony*, is a half-blood Laguna Indian who returns to his reservation after surviving the Bataan Death March of World War II. As he struggles to recover the peace of mind that his experience of warfare has stolen from him, Tayo finds that memory, identity, and his relations with others all resemble the colored threads of his grandmother's sewing basket. The elements of his personality feel knotted and tangled, and his every attempt to restore them to order merely snags and twists them all the more. Tayo's problems, however, extend far beyond the frustrations and alienation he encounters in trying to readjust to peacetime. Having risked his life for an America that fundamentally disowns him, Tayo must confront difficult and painful questions about the society he has been fighting for.

In the pages of *Ceremony*, a novel that combines extraordinary lyricism with a foreboding sense of personal and national tragedy, Leslie Marmon Silko follows Tayo as he pursues a sometimes lonely and always intensely personal quest for sanity in a broken world. As Tayo searches for self-knowledge and inner peace, the reader, too, embarks on a complex emotional journey. In observing Tayo's efforts to come to terms with a society that does not fully acknowledge his humanity, one may initially feel personal sympathy with his character. However, as Silko's narrative steadily metamorphoses into an indictment of social and historical forces that have led to Tayo's suffering, the reader's feelings are likely also to transform, as simple pity gives way to solemn contemplation of the atrocities that our native peoples have been forced to undergo.

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

## Author Information

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in 1948 to a family whose ancestry includes Mexican, Laguna Indian, and European forebearers. She has said that her writing has at its core “the attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed or mixed-blood person.” As she grew up on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation, she learned the stories and culture of the Laguna people from her great-grandmother and other female relatives. After receiving her B. A. in English at the University of New Mexico, she enrolled in the University of New Mexico law school but completed only three semesters before deciding that writing and storytelling, not law, were the means by which she could best promote justice. She married John Silko in 1970. Prior to writing *Ceremony*, she published a series of short stories, including “The Man to Send Rain Clouds.” She also authored a volume of poetry, *Laguna Woman: Poems*, for which she received the Pushcart Prize for Poetry. In 1973, Silko moved to Ketchikan, Alaska, where she wrote *Ceremony*. Silko has followed the critical success of *Ceremony* with a series of other novels, including *Storyteller*, *Almanac for the Dead*, and *Gardens in the Dunes*. Nevertheless, it was the singular achievement of *Ceremony* that first secured her a place among the first rank of Native American novelists. Leslie Marmon Silko now lives on a ranch near Tucson, Arizona.

**Love Medicine**, by Louise Erdrich (Native American). Published 1993, 384 pages.

*Love Medicine*, a novel by Louise Erdrich, was first published in 1984 and republished in an expanded version in 1993. Among the first works by a Native American woman to portray modern Indian life, *Love Medicine* depicts several generations of three families whose members search for an identity that fuses their Native and European American roots. Erdrich, whose ancestry includes both Ojibwa and German Americans, is a member of the Turtle Mountain community of the Chippewa Nation. She drew on memories of childhood visits to North Dakota reservations for the book. The novel interlaces the narratives of the families, who live on a fictionalized reservation, offering multiple authentic “Indian” points of view through sharply individual characters.

Academic critics have praised *Love Medicine* for its lyrical prose, complex nonlinear narrative, Native and European tropes, and themes including both opposing heritages and cultural hybridity. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1984. Some Native American writers, however, have asserted that Erdrich's novels have become the dominant representation of Native life, rather than one facet of a diverse culture. Some

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

Turtle Mountain readers have objected to Erdrich's stylistic flourishes and impoverished, despairing characters. Nonetheless, *Love Medicine* has been a groundbreaking text, generating wider appreciation for works representing Natives as contemporary Americans rather than romanticized noble savages.

## Author Information

Louise Erdrich is one of America's most celebrated Native American authors. Born in 1954, she grew up in North Dakota, where her parents were teachers at the Bureau of Indian affairs. However, while the author is most closely identified as a Native American, Erdrich is actually of mixed race: her father is German, and her mother is Ojibwa and French. Her writing often reflects the struggle to claim a distinct identity in her multicultural world. Frequently, Erdrich's novels deal with the cyclical nature of time, an important concept to Native Americans. Her characters often include a "trickster," a mischievous troublemaker who makes appearances in the folktales of old. Before her solo success, Erdrich collaborated with her husband on children's books. Her considerable back catalogue includes titles such as *The Plague of Doves*, *The Round House*, *The Painted Drum*, *The Future Home of the Living God*, and most recently *The Night Watchman*.

