

Other Americas



Why Am I Reading This? Book Summaries

America has always been diverse, and its diversity has been a source of richness as well as a source of friction and conflict in our history. We see many signs of fragmentation: debates over school curricula, disputes over immigration, ethnic rivalries, and the increasing use of violence to resolve conflicts. We also recognize the need to examine what unites us as a country. In a nation comprised of many divergent groups and beliefs, we need to rediscover the common American values that we share. The “Other Americas” series revolves around literature which invites readers to examine who we are as Americans.

Book List

1. *Bless Me Ultima*, by Rudolfo A. Anaya (Mexican)
2. *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko (Native American)
3. *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison (African/American)
4. *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel (Mexican)
5. *Love Medicine*, by Louise Erdrich (Native American)
6. *My Grandmother Smoked Cigars*, by Sabine Ulibarri (Hispanic)
7. *The Bean Trees*, by Barbara Kingsolver (Native American)
8. *The Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan (Chinese)
9. *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd
10. *The Women of Brewster Place*, by Gloria Naylor (African-American)
11. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston (African-American)
12. *Woman Hollering Creek*, by Sandra Cisneros (Hispanic)

Book Summaries

Bless Me, Ultima

Bless Me, Ultima (1972) is a novel of childhood memory and magic created by New Mexico writer, Rudolfo A. Anaya. The novel was published in 1972 and was Anaya's first novel. It was published at a time when Mexican American writing was only beginning to "come of age." The story deals with an individual coming of age in an atmosphere that conveys, with simplicity and eloquence, Hispanic experience in America's southwest. Anaya was born in New Mexico and is a descendant of the Spaniards who emigrated from present-day Mexico as early as 1598. These early New Mexicans received land grants from the king of Spain and have lived on the land continuously since that time.

The novel deals with a sensitive seven-year-old, Antonio, son of Gabriel and Maria Marez. From the earliest moments of his life the boy experiences the dualism in his parents' family. His mother, from the Luna family, represents the soil and the stable farmers. His father, Marez, is representative of the horseman who ranges over much territory. Antonio is torn between these two worlds. Ultima, the village folk healer, serves as a type of godmother to Antonio and guides his growth through his early difficult school years and is a constant force until the end of the novel.

Bless Me, Ultima is a calm novel of peace and desired harmony in an ancient tradition.

Author Information

Rudolfo Anaya was born October 30, 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*.

Discussion Questions for Bless Me, Ultima

1. What impact does the child-narrator have on the novel?
2. Antonio is a very intelligent, sensitive youngster. Why is it necessary that he be especially sensitive?
3. Discuss the major conflicts that Antonio feels in the novel. Where do they come from? Are they resolved? Do his conflicts relate to ones that you experienced while growing up in your culture?
4. There are several regional myths incorporated into the novel. What are they? Why are they used?
5. The novel has been criticized by some who feel that certain parts are too contrived. Discuss the statement, "The dream sequences of *Bless Me, Ultima* are too logical (for dreams) and hence detract from the novel."
6. What positive humanistic values do you see in this "Hispano" culture that are weaker or absent in your own culture?
7. What role does Ultima perform? Give specific examples.
8. What is uniquely Mexican-American about Antonio's childhood? How is it similar to yours?
9. This is a fairly serious novel, yet there are various elements of humor present. What are they and what do they contribute to Antonio's life and to the novel?
10. The motif of "loss of innocence" is present in most novels that deal with coming of age. Is it present here? If you agree, how does Antonio lose his youthful innocence?
11. How does this novel contribute to our understanding of the history of this region, or of the history of the United States?

Woman Hollering Creek

Cisneros incorporates nine stories similar in style and tone to those in *Mango Street* to make up almost half of the book. Then suddenly the narrators of each story change radically to portray a variety of adult Hispanic women. It appears that Cisneros is a very keen observer of life around her, that she can perfectly recall her own perceptions as an adolescent (can even imitate the curious and humorous language), and that she has also eavesdropped on hundreds of conversations amongst Mexican-American women as they shared the expectations, joys and frustrations of their lives.

