

The Grapes of Wrath

by
John Steinbeck

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 6

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Discussion questions

In the American West especially, the ideal of “rugged individualism” is at the root of many laws, or lack of laws, and has also shaped attitudes toward welfare and treatment of the homeless and needy. Is the ideal of rugged individualism still workable? Can we survive as individuals today the way we might have survived one or two hundred years ago?

What are the benefits of community to the individual? What are the sacrifices an individual must make to participate in the community? What are some benefits and sacrifices in your own life?

Additional readings

Francisco Jiminez. *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*, 1997.

Tomás Rivera. *Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, 1987.

Jerry Stanley. *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp*, 1992.

John Steinbeck. *Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath*, 1936.

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The Grapes of Wrath

by
John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, is a moving tale of the Joad family's struggle to adapt and survive in a changing world. Like thousands of other families in the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, the Joads are forced to leave their home and the land they have been farming for generations. These "Okies" load their trucks and jalopies with the few possessions they can bring along and set out for California, where they plan to work in the vineyards, orchards, and cotton fields. Sadly, their high expectations soon collide with harsh realities.

"How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past?" Steinbeck asks these important questions as the Joads are packing to leave and discarding much of their already meager material wealth. Such disorientation is symptomatic of all dispossessed people, and many of us can perhaps identify times in our own lives when we have felt the same way in the face of profound change. The Joad family hits the road with little more than family memories and dreams. By the close of the novel, the dreams have died, the memories are distant, and the Joad family has disintegrated—or so it appears.

When *The Grapes of Wrath* was first published in 1939, it was banned in some schools and discredited by many critics, who called it inflammatory, biased and exaggerated. The book asks the reader to reexamine the free enterprise system. The Joads, like many Midwestern farmers and ranchers today, could not compete with the larger—and more politically powerful—corporate farm. "Who can we blame for our hardships and mistreatment?" ask Tom Joad and others. The corporate farm had no face and no personality. It was run by the finance company and the bank—monsters, in the Joads' eyes—of overwhelming size, devoid of human compassion and understanding.

The term "Okies," a word the Joads had not heard until they came to California, stereotyped and denigrated a whole group of people as inferior and undeserving of normal human courtesies. Dehumanizing attitudes such as these make life-and-death conflicts between competing groups possible, if not inevitable.

Perhaps the most interesting characters in the novel are the preacher, Casey, and Ma Joad. Both embody qualities that cause humans to care for one another in times of crisis and to protect the weak rather than prey upon them. They represent the sacrifice of individual needs in favor of the common good. "I got to thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankind was holy when it was one thing. An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way," concludes Casey, after giving up the gospel and turning instead to spreading the doctrine of unionization to working people and the oppressed.

Ma struggles valiantly against the family's disintegration. Her notion of family is more inclusive than blood relation; she is, in a sense, a true humanist, a champion of the family of man. Thus she welcomes strangers and guests into the family and shares whatever she can. One of the most touching scenes in the book is the moment in camp when Ma has managed with great ingenuity to cook a meager meal to feed her own hungry clan, but must ignore the desperate looks of children who have smelled the food and come to beg. Readers might compare Ma's agony to their own reactions to the homeless who beg on our city streets.

Consider also Ma's strategy of not telling the others that Grandma has died until after they have crossed the desert at night and reached safer territory. Although Ma is suffering deeply at the loss of her own mother, she puts aside her need to grieve for the good of the rest of the family. Another meaningful moment is when Ma instructs Rose of Sharon, whose baby is stillborn, to give her breast to a man who has starved himself to feed his son. Casey says of Ma, just after she has revealed Grandma's death, ". . . there's a woman so great with love—she scares me." Ma also provides the family with a unifying identity. Her answer to so many intricate and painful dilemmas is always, "Remember, we's Joads."

Through the example of Casey and Ma, Steinbeck asks us to think about the very definition of civilization. We have banded together in family units, in larger groups, in nations, for the purpose of identity and survival. America is a nation of the uprooted and the dispossessed; over the course of a life, one person might experience again and again the turmoil of dislocation or hear the call to help others in times of extreme need. What actions are right or wrong, just or unjust, during such times? These are the central conflicts in the story of the Joads. They are also central in the settlement of California and the West, which have seen one wave of immigrants after another arrive with the fierce hunger born of desperation and the instinct for survival.

About the author

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California, and educated at Stanford University. Among his other novels are *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *East of Eden*. He also wrote nonfiction works, including the autobiographical *Travels with Charley*. Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 for "writings, combining... sympathetic humour and keen social perception."

Slouching Towards Bethlehem

by
Joan Didion

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 10

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Discussion questions

Is Didion fair to Lucille Miller in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" or is she using her to fit a stereotype of the disappointed, careless, and greedy immigrant to California?

Didion has sometimes been accused of extrapolating a fractured, frightening external world out of her own personal fears and neuroses. In these essays, is there any evidence for this claim? What image of herself does Didion create?

Additional readings

Joan Didion. *Play It As It Lays*, 1970.

Joan Didion. *The White Album*, 1979.

Tom Wolfe. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 1968.

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Slouching Towards Bethlehem

by Joan Didion

Joan Didion was born in 1934 in the Sacramento Valley, where her ancestors had settled almost a century earlier during the Gold Rush era. She attended the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1950s, and later lived in New York and wrote for various magazines. The 20 essays gathered in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* originally appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The American Scholar*, *Vogue* and others, and were published as a collection in 1968.

Didion describes her writing as “non-intellectual,” in that she is less concerned with ideas than with images and events she arranges and pastes like snapshots in a scrapbook. She experiences her subject matter very personally, mingling with the people she writes about, walking their streets, listening to them talk, monitoring their facial expressions—all the while attentively recording her own fears, confusion, joys, and insights. “All I knew was what I saw,” she writes, “flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no ‘meaning’ beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting room experience.” At the same time, as she says in “On Keeping a Notebook,” the value of what she records has less to do with the accuracy of facts than with the accuracy of her impressions. “Remember what it was to me: that is always the point.”