**My Grandmother Smoked Cigars**, by Sabine Ulibarri (Hispanic American). Published 1994, 167 pages.

These stories present a series of carefully drawn human sketches of individuals--family members, like the grandmother and uncle Cirilo; friends and acquaintances, like the all-around cowboy Negro Aguilar; and Elacio Sandoval, the boyhood friend of the narrator whose fear of marriage and "love them or leave them" approach to the opposite sex makes exciting and humorous reading; and Roberto, who after going to town for nails, reappears after a three-year absence to continue as if nothing has happened. Ulibarri establishes a careful balance between childhood memories and an adult perspective while carefully analyzing the proud, independent, and sturdy atmosphere of rural New Mexico. Classic, legendary heroes of the Hispanic past reappear in these pages and, in the words of the author, "...sweetened and enriched my life then and, now, I remember it tenderly" (Chicano Literature: A Reference...393).

## Author Information



# American Voices



Sabine R. Ulibarri was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, September 21, 1919, and raised in Tierra Amarilla where he attended local schools through the twelfth grade. He taught school in Rio Arriba County and subsequently in El Rito, New Mexico. He married in 1942 and spent the following three years serving in the U.S. Air Force. He finished his bachelor's degree at the University of New Mexico in 1947 and his M.A. degree in Spanish in 1949. He continued his graduate studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he taught and studied for nine years. After serving in the private sector as a consultant, he also served as chair of the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at the University of New Mexico.

**The Joy Luck Club**, by Amy Tan (Chinese American). Published 2006, 352 pages.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan explores different mother-daughter relationships, and at a lower level, relationships between friends, lovers, and even enemies. She presents the conflicting views and the stories of both sides, providing the reader—and ultimately, the characters—with an understanding of the mentalities of both mother and daughter, and why each one is the way she is. Each of the four Chinese women in the novel has her own view of the world based on her experiences in China and wants to share that vision with her daughter. The daughters, in turn try to understand and appreciate their mothers' pasts, adapt to the American way of life, and win their mothers' acceptance. The book's name comes from the club formed in China by one of the mothers, Suyuan Woo, in order to lift her friends' spirits and distract them from their problems during the Japanese invasion. Suyuan continued the club when she came to the United States—hoping to bring luck to her family and friends and finding joy in that hope. Critics appreciate Tan's straightforward manner as well as the skill with which she talks about Chinese culture and mother/daughter relationships. Readers also love *The Joy Luck Club*: women of all ages identify with Tan's characters and their conflicts with their families, while men have an opportunity through this novel to better understand their own behaviors towards women. Any reader can appreciate Tan's humor, fairness, and objectivity.

## Author Information

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California. Her family lived in several communities in Northern California before settling in Santa Clara. Both of her parents were Chinese immigrants. Her father and oldest brother died of brain tumors within a year of each other, and Amy's mother





# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

moved her surviving children to Switzerland, where Amy finished high school. Amy received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English and linguistics from San Jose State University, and she married in 1974. Amy took her mother back to China in 1987, and the trip gave her a new perspective on her relationship with her mother and inspired her to complete *The Joy Luck Club*.

**The Women of Brewster Place**, by Gloria Naylor (African-American). Published 1983, 192 pages.

In her heralded first novel, Gloria Naylor weaves the truths and the myths of seven women living in Brewster Place, a bleak inner-city sanctuary, into a powerful, moving portrait of the strengths, struggles, and hopes of black women in today's America. Vulnerable and resilient, openhanded and openhearted, these women forge their lives in a place that in turn threatens and protects—a common prison and a shared home. Naylor renders painful and very ugly human experiences with simple eloquence and uncommon intuition. Her ability to establish a memorable sense of place and history makes *The Women of Brewster Place* a remarkable literary accomplishment and a contemporary classic.