The curious title evokes many interpretations, the most outstanding of which is the dual image of the river or “arroyo,” which Mexican culture always associates with the legend of “la llorona.” This rooting of the book on Mexican folklore, sayings, traditions, and cultural values, is a key to much of its success and appeal to any reader who knows this culture. One can also think that the Mexican woman portrayed on the book’s cover is finally “hollering” or shouting aloud to the world about female views on life. A number of women’s voices emerge in these tales, which offer readers a chance to reflect on how one inherits and maintains Mexican values. Some of these sayings, the events, and customs make one cringe; some remind us of forgotten traditions; others certainly evoke a strong chuckle.

At every page it is obvious that Cisneros is a master of the written word; every image and sound work together to create a mood, to produce an effect. She is a poet in whatever literary genre she works. She dedicated her book to both her parents: to her mother, in English, whom she credits with giving her a fierce language; to her father, in Spanish, she credits with “el lenguaje de la ternura”—the language of tenderness.

Author Information

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago on December 20, 1954, the only daughter in a family that had six sons. She attended a variety of Catholic elementary schools inasmuch as her family was at Loyola University, where she earned a B.A. in English in 1976. Later, at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she earned an M.F.A. in creative writing (1978). Cisneros’ parents are both Mexican; her father migrated from Mexico as a young man, leaving a family of some privilege and means. Her mother’s family, also of Mexican stock, but humbler and working class, had been in the U.S. for several generations. Cisneros’ childhood was spent in a variety of run-down Hispanic neighborhoods which offered experiences that have found their way into her writing.

Discussion Questions Woman Hollering Creek

1. The young girl in the story “Eleven” feels confused and overwhelmed. Why is she so troubled on her birthday?
2. How do the “gringo” tourists end up being outsmarted by several small Chicano children who are just being themselves?
3. “One Holy Night” sounds like a Christmas story, but it turns out to be rather a tragic one. Does this girl remind you of many youths in our schools? How do young girls fall into this behavior pattern?
4. Cleofilas in the story “Woman Holler...” is a rather silly dreamer. Is she typical? What lessons does she learn?
5. What’s wrong with marrying a Mexican, if this is your family heritage? Why would a mother advise her daughters this way?
6. Do girls who marry outside of their Latino culture do better in life? How did the teacher/artist in the story “Never Marry a Mexican” end up?
7. Are there any good strong men in the lives of all the women characters in Cisneros’ book?
8. What curious traditional customs does Cisneros throw into her stories? Did any of them remind you of your own customs or those of the older generation?
9. Are there some adult female characters in these stories that you feel good about? Why? Does it take a female writer to really create such characters?

Invisible Man

This book is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest American novels of the second half of the century. From the moment of its publication in 1952, *Invisible Man* generated the impact of a cultural tidal wave. Here was a pioneering work of African-American fiction that addressed not only the social, but the psychic and metaphysical, components of racism: the invisibility of a large portion of this country's populace and the origins of that invisibility in one people's willful blindness and another's habit of self-concealment. But Ellison had created far more than a commentary on race. He had attempted to decipher the cruel and beautiful paradox that is American, a country founded on high ideals and cold-blooded betrayals. And he sent his naïve hero plunging through almost every stratum of this divided society, from an ivy-covered college in the deep South to the streets of Harlem, from a sharecropper's shack to the floor of a hellish paint factory, from a millionaire's cocktail party to a communist rally, from church jubilees to street riots. Along the way, Ellison's narrator encounters the full range of strategies that African-Americans have used in their struggle for survival and dignity—as well as all the scams, alibis, and naked brutalities that whites have used to keep them in their place. In *Invisible Man* Ellison created one of those rare works that is a world unto itself, a book that illuminates our own in ways that are at once hilarious and devastating.