Didion’s essays are generally regarded as examples of “New Journalism,” a hybrid of memoir and reportage. In this type of journalism, the reporter is no longer faceless and objectivity is no longer sacrosanct. Although she has been praised for the precision, control, and accuracy of her prose, Didion has also been accused of misrepresenting the facts through the distorted lens of her personal struggles and biases.

The title of this collection is taken from the poem “The Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats, which warns that “things fall apart” because “the center cannot hold,” implying that humanity has strayed from its center—from civilizing forces—and faces an era of moral chaos and anarchy. For Didion, Yeats’s poem succinctly expresses the foreboding and existential angst she feels as a witness to the social upheaval of the 1960s, especially in California. Prior to writing these essays, she underwent a period of paralysis as a writer in which she felt that “...writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed.” American society

in the 1960s appeared to be ripping at the seams, especially in the Haight-Ashbury District of San Francisco, where anti-establishment rhetoric and the drug dependent lifestyles of the “Hippie” movement were centered. “If I was to work again at all,” Didion concluded, “it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder.”

By and large, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is a collection of essays about disorder, about the way in which the center of American society was losing its hold, and things were falling apart:

It was the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967, and the market was steady and the GNP high and a great many articulate people seemed to have a sense of high social purpose and it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not, and more and more people had the uneasy apprehension that it was not.

In and around Haight-Ashbury, Didion tracked and recorded the “social hemorrhaging” indicated by drug dealers, revolutionaries and hordes of runaway teenagers—especially the teenagers, some of whom were already parents themselves, dangerously ill-equipped as caregivers, and living on the streets with their toddlers in tow. Watching this next generation wandering San Francisco in a haze of LSD and confused, inarticulate political rhetoric, she came to understand that, “These were children who grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors who had traditionally suggested and enforced society’s values.”

Didion reminds us that the Hippie movement represented something darker and more foreboding than simple teenage rebellion: families were unraveling; the American Dream had lost its appeal; the center could no longer hold. “We were seeing something important,” she writes. “We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum.”

Other essays in the collection also record evidence of social decay. In “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” Didion examines a San Bernardino case in which a wife murdered her

husband largely because he no longer provided her with the affluent lifestyle she had been promised in California. Didion interviews a professional radical in “Comrade Laski, C.P.U.S.A. (M.-L.),” exposing his political aspirations as obsessive and delusional, “doomed commitments” with which he filled the void. “7000 Romaine, Los Angeles” ruminates about the lifestyle of billionaire Howard Hughes, suggesting that our fascination with Hughes may stem from our own antisocial longings.

In sum, as critic Robert Dana has written, “Her prose is a literary seismograph on which are clearly registered the tremors and tremblers that increasingly shake the bedrock of the American social dream.”

About the author

A second collection of Joan Didion’s essays, *The White Album*, was published in 1979. She has also written novels based in California and Latin America, often dealing with the shattered lives of disoriented women (*Run River*, 1963; *Play It As It Lays*, 1970; *A Book of Common Prayer*, 1977; and *Democracy*, 1984). Most recently she has composed thoughtful and intensely wrought investigations of El Salvador at war, the Cuban emigres of Miami, and U.S. national politics.

On the Road

by
Jack Kerouac

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 9

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Discussion questions

Why do Sal and Dean and the other characters keep moving back and forth across the country instead of settling in one place? What purpose does this restlessness serve?

Both Sal and the author seem to have great admiration for Dean Moriarty, in spite of his many weaknesses. Why?

Additional reading

Lawrence Ferlinghetti. *A Coney Island of the Mind*, 1958.

Allen Ginsberg. *Howl and Other Poems*, 1956.

Henry Miller. *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 1958.

Anne Waldman, ed. *The Beat Book: Poems and Fiction of the Beat Generation*, 1996.

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On the Road

by

Jack Kerouac

Jack Kerouac was the central figure in a 1950s literary phenomenon known as the Beat movement. Kerouac coined the term “Beat Generation” to link the disillusionment and alienation these writers felt with the earlier “Lost Generation” writers, which included Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs were among the other writers associated with the Beat movement.

Though often maligned and misunderstood by literary critics of the time, Beat writers achieved public recognition and notoriety; *On the Road* became a best seller, and is generally recognized today as the classic representation of Beat spirit and thought. Although the ideas and attitudes of the Beats had few social or political ramifications at the time, Kerouac and his allies are now often credited with fathering the Hippie movement of the 60s, which led to broader political and social upheaval. Similarly, Kerouac’s freedom with language influenced 60s writers such as Ken Kesey, Charles Bukowski, Tom Robbins and Richard Brautigan. In *The Beat Generation*, Bruce Cook says:

It is difficult, separated as we are by time and temper from that period, to convey the liberating effect that On the Road had on young people all over America. There was a sort of instantaneous flash of recognition that seemed to send thousands of them out into the streets, proclaiming that Kerouac had written their story, that On the Road was their book.

For the reader half a century later, it may be difficult to empathize with Kerouac’s characters. Certainly the world has changed immensely in the intervening decades. Or has it? As long as there is pressure to conform to a status quo, there will be people who rebel against it. Readers might best appreciate Kerouac and his characters by considering how the attitudes and values of the Beat Generation, like generations before and after it, are reflections of a changing national identity. Examining the Beat Generation might shed some insight, decades later, on who we are today.

Jack Kerouac was born in 1922 and died in 1969; his personal life and world view were profoundly shaped by the Great Depression, World War II, the atomic bomb, and U. S. intervention in Korea and Southeast Asia. As thousands of troops returned home after World War II, many Americans longed for normal lives—marriage and family, a home in the suburbs. Material wealth became the measure of personal success for some; respectability meant “fitting in” by conforming to societal codes for appropriate dress and behavior.