## Author Information

Gloria Naylor, was born in New York City in 1950. Although she grew up in the largest urban center in the U.S., her roots were in the south since her parents had been sharecroppers in Robinsonville, Mississippi. In 1963 Naylor and her family moved to Queens, a more middle-class borough, which increased Naylor's awareness of racism. Also in the same year, Naylor's mother joined the Jehovah's Witnesses and in 1968 Naylor followed in her footsteps. She witnessed for seven years, supporting herself as a switchboard operator, but eventually left the Jehovah's Witnesses because "things weren't getting better, but worse." What followed for Naylor were years of transformation. From 1975-1981 she worked full-time as a switchboard operator, pursued writing, and attended classes at Medgar Evers College, and eventually Brooklyn College. She discovered feminism and African-American literature which revitalized her and gave her new ways to think about and define herself as a black woman. In 1977 Naylor read her first novel by an African-American woman, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which gave her the courage to write. She began writing fiction in 1979 and submitted a story to *Essence* magazine, whose editor advised her to continue writing. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

English, completed her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and began graduate work in Afro-American in Studies at Yale in 1981. She died in 2016.

**Their Eyes Were Watching God**, by Zora Neale Hurston (African-American). Published 1937, 219 pages.

This classic novel tells the story of Janie Crawford's search for freedom and fulfillment through her participation in black culture. Out of print for nearly 30 years—due largely to initial audiences' rejection of its strong black female protagonist—Hurston's classic has since its 1978 reissue become perhaps the most widely read and highly acclaimed novel in the canon of African-American literature.

Fair and long-legged, independent and articulate, Janie Crawford sets out to be her own person—no mean feat for a Black woman in the 1930's. Janie's quest for identity takes her through three marriages and on a journey back to her roots. It is as important that Janie is a woman as it is that she is black; the intersection of these two qualities made *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a groundbreaking novel.

## Author Information

Hurston tells readers in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* simply that she did “get born.” She grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the only incorporated all black town in the U.S. Her mother fought to give her the freedom to “look white folks right in the face” and set out for the horizon; she never discouraged Hurston's storytelling and inventiveness. After a long struggle to educate herself, Hurston graduated from Barnard College in anthropology, and black folk culture became her vocation. Working under the supervision of noted anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston set off to collect black folk tales in southern timber camps, jook joints, and store porches, and to study voodoo in New Orleans and Haiti.

Hurston was a member of the Harlem Renaissance and spent her entire life struggling to keep her people's cultural heritage alive. Written in Haiti while the author was doing field work, this *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “embalmed” all her passion for her recently abandoned lover. More importantly, the work combines two central themes from Hurston's life: her search for independence and fulfillment and her love for black folk culture.

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
AT YOUR LIBRARY

**Woman Hollering Creek**, by Sandra Cisneros (Hispanic American). Published 1992, 192 pages.

In this collection of 13 stories, Cisneros examines the lives of Mexican and Mexican-American women, their relationships, their identity, their hopes, and their struggles. The stories are short, the longest at 29 pages, and the shortest at five paragraphs. stories focus on the various social roles of women, such as virgin, seductress, and mother. The book is generally divided into three sections examining childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In her review of the book in Newsweek, K. Prescott describes this hard-to-summarize book as one that “surveys’ woman’s condition –a condition that is both precisely Latina and general to women everywhere. [Cisneros’] characters include preadolescent girls, disappointed brides, religious women, consoling partners and deeply cynical women who enjoy devouring men. They are without exception strong girls, strong women.”

## Author Information

Sandra Cisneros is a poet, short story writer, novelist, essayist, performer, and artist whose work explores the lives of the working-class. She is the recipient of numerous awards, several honorary doctorates, and national and international book awards, including the National Medal of the Arts awarded to her by President Obama in 2016. Most recently, she received the Ford Foundation’s Art of Change Fellowship, was recognized among The Frederick Douglass 200, and won the PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature.

Her classic, coming-of-age novel, *The House on Mango Street*, has sold over six million copies, has been translated into over twenty-five languages, and is required reading in elementary, high school, and universities across the nation. Sandra Cisneros is a dual citizen of the United States and Mexico and earns her living by her pen. She currently lives in San Miguel de Allende.

