



BECOMING AMERICAN

NEW IMMIGRATION STORIES



ADULT READING LIST

Reading List Selected by Bill Ott

Nonfiction

Abu-Jaber, Diana. ***The Language of Baklava***. 2005. Knopf, \$23 (0-375-42304-4). Novelist Abu-Jaber turns to nonfiction with this chronicle of growing up as the oldest daughter of an American mother and an exuberant Jordanian father, who aches for his birth county. Capturing the essence of the new immigration story, she asks, "Do people have to decide who they are and where exactly their home is? How many lives are we allowed?"

Anders, Gigi. ***Jubana: The Awkwardly True and Dazzling Adventures of a Jewish Cuban Goddess***. 2005. HarperCollins/Rayo, \$23.95 (0-06-056369-9). Writing in a unique voice that captures both her Jewish and Cuban heritages, Anders becomes a sort of Alice in Wonderland, leading readers through a looking-glass life before and after her family was forced to flee their home in the wake of Castro's revolution. Both poignant and laugh-out-loud funny, this is more than a read; it's an experience.

Becoming American: Personal Essays by First Generation Immigrant Women. Ed. by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah. 2000. Hyperion, \$22.95 (0-7868-6589-X). As Ghanaian-American writer Danquah points out in her introduction to these essays about immigrant women from Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, "stories are told through movement . . . They find their rhythms in the chopping, the hammering, the sewing, the bathing, and the shuffling." And so these essays chop, hammer, and sew connections from one generation to another, from what is left behind to what is found elsewhere.

Crossing into America: The New Literature of Immigration. Ed. by Louis Mendoza and S. Shankar. 2003. New Press, \$28.95 (1-56584-720-2). With electrifying selections from Sandra Cisneros, Jamaica Kincaid, Achy Obejas, and other famous writers as well as some exciting new voices, this anthology captures how the 1965 change in U.S. immigration law has affected who the new immigrants are and how they see themselves in America.

Danticat, Edwidge. ***The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States***. 2001. Soho, paper, \$15 (1-56947-218-1). Danticat, the gifted Haitian American author of *The Farming of Bones* (1998), has assembled a potent collection of essays and poems that articulates the frustrations and sorrows of Haitians who are now outsiders both in Haiti and in their places of refuge.

Deng, Alephonsion and others. ***They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky: The True Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan***. 2005. PublicAffairs, \$25 (1-58648-269-6). In a harrowing account of children at war, three young refugees in California remember how they were driven from their homes in southern Sudan during the ethnic and religious conflicts that have left two million dead. With the help of coauthor Judy Bernstein, they tell their stories quietly, in clear, interwoven narratives that put a personal face on the statistics: 3,000 lost boys of Sudan are now living in 30 cities across the U.S.

Dorfman, Ariel. **Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey**. 1998. Farrar, \$23 (0-374-16862-8). This powerful memoir uses bilingualism as a metaphor for adaptation. Dorfman notes the comfort of Spanish when his family immigrates to Argentina and the utility of English when they move to the U.S. Calling himself an amalgam of the Latino and the Anglo, Dorfman shows the interconnectedness of all his worlds.

Faderman, Lillian and Xiong, Ghia. **I Begin My Life All Over: The Hmong and the American Immigrant Experience**. 1998. Beacon, \$23 (0-8070-7234-6). Based on detailed interviews with 35 Hmong immigrants to California, this tightly edited collection captures the particulars of the personal narratives and also their connection with the common American immigrant experience. Editor Faderman introduces Hmong history and reflects on the connections between the Hmong's stories and her own life as the child of Jewish immigrants from the shtetls of Eastern Europe.

Fritz, Mark. **Lost on Earth: Nomads of the New World**. 1999. Little, Brown, \$25 (0-316-29478-0). Fritz puts a human face on the huge contemporary refugee problem with individual stories of the displaced in the 1990s, including those from Kuwait, Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, Liberia, and Russia. A recurring figure is the well-meaning humanitarian relief worker who becomes exasperated with her charges.