Not all Americans were well suited for this conservative lifestyle. Some, like Kerouac and the Beats, found the conformity of the 50s dull and repressive. They longed for spontaneity and greater freedom of personal expression. They strained against prevailing social norms and marked themselves as “other” by dressing differently, experimenting with drugs and casual sex, and worshipping jazz. In jazz, which is unrestrained by formal composition and characterized by spontaneity; they found the rhythms (the “beat”) that best expressed their longing to break from the monotony of mainstream society.

Kerouac experimented with jazz technique in his writing. In 1951, he typed *On the Road* on a roll of paper fed into his typewriter, pecking out a 175,000-word first draft in 20 days. He preferred to type on a roll of paper so that he would not have to pause at the end of each page, believing that in this continuous frenzy of creation, his inner self would be expressed without constraint. He labeled this high-speed writing “spontaneous prose.” Some critics questioned whether it was art at all. “That’s not writing,” remarked Truman Capote. “It’s just typewriting.”

On the Road is the story of a deepening friendship between two friends, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. Sal, an aspiring writer and a returned veteran with a bad case of wanderlust, is a stand-in for Kerouac himself. Dean, five years younger and the ringleader or focus for all the action in the book, represents Kerouac’s friend, Neal Cassady. As the embodiment of the “free spirit,” Dean persuades Sal to hit the road with him on a romantic quest for a more satisfying way of life.

Together, they turn their backs on conventional society and traipse back and forth between New York, Denver, and San Francisco, entangled with a series of cars and lovers and drugs and scrapes with the law. In part, Kerouac culled the style of the book from Neal Cassady’s letters, which were sometimes 40,000-word correspondences. He described his friend’s letters as “all first- person, fast, mad, confessional, completely serious, all detailed.”

In the apocalyptic world after the war, amidst the threat of nuclear disaster and the dull ache of the Cold War, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty set out on a wild and joyous quest to amend the American dream.

About the author

Jack Kerouac was born in Lowell, Mass., in 1922, played football in high school and at Columbia University, and served in the merchant marine during World War II. A close friend of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs in New York, and Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti in San Francisco, he used his extensive wanderings around the U.S. and Mexico as the basis for *On the Road* and other books such as *The Subterraneans* and *The Dharma Bums*. He died in New York at 47. Biographers and critics have been reinterpreting his life and importance ever since.

The Day of the Locust

by
Nathanael West

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 7

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Discussion questions

Does Nathanael West show sympathy or disdain toward his characters?

Many successful careers began with aspirations and visions that seemed impossible or foolish to others. Why don't the dreams of West's characters come true?

Additional readings

F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Last Tycoon*, 1941.

Budd Schulberg. *What Makes Sammy Run?* 1941.

Evelyn Waugh. *The Loved One*, 1948.

Nathanael West. *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1933.

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The Day of the Locust

by
Nathanael West

Nathanael West's fourth and final novel is a disturbing indictment of American society, in which boredom and comic absurdity turn to violence. Written in the 1930s, West's novels were not like the works of his contemporaries, many of whom wrote straightforward stories about social and economic injustices. West created a peculiar mix of pathos and comedy, realism and surrealism, that reflected his persistent suspicion that most people's lives are laughable and pitiable, consumed in fantasies. Although his talent was acknowledged in literary circles, West received little acclaim during his lifetime. Perhaps the American public found his pessimism too disturbing, especially in midst of the Great Depression and world war.

Even today, some readers are deeply shaken by West's insights into the absurdities of American lifestyles. Critic Leslie Fiedler has written:

Putting down a book by West, a reader is not sure whether he has been presented with a nightmare endowed with the conviction of actuality or with actuality distorted into the semblance of a nightmare, but in either case, he has the sense that he has been presented with a view of the world in which, incredibly, he lives.

Nathanael West was filled with "an unloseable sense that nothing in life was as it seemed," said cultural historian Alfred Kazin. Born Nathan Weinstein in 1903 in New York, he was raised in a prosperous middle-class family; his Jewish immigrant parents spent much of their lives masking their heritage to fit into American society and avoid prejudice and suspicion. His father, a successful building contractor, hoped his son would one day head the family business. Instead, Nathan Weinstein became Nathanael West, dropped out of high school and faked his way into college, where he played the role of a jazz-age collegiate dandy until graduation.

During the early years of the Depression, West stayed afloat by working in residential hotels, renting inexpensive rooms to failed businessmen, part-time prostitutes, and lonely men who lingered in the lobby desperate for conversation.

To impoverished young writers like himself, he offered free lodging. At one hotel, six people committed suicide by jumping from the same terrace. West was curious about the lives of his lodgers, and characters like them—ordinary people faced with extraordinary struggles—became the focus of his writing.

One critic describes West's characters as "... unconsciously trapped—people who were, in their blindness, so tragic as to be comic figures." Soon after the publication of *Miss Lonelyhearts* in 1933, he was offered a job as screenwriter for Columbia Pictures. He eagerly accepted, moved to Hollywood, and was laid off within a year. West's subsequent experiences in Hollywood were distilled into his most famous work, *The Day of the Locust*, published in 1939.

The narrator of *The Day of the Locust* is Tod Hackett, a Yale art school graduate who supports himself as a set designer for a Hollywood studio. Tod has aspirations to paint "The Burning of Los Angeles," his vision of a southern California apocalypse. As the novel unfolds, this vision becomes real, culminating in a surreal riot at a gala Hollywood premier.

From the beginning of the book, Tod is acutely aware of the disparity between reality and illusion in Hollywood. Tod looks out into the street and sees that:

The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandanna around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court.

