

American Voices



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Theme Essay

Updated in 2021 by Jennifer Black

Reading has long been credited with enlarging people's sympathies and views of the world. The American Voices theme allows LTAI participants to eavesdrop on the lives and aspirations of characters whose ethnic, regional, gender identities, and those of their authors, might often seem remote from our discussion groups in contemporary Idaho. The books in this category give names and voices to the late twentieth-century buzzword: diversity.

In some cases, the books in American Voices are written self-consciously from the cultural margins and in stern critique of dominant American culture. Etaf Rum's characters, for example, often consciously try to stay separate from their New York neighbors, and Louise Erdrich's characters move on and off the reservation, powerfully influenced by the religious and consumer culture of the U.S. Yet many features of these books also attest to a fundamental resilience of human character and the possibility for healing, at least within characters, and perhaps even within societies. Sharing food, sharing stories, speaking up – some protagonists in these stories do more than just survive.

In a classic text of literary criticism, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth thinks figuratively of books as "friends" who have various kinds of influence upon us, for better and for worse. Like new friends, literary discoveries can be unsettling and can require us to rethink and reimagine basic assumptions about our lives, but in the end the process leads to a larger and more satisfying sense of life's possibilities. Which new friends in this category require us to rethink basic assumptions? How do our relationships with these books affect the way we approach practical contemporary problems such as English-only language laws, immigration policy, the gender wage gap, or other issues? Could we sit around a table with these friends and chat or laugh about our common humanity? How can reading about their experiences give us a deeper understanding of what it means to be an American?