Author Information

Ralph Ellison won the National Book Award for his first novel *Invisible Man* (1952), the story of an alienated and isolated black man living in racially repressive urban America. Ellison grew up in Oklahoma and aimed for a career in jazz music. Instead he moved to New York City in 1936 and turned to writing, encouraged by other African-American writers including [Langston Hughes](#) and Richard Wright. During World War II he served in the Merchant Marines and published short stories. The remarkable success of *Invisible Man* made Ellison famous worldwide, and he was suddenly considered one of America's most important writers. Reluctant to assume the role of a representative for his race, Ellison always maintained that in writing his book he was pursuing art more than he was pursuing racial justice. Although he lectured and published collections of essays (*Shadow and Act* in 1964 and *Going to the Territory* in 1986), he worked for forty years on a second novel without finishing it. His literary executor and friend, John Callahan, put together the manuscript after Ellison died and the novel was published as *Juneteenth* in 1999.

Discussion Questions for *Invisible Man*

1. What makes Ellison's narrator invisible? What is the relationship between his invisibility and other people's blindness—both involuntary and willful? Is the protagonist's invisibility due solely to his skin color? Is it only the novel's white characters who refuse to see him?
2. One drawback of invisibility is that "you ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world" (p.4). How does the narrator try to prove that he exists? Does this sentence provide a clue to the behavior of other characters in the book?
3. What are the narrator's dreams and goals? How are these variously fulfilled or thwarted in the course of the book?
4. Is the reader meant to identify with the narrator? To sympathize with him? How do you think Ellison himself sees his protagonist?
5. What is the significance of the grandfather's deathbed speech (p. 16)? Whom or what has he betrayed? What other characters in this book resort to the same strategy of smiling betrayal?
6. Throughout the novel the narrator gives speeches, or tries to give them, to audiences both black and white, at venues that range from a white-only "smoker" to the funeral of a black street vendor murdered by the police. What role does oratory—and, more broadly, the spoken word—play in *Invisible Man*?
7. The "battle royal" sequence portrays black men fighting each other for the entertainment of whites. Does Ellison ever portray similar combats between blacks and whites? To what end?
8. Throughout the book the narrator encounters a number of white benefactors, including a millionaire college trustee, an amiable playboy, and the professional agitator Brother Jack. What does the outcome of these relationships suggest about the possibility of friendship or cooperation between the races?
9. What black men does the protagonist choose as mentors or role models? Do they prove to be any more trustworthy than his white "benefactors"? What about those figures whose authority and advice the narrator rejects—for example, the vet in *The Golden Day* and the separatist Ras the Exhorter? What characters in *Invisible Man*, if any, represent sources of moral authority and stability?
10. What cultural tendencies or phenomena does Ellison hold up for satire in this novel? For example, what were the real-life models for the Founder, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter? How does the author convey the failures and shortcomings of these people and movements?

Love Medicine

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 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. Some of her best-known novels include *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, and *The Antelope Wife*.

Discussion Questions for *Love Medicine*

1. *Love Medicine* does not have one central protagonist. It could be argued that Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine, as matriarchs of their respective families, share the role of “main character.” The two women are brought closer through their decades-long fight over Nector Kashpaw. Is one of these women more sympathetic to the reader than the other? Why or why not?
2. Nector and Eli Kashpaw are brothers and members of the eldest generation in the novel. Nector is an educated family man, while Eli is quieter and more reclusive. In what ways are the brothers alike? In what other ways do they differ?
3. What important events are told and retold from more than one character’s point of view? How do these retellings shape the reader’s understanding of the events?
4. June Kashpaw appears as a character in the novel only in its opening pages, but the other characters remember her and speak of her frequently. Why is June Kashpaw so important to Marie Kashpaw? Why does Lipsha Morrissey care about June?
5. As a young girl, Marie Kashpaw is terrorized by Sister Leopolda in the Sacred Heart Convent. Why does Marie decide to visit Leopolda at the convent so many years later, taking her daughter Zelda with her?
6. This novel is steeped with death and loss, yet there are also comic moments throughout. How do these events relieve tension within the novel?
7. How does Native American culture clash with mainstream American culture throughout *Love Medicine*? Describe some of the recurring conflicts in the novel, and how the characters react to or retreat from them.
8. Is Lulu Lamartine a good person? How and why do her values differ from the other characters in the novel? Is she a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
9. Lipsha Morrissey and Lyman Lamartine, although close in age, are opposites in many ways. How does the reader react to these two very different characters? How do they represent the options available to modern Native Americans?
10. As a novel-in-stories, *Love Medicine* does not have a traditional, linear plot. Does the novel have a climax? Does it have more than one? Why or why not?