Soon Tod is infatuated with Faye Greener, a young woman "shiny as a new spoon," who lives with her father, Harry Greener, in Tod's apartment building. Faye fancies herself an undiscovered starlet; she's consumed with fantasies of stardom, and although she flirts openly with Tod (and other men), she is completely lost in her ambitions and unavailable to possibilities of love. Harry Greener is an ex-vaudevillian turned huckster, peddler of a phony Miracle Silver Polish he produces in his own apartment.

Through Harry and Faye, Tod meets timid Homer Simpson, a bookkeeper and the quintessential midwesterner who has moved to sunny southern California. Homer also falls for Faye, and she plays him for every dollar he's willing to part with in return for the illusion of a possible romance with her. But Faye remains inaccessible except in fantasy. After Harry dies, Faye turns to prostitution.

Homer in particular has difficulty handling Faye's callousness toward him. After she rejects him, Homer decides to leave Hollywood and move back to Iowa, but he suffers a nervous breakdown and finds himself wandering into a crowd gathered to gawk at stars arriving for the opening of a new movie. Homer murders a child who torments him, the crowd riots and a policeman pulls Tod Hackett from the mob to safety. This surreal sequence of events enables Tod to complete in his mind the apocalyptic painting "The Burning of Los Angeles."

The painting represents the anger and frustration of the many people who came to California expecting the promised land, the Golden State, the land of opportunity, but found themselves no better off in California than anywhere else, locked out of the glamour and riches they sought. They feel cheated. They are bored, disillusioned, and prone to violence. At the close of the twentieth century, some readers might agree that Nathanael West's dark visions were prophetic indeed.

About the author

After some success as a Hollywood screenwriter, Nathanael West died in a car crash in 1940 (the same weekend fellow Hollywood writer F. Scott Fitzgerald died in Los Angeles). Screenwriter Waldo Salt adopted *The Day of the Locust* for a 1975 film of the same name produced by Paramount Studios and directed by John Schlesinger.

Twilight— Los Angeles, 1992

by
Anna Deavere Smith

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 13

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Discussion questions

"They [whites] lost, oh, big time," says Paul Parker, chairperson for the "Free the L.A. Four Plus" Defense Committee. Who, if anyone, won or lost as a result of the riots in Los Angeles in March-April 1992?

Did you conclude that certain people and factions were more at fault than others? How did the author's selection of participants and quotations influence your conclusion?

Would there be more justice and less violence if we listened to one another more?

Additional readings

Sam Shepard. *True West*, 1979.
Luis Valdez. *Zoot Suit*, 1978.

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Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992

by Anna Deavere Smith

Anna Deavere Smith grew up in a black, middle-class neighborhood in Baltimore in the 1950s and early 60s, the eldest of five children. Her father was a businessman, her mother an elementary school principal. “There was segregation in Baltimore then,” Smith says, but because she was light skinned, at times she straddled the line between black and white. “I wasn’t allowed to try on clothes in certain department stores. I remember one saleslady saying to my mother, ‘She looks okay. I’ll let her sneak in.’”

In her late teens, Smith became acutely aware of racial tensions and injustices, especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the ensuing nationwide riots, which included gunfire and massive destruction in the Watts area of Los Angeles. Immediately after she graduated from college, Smith headed west to San Francisco with “eighty-five dollars and an overnight bag, looking for the revolution.” It was 1971. “I was very interested in social change, but I had no idea what I was going to do.”

Soon, however, in an acting class at the American Conservatory Theater, Smith discovered her calling: she fell in love with the theater, recognizing its power to move hearts and minds. Eventually she revolutionized the American stage with “documentary theater”—performances that featured the words of actual participants in historical events. These one-woman shows in which Smith played all the characters grew into a collection of theatrical works titled “On the Road: A Search for American Character.”

In 1992, Anna Deavere Smith was commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles to create what became *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992*, a search for the character of Los Angeles in the aftermath of the original Rodney King verdict. In that verdict, four white Los Angeles police officers were found not guilty of the beating of King, a black man who had been stopped for a traffic violation. The beating had been recorded on videotape and widely broadcast.

Earlier works in the “On the Road” series have achieved considerable acclaim, most notably *Fires in the Mirror*, a dramatic documentary of voices from a 1991 conflict between blacks and Hasidic Jews in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Smith received an Obie Award, an honor given to distinguished Off-Broadway productions, for the work.

In *Fires in the Mirror*, as in Smith’s other works, she strove to give voice to both sides—or all sides—of the events her works addressed. Her goal was social change through consciousness-raising: if people could better understand their adversaries’ points of view, conflicts might achieve compromise before escalating into violence. In an August 1994 interview, Smith said:

Racism is this incredible, incredible reality that few of us are fully conscious of at any given moment. So there’s this lack of consciousness that is our weird common thread. But that’s where my optimism comes in. I think that if we ever came into full consciousness, it would be painful, but it would be glorious—and we would be free. And I don’t think that’s out of the question.

Nevertheless, the riots in Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict presented unforeseen challenges to Smith. The riots are estimated to have led to 50 deaths, more than 2,000 injuries, and the burning, looting or damaging of 3,000 Los Angeles businesses. Smith said that although she was able to see both sides in *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight—Los Angeles* was more complicated. “I went to the second trial, and I can intellectually see some part of what the policemen felt. But I couldn’t say that I could watch the tape of the Rodney King beating and be completely objective. How many people could?”

In creating *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992*, Smith taped interviews with more than 175 people over a period of nine months. Out of hundreds of hours of tape, she selected 50 monologues from 46 voices, listening closely for moments when her subjects spoke most tellingly. An anonymous juror, speaking for himself and fellow jurors, says, “We just felt like we were pawns that were thrown away by the system,” a sentiment that mirrored the rage and frustration of Rodney King supporters who took to the streets after the acquittal. Reginald Denny, the truck driver who was pulled from his vehicle and badly beaten by rioters, says, “I didn’t know the verdict had come down. I didn’t pay any attention to that because that was somebody’s else’s problem....” A few moments later, Denny is praising those who helped him and talking about “this weird common thread that connects us all.”

