


# VOICES

A reading list about the new immigration





Over the past twenty years, new immigrants to the United States have generated an especially impressive number of novels and memoirs describing the immigration experience and its complexities in contemporary America and in a globalizing world.

The voices of these new writers have created a banquet of moving, informative, and provocative work about what it means to be an outsider as well as what is involved in becoming an American today. There is pain, disquiet, joy, humor, acceptance, and doubt in these accounts of the costs, consequences, and rewards of assimilation, something American society has long held in high regard.

The authors are male and female, of different ages, from varied countries; some were totally unknown before their first book, some are distinguished prize-winners and faculty members at American colleges and universities. Some came from homes where little English was spoken. Many are first novels. Some use art as a means of expression, one uses poetry.

Although the authors share no particular writing style, readers will hear a persistent theme: immigration is a complex process responsive to the historical moment, as well as political, regional, and economic variables. And, inevitably, personal family and generational values also interact with larger social forces. Some books tell the stories of immigrants who have become highly successful by conventional American standards; others paint pictures of children and adults struggling with poverty, the frustrations of finding appropriate work, discrimination, and the complicated exigencies of American immigration law. More and more books like these are appearing—a testimony to our increasing national diversity, the talents of many newcomers, and our ongoing struggle as a nation with how to handle “the immigration question” in the twenty-first century.

We provide here a brief and selective reading list of notable books published since 2000. This is by no means a comprehensive bibliography of ethnic immigrant literature, nor is it a substitute for historical scholarship on the topic. We hope this listing will spur book groups, libraries, civic organizations, and individuals to learn and take the time to discuss the issues that face our latest immigrants.

*Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Project Director*

## The Tequila Worm

Viola Canales (Wendy Lamb Books, 2005)

This is a story of Sofia, the adolescent narrator growing up in the barrio in McAllen, Texas, where the Mexican community retains much of its native tradition: long-standing observances of holy days, marvelous story-telling, native foods, preparing for a girl's *quinceanera*. At fourteen, Sofia is singled out to receive a scholarship to a prestigious boarding school more than 300 miles away. Does she want the opportunity to explore life beyond the barrio and family to step into a world of wealthy, privileged kids? This book combines serious issues such as discrimination, family separation, and the death of a parent with a sense of humor. The title comes from the folk tradition that a tequila worm will cure homesickness. This is a good choice for adolescent as well as adult readers.

## Brother, I'm Dying

Edwidge Danticat (Knopf, 2007)

This moving memoir of a Haitian immigrant family is about geographical separation and its consequences, especially when people face old age and death. The author—now a writer of wide acclaim—is separated from her father and mother at an early age when they leave for New York City; she stays behind in the care of her uncle Joseph, a pastor, who becomes a second father to her. When she and her brother finally do go to New York eight years later, they feel some ambivalence about the move. The story focuses on the long-term relationship of Danticat's father, Mira, with Joseph, the uncle—what they say and what they don't say as death approaches. Danticat draws rich portraits of both men who remain kindred spirits despite the way immigrant families are forced to adapt, reorganize, and reinvent themselves. She also provides background on the deteriorating political situation in Haiti (which drives her uncle out), and she is pointed and angry about the inhumane way that her uncle was detained by U.S. Customs, brutally imprisoned and dead within days.

## The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Junot Diaz (Riverhead Books, 2007)

From Santo Domingo to Washington Heights, New York, and Paterson, New Jersey, this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (2008) is a multifaceted story of an obese, awkward, first-generation Dominican adolescent who is obsessed by girls; in fact, he is a "nerd" in a culture that exalts sexuality. Oscar's ungainliness is a problem with friends and family in New York but also when he returns to his native land seeking change, happiness, and sex. The author's language creatively conveys the texture of the Dominican immigration in New York and he provides fascinating and irreverent footnotes about the actual history of the Dominican Republic that relate to the story. Ultimately, Diaz makes the case that no individual can be understood in isolation from the history of his family and his native land.

## A Free Life

Ha Jin (Pantheon, 2007)

An absorbing saga about a Chinese family that leaves China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre to begin a new free life in America. The major character is Nan Wu, a dutiful son intended to do graduate work in political science at Brandeis, but who becomes disillusioned with academics and turns to poetry, his first love. He marries a resolute and hardworking woman (also Chinese) and they produce a son. While Wu and his wife labor at menial jobs in and around Boston, Massachusetts, their son craves all things American and does not want to learn Chinese. Wu meanwhile struggles with the issues of whether he should or can write poetry in English or Chinese. In search of more income, he eventually moves to New York on his own where he acquires cooking skills that allow the family to move together to suburban Atlanta, Georgia, where they become the owners/operators of a small Chinese restaurant, purchase a home, and invest in having their son do well in school. Still uncomfortable with many aspects of

American life and its ideals of freedom and individualism, Nan Wu continues to write poetry that expresses his emotional ties to his native land.

### **The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf**

Mohja Kahf (Carrol & Graff, 2006)

A novel that recounts growing up in a devout Muslim family in Indianapolis, Indiana, in the 1970s. The main character endures ethnic slurs (such as “raghead”) but she also admires and wants many American things and opportunities. Her family life is shaped by rifts in the Indianapolis Muslim community; she leaves to go to college, marries briefly, and is haunted by the rape and murder of a good friend. The narrative weaves the everyday patterns of Muslim women’s personal religious rituals into a broader narrative of the social and spiritual landscape of Muslims in middle America. The author also wrote *E-Mails from Scheherazade*, a book of poetry about Muslim women’s lives.