# American Voices



BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES  
**LET'S TALK  
ABOUT IT**  
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**Call Us What We Carry**, by Amanda Gorman (African American). Published 2021, 240 pages.

Gorman blazed into sharp focus during Joe Biden's 2021 inauguration with her poem "The Hill We Climb" which concludes this poetic collection. *Call Us What We Carry* is an invitation to examine the current moment, with poems ranging widely in topic as well as experiential form. Gorman offers a sweeping array of subjects, from racism to COVID-19, isolation, and fragmentation, immigration, and AIDS. Often evoking the theme of ungroundedness, Gorman's collection serves as a literary feast for the eyes as well as the mind, often rendering textual playfulness on the page, even as it toys with poetic lineation and enjambment. Pulling from classics such as Virginia Woolf and William Shakespeare, Gorman manages to produce something contemporary and urgent. In her afterward titled simply "Gratitude," Gorman says she "learned to write to my ghosts and not run from them." This collection feels like a wrestling with the hauntings of today, as we dwell inside a "country bruised but whole."

## Author Information

Amanda Gorman is the youngest presidential inaugural poet in US history. She is a committed advocate for the environment, racial equality, and gender justice. In 2017, Urban Word named her the first-ever National Youth Poet Laureate. She is also the author of the children's picture book *Change Sings*. After graduating cum laude from Harvard University, Gorman now lives in her hometown of Los Angeles.

## Questions in Relation to "A More Perfect Union"

1. Which poem(s) did you find particularly intriguing or disturbing? Why? Are there particular lines that stood out to you?
2. How does Gorman use poetic form and text presentation to craft her message?
3. How are issues of fragmentation and marginalization approached in Gorman's work?
4. Where (and how) does Gorman find unity and common ground?
5. Explore the book cover--what can it help reveal about the publication's contents?
6. The poem "The Hill We Climb" concludes the collection, yet it was the poem that catapulted Gorman to fame. Why does it conclude rather than foreground the collection?

# American Voices



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**Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive**, by Stephanie Land  
(American/Economic Hardship). Published 2019, 288 pages.

Published in 2019, Stephanie Land's memoir *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive* looms timely and relevant. Land, who was 28 when she wrote her memoir, gives an unfettered and deeply personal account of life as a single mother and one of the working poor. Barbara Ehrenreich wrote the forward for Land's book. Ehrenreich, whose own work *Nickel and Dimed* chronicled an experimental year where Ehrenreich worked a series of minimum wage jobs, echoes throughout Land's, but she offers readers an important reminder: "I [Ehrenreich] could always go back to my far-more-comfortable life as a writer." Land did not have such an option. Ehrenreich also did not have a child, and Land keeps her infant child at the heart of her story, serving to fuel Land's motivation and tenacity to move up and beyond a life of hardship. Land's memoir reveals an upper middle class largely ignorant and dismissive of the service sector upon which they rely, in addition to portraying a system of governmental assistance that is, at best, humiliating, and at worst defeating. The writing is direct and unflinching, particularly when Land writes about troubling subjects such as her moldy apartment, which contributes to her daughter Mia's recurring sinus infections. *Maid* is a memoir that reveals the hidden side of poverty and lives of those who, despite working desperately hard, cannot seem to get ahead.

## Author Information

Stephanie Land was 28 when she wrote *Maid*, working from a desire to tell her story so that others might be awakened to the struggles of the working poor. Since the success of *Maid*, Land continues to use her platform to raise awareness about systemic poverty and the societal inequities that work to keep the lower class from inventing a better life. Land is focused on social and economic justice as a writing fellow through both the Center for Community Change and the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.

## Questions in Relation to "A More Perfect Union"

1. What does Land's portrayal of her working experience as a maid reveal? About Land herself? About the work? About class values?
2. What attitudes are prevalent regarding the service sector in this memoir?
3. How do you find yourself responding to Land's story? How do you find her? Heroic? Sympathetic? Pathetic? Explain.
4. Why is Land's story an important one for today, and why do you think we need to hear it?
5. How is Land's story different due to her being a single mother?



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6. Is Land's story one of triumph? Why or why not?