The title, *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992*, was taken largely from an interview with Twilight Bey, organizer of a gang truce that helped to end the riots. Bey says his name means “twice the knowledge of those my age”—“twi” is twice without the “ce” and “light” is an ancient symbol of knowing. What does he know?

I can’t dwell forever in darkness. I can’t dwell in the idea of just identifying with people like me and understanding me and mine.

Twilight’s eloquent statement seems like a truth that human beings might have understood since the beginning of civilization. But events in Los Angeles in 1992 make it clear that modern man has not yet taken it to heart.

About the author

Anna Deavere Smith is the Ann O’Day Maples Professor of the Arts at Stanford University. Awarded a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant in 1996, she lives in San Francisco.

The Woman Warrior

by
Maxine Hong Kingston

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 11

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

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About the author

Maxine Hong Kingston was born in Stockton, California in 1940. She studied engineering, and later English at the University of California, Berkeley. After teaching school in Hawaii for 17 years, she returned to Berkeley as a Professor of English.

Discussion questions

Some male Chinese-American critics have faulted Kingston for perpetuating American stereotypes of the Chinese. Are American writers from nonwestern traditions under any special obligation to present positive images of their cultures, for fear of encouraging the prejudices of whites?

What is the significance of the story of Fa Mu Lan, the "woman warrior," to the story of Maxine, the laundryman's daughter? Why might earlier Chinese cultures have held females, especially female children, in such low regard? How do you react to Chinese sayings like, "Girls are maggots in the rice"?

Additional readings

Jessica Hagedorn, ed. *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, 1993.

Maxine Hong Kingston. *China Men*, 1981.

Lisa See. *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*, 1996.

Amy Tan. *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989.

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The Woman Warrior

by

Maxine Hong Kingston

In *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Maxine Hong Kingston, a first generation Chinese-American, recounts memories of her childhood struggle to reconcile her Chinese and American identities. The challenge of a dual identity is a common focus of novels and memoirs written by first generation Americans whose parents emigrated to the U.S. “Those of us in the first American generations,” Kingston writes, “have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.”

Her father and mother, who work long hours in their laundry in Stockton, Calif., cling to the traditions and values of their homeland and expect their daughter to do the same. But she is American-born. To her, China seems unreal—a mythical place of characters and events that existed before she was born. Complying with her parents’ expectations becomes increasingly difficult for Maxine as day by day she becomes more Americanized.

In her parents’ view, “ghosts” are anyone who is not Chinese. Thus Maxine spends her girlhood among ghosts—her teachers, classmates, and neighbors—and her mother criticizes her for “acting like the ghosts.” But there are other ghosts in Maxine’s life; she is haunted by the ghosts of her ancestors and the mythological heroines in bedtime tales told by her mother.

“Night after night,” she writes, “my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep.” The stories are powerful lessons in proper Chinese values and behaviors, but they are confounding to Maxine because they are appropriate to her parents’ lives in China, a world she has never known first-hand.

At the other extreme, Maxine must puzzle out for herself the details of her parents’ lives and the particulars of Chinese customs because “. . . adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask.” Furthermore, she writes:

You get no warning that you shouldn’t wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chopsticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, or step over a brother whether it’s during your menses or not. You figure out what you got hit for and don’t do it again if you figured correctly. . . . I don’t see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn’t; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death.”

In recounting the lives of her ancestors in China, Kingston relies heavily on her mother’s tales, but she must fictionalize many details—imaginatively reconstruct the lives of her ancestors—in order to make sense of all she has not been told. Thus *The Woman Warrior* is not purely memoir; it weaves together fact and fiction, real lives and mythological lives. Henry Allen, in *The Washington Post*, described Kingston’s work as “a wild mix of myth, memory, history, and a lucidity which verges on the eerie.”

Chapters 1, 3 and 4 focus on three women: Maxine’s father’s sister (No-Name Woman), Maxine’s mother (Brave Orchid), and Maxine’s mother’s sister (Moon Orchid), respectively. Chapters 2 and 5 are mythological tales of Chinese heroines, the women warriors with whom Maxine identifies.

Brave Orchid is an intimidating, tradition-bound mother who in many ways displays the fierce determination, energy and power of the women warriors she so often speaks of. Indeed, her own life has been heroic. Her husband (Maxine’s father) emigrated to the U.S. 15 years before her, leaving her alone in China. During that time, the couple’s two young children die. The tenacious Brave Orchid lies about her age, gains admission to a Chinese medical college, and in two years of intensive study earns a diploma in “Midwifery, Pediatrics, Gynecology, [Medecine], [Surgery], Therapeutics, Opthamology, Bacteriology, Dermatology, Nursing, and Bandage.” She becomes a revered doctor in her village, a heroine in a culture that insisted women could be only wives or slaves.

My mother wore a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair. She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous, like the ancient magician who came down from the mountains.

In the United States, Brave Orchid’s life takes a sharp down-turn. She cannot practice medicine, instead working at her husband’s side in a laundry, or laboring as a field hand harvesting tomatoes. At the age of 45 she gives birth to Maxine, the first of six American-born children.

Chapter 2, “White Tigers,” is a new telling of the traditional Chinese folktale of Fa Mu Lan, the young girl who took her father’s place in battle. (Disney Studios’ “Mulan” is another version of this folktale.) As a role model, Fa Mu Lan set impossible standards to which Maxine aspired. If she were to be more than a wife or slave, she must become a warrior woman, but the days of magic and mythological opportunities had vanished.