Like Water for Chocolate

Set in rural Mexico during the era of the Mexican Revolution, Esquivel's novel opens with instructions on how to chop onions. These instructions come from the main character's great niece, who proceeds to narrate the entire novel. The novel constitutes, then, a family legend told by a younger female relative, and fits into the developing literature of matrilineage, a result of feminist interest in telling the lives of our foremothers. The novel deals with tradition and family relationships, personal fulfillment versus family expectations, courage, effrontery, adultery, nurturing, and the role of women in society and in the family. Food is an important symbol since the original purpose of family, according to some anthropologists, was the procuring and preparation of food to insure survival. This is an exciting, innovative novel in its use of recipes, lists of ingredients, and descriptions of food smells, household utensils, and kitchen atmosphere. However, it also deals with a life-long but forbidden love between Tita, the main character, and her brother-in-law Pedro. Though the novel is innovative in many ways, the characters embody traditional roles. The reader is permitted a glimpse of life in another era in which perhaps motivation and psychology were analyzed less, in which people fit themselves into patterns of life already established from time immemorial. A sense of chronological depth is acquired by the author's placement of the novel in the by-gone era of the Mexican Revolution. Esquivel's work fits into a tradition well known in Latin America but usually not dealt with by women novelists.

Author Information

Laura Esquivel is a Mexican writer and author. Born on September 30, 1950, in Mexico City, Mexico. Esquivel began writing while working as a kindergarten teacher. She wrote plays for her students and then went on to write children's television programs during the 1970s and 1980s. Her first novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, became internationally beloved and was made into an award-winning film. Her other titles include *The Law of Love* and *Between the Fires*.

Esquivel often explores the relationship between men and women in Mexico in her work. She is best known for *Like Water for Chocolate* (1990), an imaginative and compelling combination of novel and cookbook. It had been released in Mexico a year earlier. After the release of the film version in 1992, *Like Water for Chocolate* became internationally known and loved. The book has sold more than 4.5 million copies.

Discussion Questions for *Like Water for Chocolate*

1. What type of a character is Pedro? Is he weak or strong? Can the reader respect his decision to marry Rosaura in order to remain near Tita?
2. What point is made by Rosaura's flatulence, bad breath, and digestive troubles which ultimately lead to her death?
3. Is Tita always admirable? Is it morally justifiable for her to make love with her sister's husband just because she was in love with him first? Does she struggle with moral issues? Is she a true heroine in every sense of the word?
4. Are there any redeemable qualities in the character of Mama Elena?
5. What is the function of secondary characters such as Dr. Brown, Nacha, and Chenchá?
6. What literary devices tie the main action of the novel to the de la Garza family's past and to their future?
7. Food and its preparation are linked with every aspect of the story. Each chapter begins with a recipe used by Tita for some family event. What role does this gastronomic element play in the reader's experience of the novel? How does it add to the novel's cultural setting?
8. How would most contemporary daughters deal with a despotic mother? How can we explain Tita's long-suffering submission to Mama Elena? Is it due to cultural reasons? Psychological? Is it comprehensible in the context of the times?
9. Do significant changes occur in any of the characters that indicate their development and maturation throughout the novel? Do characters make choices that influence the course of their lives? If so, what are they?
10. What elements in *Like Water for Chocolate* are distinctly Mexican or Hispanic? Think in terms of action, general atmosphere or "flavor," conclusion, family relationships, and so forth. On the other hand, what elements are universal?
11. If you have seen the film version, compare it with the novel. Which do you prefer and why? Was the novel written with the idea in mind that it would soon be made into a movie?
12. How does each of the female characters relate to men? Think of Tita and Pedro, Tita and Dr. Brown, Rosaura and Pedro, Gertrudis and the men in her life, and Mama Elena's hidden relationship to Jose Trevino as well as her attitude toward her son-in-law Pedro.
13. Does it detract from the novel that the interiority of the characters is not discussed? Is it preferable for an author to reveal the intimate, inner working of the human mind or simply to relate events? There is treatment of emotions such as love and outrage, but does it satisfy the reader's desire to understand the characters?
14. Overall, what do you like and dislike about this novel? How has it benefitted you to read it?