### **Unaccustomed Earth**

Jhumpa Lahiri (Knopf, 2008)

This book follows Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Once again she deftly draws her readers into the emotional lives and fates of immigrant Bengali families in America, describing the rich texture that underlies their bicultural lives: Indian social gatherings and food, visits back home to parents and extended family, and high expectations of their children to become professionals and marry other Indians. Along with this love and duty, there is, however, deep conflict between expatriate parents and their American-raised children. These eight beautifully written interlocking stories are filled with well-drawn characters dealing with identity in exile, anger and disappointment, as well as acceptance and maturation. Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake*, was adapted to film by Mira Nair in 2006.

### **Free Food for Millionaires**

Min Jin Lee (Grand Central, 2008)

A lively, “hip” contemporary story of a first-generation Korean, Casey Han, a Princeton University graduate in economics. The story is set in Manhattan and details the trials and adjustments of her post-college life in the 1990s. Casey becomes estranged from her immigrant parents, splits up with a long-time white boyfriend with whom she was living, and then has problems finding housing and employment even with her Ivy League degree. The difficulties of paying for the high cost of the lifestyle enjoyed by many of her college friends is a constant irritation, and Casey’s typical response to her frustration is to overuse her credit card, notably for expensive clothes, which she loves. Casey’s search for a comfortable social and economic niche is told against the backdrop of Wall Street traders (where she eventually gets an unimpressive job), her parents’ laundry business in Queens, and their church and charity work. The novel makes a strong statement about social class, intergenerational cultural friction, and the powerful seductions of social status and the affluent life for immigrant children who are college graduates.

### **The Last Chicken in America**

Ellen Litman (W. W. Norton, 2007)

Russian Jewish immigrants trying to assimilate are portrayed here in a set of linked short stories set in Squirrel Hill, a section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At the center is Masha, a young woman who is supposed to study computer science at the local university but turns to literature instead. Masha, like other young adults, searches for love in a society of clashing culture and religion far different from her homeland. With humor and sagacity, the stories weave together immigrant adults who are alienated from their children, spouses trying to hold their families together while grappling with unemployment and alienation, as well as the enormous lures of American plenty and consumerism.

## **The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears**

Dinaw Mengetsu (Riverhead Books, 2007)

A short novel that portrays an interlude in the life of an Ethiopian immigrant, the narrator, who has lived in Washington, D.C., for over ten years and operates a dusty, understocked grocery store in Logan Circle, a gentrifying area. His social life is built around two other African immigrant men consistently debating what is good and bad about America until he begins a friendship with a white academic woman and her young daughter who are rehabilitating a home next to his apartment building. This is a deceptively simple but powerful story about racial politics in the nation's capital and an immigrant's search for acceptance, peace, and identity.

## **Angels for the Burning**

David Mura (Boa Editions, 2004)

Mura examines the experience of first-, second-, and third-generation Asian Americans through poetry rather than prose. The poems, written in direct, accessible language, are easily diverse—some funny, some serious and moving. Although they center on Japanese American experience and discrimination, the author is clearly promoting multiculturalism and the idea that the United States is a complex society requiring that we all learn to accept “the other.” A number of the poems focus on the historical experiences of the author and the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II.

## **Stealing Buddha's Dinner**

Bich Minh Nguyen (Penguin, 2007)

A memoir by a Vietnamese immigrant in Grand Rapids, Michigan, who came to the United States with most of her family—but not her mother, who was lost in the confusion of the airlift out of Saigon in April 1975. In Grand Rapids, Bich learns about America and is particularly intrigued by her school cafeteria. As a result, food plays a central organizing role in her thinking about what she considers to be “truly American.” At home, she longs for Pringles, Toll House cookies, and casseroles but her

loving grandmother, Noi, insists on maintaining their native cuisine and culture. At school and then at home with a Latina stepmother, Bich struggles with many normal adolescent issues but the question of what happened to her mother remains. That story is finally revealed and in 1997 Bich returns to Vietnam, allowing time to embrace not only her extended family but the wonders of Vietnamese cuisine.

## **The Arrival**

Shaun Tan (Scholastic, 2007)

This is an unusual and artfully created graphic novel about immigration—but with no words at all. There are many intimate absorbing portraits of immigrants and their belongings and activities, vast cityscapes, and some imaginary landscapes all expertly drawn in a soft-edged, realistic way that feels cinematic. The monochromatic color scheme (black, white, and sepia)—and the lack of words—conveys the loneliness of immigrants everywhere but also the ability of people to communicate with strangers even when there is no common language.

## **Shortcomings**

Adrian Tomine (Drawn and Quarterly Books, 2005)

This is another graphic novel but this one resembles a sophisticated comic book. It has a black and white format with characters talking to one another about their relationships and their “personal issues.” The artist-author, a fourth-generation Japanese American, provides a sense of contemporary, sexually diverse San Francisco and New York through a set of six characters, all in their late twenties and early thirties. The main character, Ben Tanaka, has a hankering for white girls despite his ongoing relationship with his Japanese girlfriend, Miko. His best friend is lesbian. The characters talk a lot about their own sexuality and expose tensions among Asian American groups. Much of the dialogue is edgy and raw. Tomine's story suggests the ways in which some people confuse the personal with the political in their intimate lives, and that race is embedded in eroticism and romance.

Produced by the Family Life Development Center at  
New York State College of Human Ecology at Cornell for  
“The Immigrant Child: Past, Present, and Future,” October 2008.

The conference was funded in part by a grant from  
The New York Council for the Humanities.

Available also at [www.human.cornell.edu/fldc](http://www.human.cornell.edu/fldc).

Cornell University is an equal opportunity, affirmative action  
educator and employer.

Produced by the Office of Publications and Marketing.  
9/2008 FLP 250 080335D