Or had they? Maxine’s own struggle to bridge the chasm between her parents’ culture and her own American childhood is an heroic act in a modern age. In Chapter 5, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” we read of Ts’ai Yen, a poet of the 1st century A.D. who is sold to barbarians and carried off to a far land. She suffers greatly from loneliness and is misunderstood in her new surroundings. At night she hears the barbarians play such a high-pitched and disturbing noise on their flutes that she moves her tent farther away:

She hid in her tent but could not sleep through the sound. Then, out of Ts’ai Yen’s tent . . . the barbarians heard a woman’s voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts’ai sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger.

Like the heroine Ts’ai Yen’s song, Maxine Hong Kingston’s book is a women’s song about China and her family and the struggles of living in an unfamiliar land.

Angle of Repose

by
Wallace Stegner

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 4

by
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Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

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About the author

Wallace Stegner was founder and director of the Creative Writing Program at Stanford University, where he tutored and encouraged many other Western writers such as Edward Abbey, Ken Kesey, Larry McMurtry, and Scott Momaday. Stegner, who died in 1993, was an ardent environmentalist who also wrote nonfiction works and memoirs about life in the West. *Angle of Repose* was made into an opera in 1976 as a result of a Bicentennial commission by the San Francisco Opera.

Discussion questions

Stegner wrote, "The west does not need to explore its myths much further; it has already relied on them too long." *Angle of Repose* disputes several common myths of the early west. What are some of them?

In what ways do both Susan and Oliver Ward deserve our sympathy? How was each responsible for the difficulties in their marriage? Does their marriage represent in some ways a national tension between east and west?

Additional readings

Ernest J. Finney. *California Time*, 1998.
Mary Hallock Foote. *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote*, 1992.
Wallace Stegner. *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, 1943.
Wallace Stegner. *A Shooting Star*, 1961.

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Angle of Repose
by
Wallace Stegner

An influential writer, teacher, and interpreter of life in the American West, Wallace Stegner grew up in Utah, North Dakota, Washington, Montana, Wyoming, and Saskatchewan. His family—like so many other families in the West—moved from place to place, ever chasing the prospect of a better life elsewhere. “I grew up without history,” Stegner wrote, “in a place where human occupation had left fewer traces than the passage of buffalo and antelope herds. I early acquired the desire to find some history to which I myself belonged.” The discomforts of rootlessness and a longing for a sense of “home,” common themes in Stegner’s novels, comprise the central focus of his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Angle of Repose*.

The book’s narrator is Lyman Ward, a retired University of California professor, recently divorced from his unfaithful spouse. He has lost a leg to a debilitating bone disease and is confined to a wheelchair. Striving to distance himself from his losses and to recover his sense of identity and purpose, Lyman moves into the home where he spent part of his childhood with his grandparents in Grass Valley, California, and undertakes research for a book about his grandparents’ lives. Stegner borrowed the basic outline for this story from his own research into the letters of Mary Hallock Foote, a noted frontier novelist and illustrator.

Lyman’s grandmother, Susan Burling—like Mary Hallock Foote—grew up in the cultivated and genteel society of New York during the Edith Wharton era, between 1870 and 1890, surrounded by people acclaimed for their literary and artistic achievement. Susan Burling, also like Foote, marries a Westerner, an engineer of a background and temperament quite unlike her own.

Both women spend the rest of their lives in the West, following their husbands from job to job, mining camp to mining camp, dream to dream. They are ill-suited for life on the frontier, yet they make a go of it, albeit haltingly, raising families and stubbornly pursuing their own literary and artistic careers. They typify the person with Eastern roots, displaced in the West and struggling to adapt, whose life became a familiar American drama as the country expanded to its Pacific shores.

Lyman’s grandfather, Oliver Ward, meets Susan Burling at her home in New York, where he is one of many invited guests. The two spend a brief moment alone together, during which Susan paints and Oliver—as is his way—says little. Yet they correspond by mail over the next several years while Oliver works as an engineer in a California mine. One day Oliver returns to Susan’s home and proposes marriage. By this time he is well accustomed to the rigors of life on the frontier and all the more out of step with the refined behaviors of Eastern gentility. He carries a revolver into Susan’s home, flaunting his rustic lifestyle. Susan’s friends are aghast and warn her against marrying a ruffian of dubious pedigree. They caution her that life in the West could be nothing but unpleasant and far inferior to the more civilized New York. Nevertheless, Susan and Oliver marry and Susan later joins her husband in a mining camp in the Sierras.

During her train ride west, already dismayed by the coarse conditions of her new surroundings, Susan writes home:

. . . lonely little clusters of settlers’ houses with the great monotonous waves of land stretching miles around them, that make my heart ache for the women who live there. They stand in the house door as the train whirls past, and I wonder if they feel the hopelessness of their exile.

Life in exile is the prevailing attitude Susan adopts toward her residence in the West, and for years she nourishes the notion of returning east as soon as Oliver establishes himself as an engineer of consequence. She writes from the mining camp that the “undertone” of her marriage is such that “. . . this is not our real home. . . we do not belong here except as circumstances keep us,” and she assumes her husband feels the same way. But Oliver, says his grandson, had other ideas. He was one of the “makers and doers,” a true frontiersman who “wanted to take a piece of the wilderness and turn it into a home for civilization.”

Readers’ opinions may differ as to whether Susan’s complaints about frontier life are justifiable. Lyman Ward concludes that his grandmother “felt imprisoned” in her husband’s life. Oliver Ward leads his wife and children through a long string of failed dreams, deceptive opportunities, impermanent jobs and rustic homes at important early mining and irrigation projects in California, Colorado, Mexico and Idaho.

Day by day, the marriage grows more sullen as dreams deflate and collapse, one after the other. Susan harbors an unspoken resentment toward her husband as the cause of her “exile.” Oliver’s failed inventions and schemes force Susan to support the family with income from her writings and illustrations. He is often absent on distant explorations and occasionally drinks too much to numb a gnawing sense of personal failure. Susan, meanwhile, escapes first into letters and visits with her more refined friends back home and eventually into the arms of Oliver’s most trusted friend, Frank Sargent, an assistant engineer.