Ceremony

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.

Author Information

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in 1948 to a family whose ancestry includes Mexican, Laguna Indian, and European forebears. 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 the writing of *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.

Discussion Questions for *Ceremony*

1. Readers sometimes find the reading of *Ceremony* a disorienting experience, in part because Silko frequently shifts scenes and time frames without warning. How does this technique help the reader to participate in Tayo's thoughts, emotions, and experiences? Is its influence on the narrative consistently the same, and is it always effective?
2. How does Tayo's status as a half-breed influence his choices, his thinking, and the way he is perceived by other characters in the novel? What tensions and conflicts does his mixed ancestry contribute to Silko's story?
3. For what reasons do Tayo and his cousin Rocky join the Army? In what ways do they and the other young Native American men benefit from their armed service, and why do these benefits evaporate once the war is over?
4. *Ceremony* has been described as a story of struggle between two cosmic forces, one basically masculine and one essentially feminine. Assuming this to be true, what are the images of masculinity and femininity that Silko presents? Is this gendered analysis an adequate way of understanding the novel? Are there important ideas that it leaves out?
5. *Ceremony* offers the suggestion that the European settlers of America were created by the "witchery" of a nameless witch doctor. What is the effect of this assertion? Does it make white people demonic by intimating that they are agents of evil, incapable of doing good? Or, to the contrary, does it somehow absolve them from blame because they are merely tools of the "Destroyers" and are not really responsible for their actions?
6. How do the poems and legends that are interspersed in Silko's text influence your reading of the novel? Why do you think Silko centers Emo's tale of debauchery (pp. 57–59) on the page in the same way that she centers the older, sacred stories?
7. One aspect of white culture that Tayo especially resents is the way in which its educational practices, particularly instruction in the sciences, dismiss Native beliefs as "superstitions." What are the similarities and differences between the way Tayo feels about the treatment of his ancestral beliefs and the way in which a believer in the creation stories of Genesis might respond to Darwinism? To what extent is the novel a story of the struggle between technology and belief?
8. Blindness and invisibility are recurring motifs in *Ceremony*. What does Silko suggest through her repeated uses of inabilities or refusals to see?
9. Silko, who has suffered from headaches, depression, and nausea similar to those that plague Tayo in her novel, has said, "I wrote this novel to save my life." How is *Ceremony* a novel of salvation, for Tayo, for its author, and for its readers? What are the limits to the salvation that it appears to offer?

The Joy Luck Club

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan explores the different mother-daughter relationships between the characters, 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 has her own view of the world based on her experiences in China and wants to share that vision with her daughter. The daughters 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 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*.

Discussion Questions for The Joy Luck Club

1. How does Jing-Mei feel about taking her mother's place in the Club?
2. Describe why An-Mei's mother left her with relatives.
3. What did Ying-Ying discover about the Moon Lady?
4. Do you think it is fairly common that some mothers create resentment in their children by trying to do things they feel are in their children's best interests? Can you think of any examples?
5. Have you ever had an experience as embarrassing as Jing Mei's piano recital? Have you ever been asked to, forced to, or encouraged to try to do something that you just could not do?
6. Do you believe people grow up with certain personality traits that can't be changed?

My Grandmother Smoked Cigars

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

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.

