

Other Americas



Why Am I Reading This? Theme Essay

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)

Theme Essay

Reading has long been credited with enlarging people's sympathies and views of the world. The Other Americas theme allows LTAI participants to eavesdrop on the lives and aspirations of characters whose ethnic, regional, and gender identities, and those of their authors, will 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 Other Americas are written self-consciously from the cultural margins and in stern critique of dominant American culture. Ralph Ellison's narrator, for example, relishes his invisibility among his white 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 Americanness? On what grounds, or why not?