The downward spiral of the couple’s history reaches its conclusion the day their youngest daughter drowns while Susan dallies with her lover. Susan’s lover commits suicide, her husband leaves her, and her son turns cold toward her forever. Eventually, Oliver invites Susan to live with him in California, in the very house where their grandson, Lyman Ward, now composes the saga of their tumultuous relationship. There, in Grass Valley, the couple reaches an “angle of repose” (“angle of repose” is an engineering term for the slope at which a rolling stone will come to rest). They spend the next several decades together—distant and alienated, but determined.

As a result of his investigation into his grandparents’ marriage, Lyman Ward decides to be more forgiving of his own wife’s unfaithfulness, and allows her back into his life. “Wisdom,” he concludes, “is knowing what you have to accept.” This wisdom is perhaps the angle of repose where Susan and Oliver Ward finally came to rest.

Farewell, My Lovely by Raymond Chandler

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 8

by
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About the Author

In addition to his many novels and stories, Raymond Chandler wrote Hollywood screenplays (*Double Indemnity*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Strangers on a Train*). *The Big Sleep*, his first Philip Marlowe novel, was written in three months in 1939. Disgusted with Hollywood, he moved to La Jolla, California, in 1946. He died in relative obscurity in 1959.

Discussion questions

What drives Marlowe? Is he too good to be true?

In what ways do the specific landscapes and places of southern California help shape the moral atmosphere of the book? Would a story like this work as well set in another part of the U.S. in 1940?

Additional readings

James M. Cain. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 1934.
Raymond Carver. *Short Cuts*, 1993.
Raymond Chandler. *The Long Good-bye*, 1950.
Dashiell Hammett. *The Maltese Falcon*, 1930.

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Farewell, My Lovely
by
Raymond Chandler

Raymond Chandler wrote seven Los Angeles-based mysteries, all featuring the hard-boiled, wise-cracking detective Philip Marlowe. Although Chandler didn't invent "tough guy" fiction, or coin the character of the hard-boiled detective as urban crusader, his detective novels are of notable and lasting value; he raised the detective thriller to the level of social criticism. The seven Philip Marlowe novels have been made into 11 films, in which Marlowe is played by Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, Robert Montgomery, Dick Powell, Elliott Gould and others. Because of the haunting depictions in these films of urban life in Los Angeles as sordid and unglamorous, Chandler's works have become associated with "film noir." His novels are more than entertaining stories; they are keen insights into the contradictions, illusions, and uneasiness of mid-twentieth century life in California.

Jerry Speir, Chandler's biographer, emphasizes the development of Philip Marlowe's character as an expression of Chandler's own struggles. Born in Chicago in 1888, Chandler moved to England with his divorced mother and spent most of his childhood in the Victorian atmosphere of moral rectitude and social propriety of his maternal grandmother's home. In English public schools, Chandler studied the classics and internalized a code of ethics in which masculine virtue is achieved through honor and self-sacrifice. Entwined in these two influences, Chandler's personality became a contradictory mix of high-minded moralism and a fascination with the lustiness and allure of adventurous, exaggerated masculinity.

Speir describes this contradiction of the mind as an "essential dualism" in the young Chandler, signifying an internal struggle between an "innate romanticism against a very self-conscious cynicism." The battle between romanticism and cynicism accurately defines the driving force behind tough-guy detective Philip Marlowe. It may also account for his public appeal: many twentieth-century Americans struggle with similar contradictions.

Romanticism is deeply rooted in the American character, beginning with dreams of the New World immigrants, to the "land of opportunity" optimism in the expansion and development of the continent, to the "get rich quick" thrill of the California gold rush. Of course, the problem with dreams is that they so often lead to disillusionment when reality fails to measure up to impossibly romantic expectations.

Since the Gold Rush days, California has been a focal point for this human dilemma. The "Golden State" has always promised more than it could deliver. Yet dreamers arrive every day, and Raymond Chandler was one of them; Chandler moved to southern California after World War I, lured by the economic prospects of the oil boom. There he found the perfect external expression of his own internal conflicts.

This was paradise corrupted; urban development sprawled across southern California explosively, erratically, and irresponsibly, fueled by the discovery of oil. The landscape was blemished with billboards and garbage. Local governments were troubled by graft and corruption. The movie industry's glittering facade hid a seamy underside of amoral excess and integrity blighted with greed. Southern California became, in Chandler's view, the epitome of the world gone wrong; this was the American Dream plundered by the dark side of success. Chandler's novels became a powerful indictment of the careless, selfish, narcissistic, dishonest society in Los Angeles prior to World War II.

In *Farewell, My Lovely*, which some critics believe to be Chandler's best work, several apparently unrelated crimes are ultimately traced by the dogged, much abused detective to a single source—a kingpin gangster and gambler who has effectively bought the mayor and police of Bay City (read Santa Monica)—a not inaccurate representation of the pervasive corruption of L.A. officialdom in the 1930s and early 40s.

The trail begins in a dangerous, virtually all-black neighborhood of Central Avenue; moves through the shabby stucco bungalows of South L.A., the seaside mansions of Montemar Vista (Malibu) and the winding canyon roads to the east, and well-known stretches of Hollywood Boulevard and Sunset Strip, and climaxes with a dramatic scene on board a gambling ship moored in international waters off Bay City.

Enroute, our rude, stalwart hero is beaten, choked, and drugged; meets and insults the wealthy and the decadent, a fake psychic healer, and burned-out and sold-out cops and other unsavory characters, most of whom drink and smoke constantly. The ever-twisting plot, which involves a stolen jade necklace, various kinds of drugs, a brutal ex-convict searching for his old flame, and a surprising final revelation, is in the end less important than Chandler's overall indictment of careless, cruel, selfish, and dishonest society, and his vivid, if only slightly overdrawn, portrait of Los Angeles in the years before World War II.