Discussion Questions for My Grandmother Smoked Cigars

1. In your opinion, what is the author's overall purpose in writing these stories? A few possibilities: To preserve a family of popular history; capture and preserve local color; entertainment; to show a world not too different from our own; to preserve in writing what the mind so readily forgets.
2. What makes Ulibarri's storytelling style memorable? Why do we remember the characters and their activities long after we have read the work?
3. Is there anything unique about the author's use of vocabulary and word selection? In what ways does Spanish word use affect these works?
4. Why would he choose the story of the grandmother and her eccentricities and peculiarities for the title story?
5. What is human about these stories, and how does the author achieve that descriptive quality in his writing?
6. Why is it important to remember that the works are set in a specific environment, i.e. New Mexico, Terra Amarilla, Las Nutrias, Rio Arriba County?
7. What themes become apparent in the book? Indomitable spirit; the battle between the sexes; loss of innocence; rites of passage; initiation; the clash between cultures; religion vs. secularism; understanding the land and nature as a means of understanding the people?
8. How does the author view his own characters; are they sympathetically drawn?
9. What comment is the author making about the qualities of independence, honesty, thriftiness, being genuine, religious faith, etc.?
10. To some degree, several of the stories seem to be counterpoised (almost opposites), while others seem to reinforce messages. What could be said of the relationship between: husband and wife in *My Grandmother Smoked Cigars*, *La Kasa KK*, and *He Went for Nails, Witcheries or Tomfooleries?* and *The Penitentes*; *My Uncle Cirilo* and *Elacio Was Elacio*?
11. Why is Mano Fashico different from every other story in the volume? What could be the origins of these episodes?
12. What is unique about the cultural perspective in the story *El negro Aguilar*? What role does race play in the interpersonal relationships in the region? Is "El Negro Aguilar" black or Hispanic, or does that matter? Why?
13. Is there a distinction made between religious faith, the Church leadership and the membership, superstition and/or witchcraft? Is there something traditional about the way those relationships are handled in the Hispano community?
14. What role does Mother Nature play in the day-to-day occurrences of rural life, and what should be the person's attitude about nature? Please consider the story *El Apache* as a point of reference.
15. Are there differences and/or similarities between these stories and the works of other Chicano writers that you have read? What differences/similarities? Why do you think they exist?

Their Eyes Were Watching God

This is a novel which tells the story of Janie Crawford's search for freedom and fulfillment through her participation in black culture. It is as important that Janie is a woman as it is that she is black; the combination of these two qualities made *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a groundbreaking novel. Author Zora Neale 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 novel "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.

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, 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.

Discussion Questions for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

1. Early in the novel, Janie experiences a moment of awakening while lying under a pear tree. Versions of that pear tree image form an important motif in the novel. What does the image mean? What uses does Hurston make of the image in other parts of the novel?
2. Hurston incorporates a number of folk tales into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. What function does this folk material serve in the novel?
3. The novel presents and tests at least three different understandings of marriage. Explain these different understandings. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
4. One critic has argued that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has an “awkward” structure because Janie is forced to narrate to Phoebe events with which Phoebe must already be familiar. Is the structure of the novel a problem? What positive purpose does Janie’s narrating events with which Phoebe must already be familiar serve in the novel?
5. How does the language of the narrator reflect a growing sense of intimacy with Janie?
6. Janie’s ability to become a full participant in black folk culture makes it possible for her to find the freedom she seeks. In what ways does the folk culture help Janie succeed in her search?
7. Hurston’s novel fails to confront explicitly the problem of black/white relations. Yet Hurston dramatizes the many ways in which racial tensions surface within the black community. What evidence of this racial tension do you find? What were the reasons for these tensions? How does Hurston’s treatment of prejudices among blacks contribute to the theme of the novel? In what ways do white/black relations enter the novel?
8. Alice Walker has observed that one of Hurston’s most attractive features is her “racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings.” From your reading of this novel, how do you understand Hurston’s attitude toward race?
9. For some years now, this novel has been growing in popularity. What features of the work, in your opinion, have made this novel an enduring classic? What about the novel makes it appeal to readers today?