Kniffel, Leonard. **A Polish Son in the Motherland: An American's Journey Home**. 2005. Texas A & M, paper, \$17.95 (1-58544-441-3). Kniffel's memoir illustrates how today's immigration stories both return to the old and leave for the new. Armed with a computer and the stories his grandmother told him, Kniffel returned to the Polish village from which his relatives emigrated prior to World War I. He spent several months folding himself into the community as it exists today and connecting with family members and memories of the past.

Rodriguez, Richard. **Brown**. 2002. Penguin, paper, \$14 (0-14-200079-3). Rodriguez's ongoing spiritual autobiography—began in *Hunger for Memory* in 1982 and continued in 1992 with *Days of Obligation*—has at its heart the ongoing conflict between public and private selves, a universal condition but one that is felt most acutely by immigrants and the children of immigrants. In this third volume, the always eloquent, always challenging Rodriguez posits that in the browning of America, the mixing of races and cultures, we have the opportunity—both as individuals and as a nation—to reconcile our different selves.

Santiago, Esmeralda. **When I Was Puerto Rican**. 1993. Vintage, \$20 (0-201581-17-5); paper, \$12.95 (0-679-75676-0). In this stirring memoir, Santiago lovingly recalls her childhood, including her rural life in Puerto Rico and then her growing up in poverty in a Brooklyn apartment, startled by culture shock, valiantly confronting New York head-on, an exceptional student but with little English.

Tobar, Héctor. **Translation Nation: Defining a New American Identity in the Spanish Speaking United States**. 2005. Riverhead, \$24.95 (1-57322-305-0). Born in Los Angeles of Guatemalan immigrant parents, Tobar blends his personal story of binational identity with a riveting account of how Latinos are changing the U.S. In plain, stirring prose, Tobar reveals the unsettling particulars of Americans who are restless and always longing for home, whatever and wherever that may be. An invaluable account of immigration today.

Waking Up American: Coming of Age Biculturally: First-Generation Women Reflect on Identity. Ed. by Angela Jane Fountas. 2005. Seal, paper, \$15.95 (1-58005-136-7). "Where are you from?" In one of the best of the recent anthologies by new immigrants, young women writers with roots in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe, answer that question with immediacy and wit, honest about the pain, anger, and prejudice at home and outside, and often hilarious about their personal conflicts.

Fiction

Alvarez, Julia. ***How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents***. 1991. Algonquin, \$18.95 (0-945575-57-2); Penguin/Plume, paper, \$15.95 (0-452-28707-3). In a Dominican refugee family in the Bronx, four daughters remember their privileged childhood on the island before they were forced to flee. They rebel against their parents even as they cope with bullying and racism in their new home. Alvarez's novel remains one of the essential immigration stories, capturing the ambiguity of assimilation in all its multifaceted meanings.

Divakaruni, Chitra. ***The Vine of Desire***. 2002. Doubleday, \$23.95 (0-385-49729-6). Divakaruni's empathy for young Indian women living in the U.S., who are caught between homesickness and the promise of a more liberated life, knows no bounds. Divakaruni continues their tale here, intertwining romance with trenchant insights into the harsh realities of women's lives, whether they live in material comfort in Berkeley or in poverty in Calcutta.

Garcia, Christina. ***Dreaming in Cuban***. 1992. Ballantine, paper, \$13.95 (0-345-38143-9). For three generations of Cuban women in Garcia's first novel, the ties that bind are impassioned and profound. This magical and exhilarating journey away from and back toward home helped draw the circular map used in so many of today's immigrant stories.

Goldman, Francisco. ***The Long Night of White Chickens***. 1992. Grove, paper, \$16.95 (0-87113-509-4). A Guatemalan American writer, Goldman brings his intimate and unique understanding of these two very different cultures to this complex and masterful novel that swings between a Boston suburb and the turmoil of Guatemala in the 1980s.