The Bean Trees

Marietta Greer leaves home in a beat-up '55 Volkswagen bug, determined to get away and to avoid pregnancy. Heading west and savoring her freedom, she changes her name to "Taylor" when her car runs out of gas in Taylorville, Illinois. A forlorn Cherokee woman drops a baby in Taylor's passenger seat and asks her to take it, and she does. Taylor names the little girl "Turtle," because she clings with an unrelenting, reptilian grip. With Turtle in tow, Taylor lands in Tucson, Arizona, with two flat tires at an auto repair shop called Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. It also happens to be a sanctuary for Central American refugees. Taylor meets the human condition head-on, as she experiences motherhood, responsibility and independence. The heart of this funny, inspiring book is its affirmation of risk-taking, long and friendship, abandonment and belonging, commitment and everyday miracles.

Author Information

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955 and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona, and she has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. At various times in her adult life she has lived in England, France, and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico, and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently resides.

Her books include *The Bean Trees*, *Homeland*, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike*, *Animal Dreams*, *Another America*, *Pigs in Heaven*, *High Tide in Tucson*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, *Small Wonder*, *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands*, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, *The Lacuna*, and *Flight Behavior*.

Kingsolver was named one of the most important writers of the 20th Century by *Writers Digest*. In 2000 She received the National Humanities Medal, our country's highest honor for service through the arts. In 2011, Kingsolver was awarded the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for the body of her work.

Discussion Questions for The Bean Trees

1. Where is God in this book?
2. Why are there so many references to telephones?
3. Why are names so important?
4. What's with all the plants?
5. How does the book address fear?
6. How are gender relations portrayed?
7. What does Kingsolver have to say about how Americans treat other nationalities?

The Secret Life of Bees

The Secret Life of Bees is a 2002 historical novel by American author Sue Monk Kidd. Set in the American South in 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act and intensifying racial unrest, Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* is a story of coming-of-age, of the ability of love to transform our lives, and the often-unacknowledged longing for the universal feminine divine. Addressing the wounds of loss, betrayal, and the scarcity of love, Kidd demonstrates the power of women coming together to heal those wounds, to mother each other and themselves, and to create a sanctuary of true family and home. It received much critical acclaim and was a New York Times bestseller. It was nominated for the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction and was adapted into a 2008 film by Gina Prince-Bythewood.

Author Information

Sue Monk Kidd, born in Sylvester, Georgia, graduated from Texas Christian University with a B.S. in nursing in 1970 and worked throughout her twenties as a Registered Nurse and college nursing instructor. She got her start in writing when a personal essay she wrote for a writing class was published in *Guideposts* and reprinted in *Reader's Digest*. She went on to become a Contributing Editor at *Guideposts*. Her first books, *God's Joyful Surprise* (Harper San Francisco, 1988) and *When the Heart Waits* (Harper San Francisco, 1990), were spiritual memoirs describing her experiences in contemplative Christianity. *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (Harper San Francisco, 1996) introduced themes from feminist theology. Her first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees* (Viking, 2002), was written over three and a half years. It has been produced on stage in New York by The American Place Theater and been adapted into a movie by Fox Searchlight, starring Dakota Fanning, Queen Latifah, Jennifer Hudson, Alicia Keys and Sophie Okonedo. Her second novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, was published in 2005, and made into a Lifetime movie of the same name. In 2006, *Firstlight*, a collection of Kidd's early writings was released in hardcover by *Guideposts Books* and in paperback by *Penguin* in 2007. This compilation of inspirational stories, spiritual essays, and meditations has been translated into several languages and has over 200,000 copies in print. Kidd's new book, *Traveling with Pomegranates*, co-authored with her daughter Ann, is a mother daughter travel memoir due out in 2009. Kidd has acknowledged Henry David Thoreau, Kate Chopin, Thomas Merton, and Carl Jung as influences. Kidd is currently Writer in Residence at Phoebe Pember House in Charleston, where she lives with her husband, Sanford (Sandy) Kidd, two children, Bob and Ann, and a black lab, Lily.

Discussion Questions for *The Secret Life of Bees*

1. Right from the start, Lily comes across as a complex and interesting narrator. How would you describe her feelings for her mother? For T. Ray? For Rosaleen? For bees?
2. Despite the many differences between them, Lily and Rosaleen share a strong bond. What is the source of their closeness and how does it survive the many changes in both of their lives over the course of the book?
3. While Lily is staying with the Calendar sisters, she is introduced to the Daughters of Mary, their traditions, stories, and rituals, including the Lady of Chains. Would you call this a religion? At one point, August tells Lily, "You see, everybody needs a God who looks like them." Otis, a man, can participate in the ceremony, but not Lily. Why not?
4. This book is also about stories and storytelling. What are some of the stories that are told within the book? Who tells them and why? Pick one story and tell how it relates to the larger themes and issues in the book.
5. Bees and beekeeping are important elements of the story. Besides being a central focus of life with the Calendar sisters, they also have symbolic overtones that resonate throughout. Discuss how the bee lore contributes to the story. How do the bees help reveal character? How do bees resemble humans? How do they differ? Why are they so important to the people in the story? Be sure to consider the title: What is their secret life?
6. At fourteen, somewhere between childhood innocence and the complexities of adulthood, Lily tries to sort out and understand who she is so that she can break free of the inner turmoil that haunts her and unchain herself from her past. In the end she appears to have succeeded. What events and people have helped her? How? And why?
7. This book is set in 1964 in a small town in South Carolina, but here we are now in Idaho, reading and discussing it. What aspects of the story seem unique to that time and place? What themes, characters, and incidents reach beyond that time and place to speak to you as a reader, here and now?

The Women of Brewster Place

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, first child of Alberta McAlpin and Roosevelt Naylor, was born in New York City on January 25th, 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. Naylor's parents taught self-validation, independence, and self-confidence. Naylor's personality resembles her mother's--timid, quiet, and shy. She also shares her mother's love of reading and libraries. 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. The Jehovah's Witnesses brought her out of her shyness and gave her a cause, community and opportunity for travel. They encouraged her already active imagination and believed in the power of the written word, which would have obvious importance to Naylor in the future. Unfortunately, the Jehovah's Witnesses also isolated her from her own culture. There was an incredible explosion of black literature at the time and Naylor didn't even realize it. 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 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.

Discussion Questions for *The Women of Brewster Place*

1. Throughout the novel, Brewster Place is personified as a character itself. Is the street a protagonist or an antagonist? What effect does this have on the impact of the story and on its outcome?
2. What experiences and characteristics do the seven women characters of Brewster Place have in common? How are they different from one another? In what specific and general ways do the women support and comfort one another?
3. How solid is the logic in Butch's philosophy that life is like eating sugar cane: "You gotta know when to stop chewing..."? What are the advantages of that philosophy? What are the weaknesses of it?
4. Mattie's son Basil doesn't stay long enough to go on trial. If he had, what do you expect would have been the outcome of that trial?
5. Most of the women in this novel are mistreated by men, both emotionally and physically. Why do you suppose these men treat these women this way? In what ways do women mistreat men in this novel? Are there any positive relationships between men and women in the book? In the most violent chapter of the book, Lorraine is raped repeatedly. Why, then, does she kill poor old Ben?
6. At the end of the book, Kiswana and some of the others hope that their block party will be successful and that their Block Association will benefit from some significant changes. What do you expect are their chances for success? On what evidence do you base your opinion?
7. Using the Langston Hughes poem at the front of the book, discuss which (if any) characters in the novel exhibit the characteristics he describes. Who dries up? Who festers? Who becomes syrupy sweet? Who sags? Who explodes?
8. Some readers feel that this novel, like many novels about the experiences of poor black people, is depressing and demoralizing. Others feel that its effect is uplifting and inspiring. What do you think?
9. As the book begins, we are told how Brewster Place had been born. Throughout the story, the street lives through the existence of its residents. In the end it is dying. What causes its demise? In what ways will it never die? Would it be better off dead?
10. Dreams and memories contribute much to the substance of this book as well as to its structure. In what ways is this a useful writing device? How might it confuse some readers? What is the significance of Mattie's dream at the end of the book?

Source:

Penguin Teaching Guide, prepared by Dr. Donald R. Gallo, Professor of English, Central Connecticut State University, <https://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/womenbrewster.pdf>