Growing Up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction about Learning to be American. Ed. by Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Jennifer Gillan. 1999. Penguin, paper \$16.95 (0-14-028063-4). The stories and memoirs in this collection—by Sherman Alexie, Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, E. L. Doctorow, Sandra Cisneros, and many more of our best writers—deal directly, but never simplistically, with the conflicts of becoming American. They personalize what you lose by crossing borders, what you leave behind, what you gain, what America gains. They write with humor and poignancy, rooted in particulars that speak to everyone about dislocation, about being an outsider at school, in the neighborhood, at home.

Hwang, Caroline. ***In Full Bloom***. 2003. Penguin/Plume, paper, \$13 (0-452-28488-0). Chick lit meets the immigration story in this light but never frothy novel about a young Korean American editorial assistant at a New York fashion magazine who reluctantly agrees to let her mother serve as matchmaker.

Imagining America: Stories from the Promised Land. Ed. By Wesley Brown and Amy Ling. 1991. Persea, \$21.95 (0-89255-167-4). Thirty-seven short stories grouped under the themes of "Arriving," "Belonging," "Crossings," and "Remembering" dramatize the conflict between myth and reality in emigration to and migration within the U.S. during the twentieth century.

Jen, Gish. ***Typical American***. 1991. Penguin/Plume, \$13.95 (0-452-26774-9). In a touching, funny novel, Ralph Chang (formerly Lai Fu) leaves Shanghai for America and marries his sister's friend, Helen (formerly Hailan); the three of them love and quarrel and try to find their way in their new country.

Kincaid, Jamaica. ***Lucy***. 1990. Farrar, paper, \$13 (0-374-52735-0). Lucy, 19, leaves her West Indian home and her domineering mother for America, where she works as an au pair for a wealthy New York family, benefiting from their generosity and scorning their insularity. As Lucy awakens intellectually, morally, sexually, and aesthetically, Kincaid is audacious and magnificent in her critique of privilege and prejudice, and in her dramatization of the metamorphosis of an intrepid young woman.

Lee, Chang-Rae. ***Native Speaker***. 1995. Riverhead, paper, \$14 (1-57322-531-2). This poignant, moody novel by a young Korean American tells the story in the voice of Henry Park, a second-generation Korean who works as a privately employed spy and at home deals with a shaky marriage and the death of his young son. Beautifully written and intriguingly plotted, the novel interweaves politics, love, family, and loss as Parks starts to make sense of the rhythm of his life.

Lee, Gus. ***China Boy***. 1991. Penguin/Plume, \$14 (0-452-27158-4). Lee's autobiographical novel about growing up in San Francisco is funny, crude, sad, ugly, and wonderfully compelling, especially when the skinny loser Kai Ting, the American-born son of an aristocratic Mandarin family, finally learns to speak street language and to fight bullies, racists, and his abusive stepmother.

Shteyngart, Gary. ***The Russian Debutante's Handbook***. 2002. Riverhead, \$24.95 (1-57322-213-5). Shteyngart takes the idea of the two-way immigrant's journey to an unprecedented level in this all-stops-out absurdist comedy. Running desperately low on the funds necessary to keep his girlfriend (a bit of a dominatrix) purring along in the fast lane, Russian Jewish immigrant Vladimir returns to Russia as a kind of faux gangster. As a black-comedic antidote to the hypersensitivity of so many immigrant-as-outsider sagas, this novel has no peer.

Straight, Susan. ***Highwire Moon***. 2001. Houghton, \$24 (0-618-05614-9). Straight casts Southern California as a microcosm of malevolence, where Mexican workers are forced to risk their lives to earn a living. Serafina, a young Mixteca Indian who speaks no English, survives the journey, then ends up with a rough but not unkind white truck driver. They have a daughter, Elvia, whom Serafina adores, but after Serafina is arrested and deported, Elvia lives in foster homes. As mother and daughter make their way toward each other, Straight exposes the malignancy of a place poisoned by greed and desperation.