Marlowe is a modern innocent. His quest is truth and justice, but his greatest challenge is maintaining his own moral equilibrium in a world of crime and compromised ethics. This broken-hearted tough-guy will make you laugh with caustic asides: "The eighty-five cent dinner tasted like a discarded mail-bag"; "She was cute as a washtub"; "He was a big man but not more than six feet five inches tall and no wider than a beer truck." Chandler summarizes Marlowe's character as follows:

[Marlowe]. . . never gets the girl, never marries, never really has any private life, except insofar as he must eat and sleep and have a place to keep his clothes . . . he gets nothing but his fee, for which he will if he can protect the innocent, guard the helpless and destroy the wicked, and the fact that he must do this while earning a meager living in a corrupt world is what makes him stand out.

Ishi in Two Worlds

by
Theodora Kroeber

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 1

by
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Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

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Questions for discussion

Were the conflicts between the Yahi and foreigners encroaching on Yahi land inevitable? Is it possible that history might have played out differently?

How were the values that governed Ishi's life different from those of his protectors?

What can be learned by this modern encounter with a Stone Age survivor?

Additional readings

Mary Ellicott Arnold and Mabel Reed. *In the Land of the Grasshopper Song*, 1957, reprinted 1980.

Robert Fleming Heizer. *Ishi, the Last Yahi: A Documentary History*, 1979.

Alfred Kroeber. *Handbook of the Indians of California*, 1925, reissued 1977.

Malcolm Margolin, ed. *The Way We Lived: California Indian Stories, Songs and Reminiscences*, Rev. ed. 1993

Malcolm Margolin and Yolanda Montijo, eds. *Native Ways: California Indian Stories and Memories*, 1997.

Jerry Stanley. *Digger: The Tragic Fate of the California Indians from the Missions to the Gold Rush*, 1997.

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Ishi in Two Worlds
by
Theodora Kroeber

In August of 1911, a lone Indian wandered out of the bushes and collapsed in a slaughterhouse corral a few miles from the town of Oroville, near the foothills of Mount Lassen in north-central California. This man— “emaciated to starvation...naked except for a ragged scrap of ancient covered-wagon canvas which he wore around his shoulders like a poncho...” —soon became renowned as Ishi, “the last wild Indian in North America.” His surrender marked the close of an era in the history of the original inhabitants of this continent. *Ishi in Two Worlds*, by Theodora Kroeber, is a heartwarming biography of this remarkable man who eventually made a purposeful life for himself in the “trolley world” of San Francisco.

Theodora Kroeber begins her biography by tracing the long decline of Ishi’s tribe, the Yahi, which dwindled over three or four centuries from a thriving community of thousands to Ishi, its lone surviving member. Kroeber reveals that at one time native peoples in California numbered approximately 250,000, from at least 21 known tribes.

The Yahi had remained virtually untouched by Spanish and Mexican newcomers until 1844, when land grants by the Mexican government deeded large parts of the Sacramento Valley into private ownership, including Yahi holdings in the creeks and forests at the foot of Mount Lassen. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Spanish/Mexican reign in California by seceding to the United States all of that state and other large areas of the present American southwest. A year later Yahi lands were inundated by the “FortyNiners,” hordes of Anglo immigrants pouring in from the east over the Sierra Nevada ranges in search of gold.

The ensuing conflicts between the indigenous tribes and relentless waves of hungry settlers are stories all too familiar across the American West, the continent in general, and perhaps the world. From time immemorial, migrating peoples have displaced indigenous populations by one means or another. Yet the annihilation of entire tribes of American Indians seems particularly disturbing to many, perhaps because we think ourselves in this modern age to be more civilized than our actions have shown. At any rate, “Gold seems to work on the human psyche to its undoing,” states Kroeber.

By 1874, in less than three decades, the Yahi had declined from as many as three thousand to only a dozen adults and one ten-year-old child, Ishi. For the next 12 years this small band managed to conceal itself in the canyons and forests of its homeland, traveling “long distances by leaping from boulder to boulder, their bare feet leaving no print,” sleeping under rabbit skin blankets and otherwise surviving in a manner “. . . the most totally aboriginal and primitive of any on the continent, at least after the coming of the white man to America.”

Ishi’s appearance in the corral signified his arrival at the limits of human endurance. After his fellow tribesmen expired one by one, Ishi had lived alone for more than three years in the wild, knowing a language intelligible to no other man, practicing a culture that would pass into extinction upon his death. All Ishi knew of the white man’s world was that surely a Yahi would be put to death. There is gripping drama in the moment the lone figure from the past reaches out to the modern world. Happily, in this instance at least, the modern world in 1911 was civil enough to help with Ishi’s adaptation, discerning enough to recognize the value of his knowledge, and compassionate enough to comprehend the global tragedy of an entire culture’s demise.

Given a home of sorts at the University of California’s Museum of Anthropology in San Francisco, Ishi is cared for largely by the anthropologists Thomas Talbot Waterman and Alfred Kroeber, the author’s husband. The daily details of his introduction to modern life are at once sad and triumphant, humorous and tragic, but entirely heartwarming as well, offering a reassuring glimpse of the human potential for bonds of friendship which transcend racial and cultural barriers.

Ishi works as an assistant janitor at the museum and gives public demonstrations of his native crafts and cultural practices to eager audiences of museum visitors, young and old alike. He learns to manage his life independently and with dignity in the “wilds of civilization.” Wearing a gentle smile and presenting an affable demeanor, he wins the trust and friendship of his community and much admiration from people far away, as news of “the last wild Indian in North America” spreads across the globe.

Ishi’s life in the modern world lasted only until 1916, when he died of tuberculosis. Two years before, in May of 1914, Ishi had escorted his anthropologist friends back to his old homelands on an extended camping tour in which he instructed his friends in the art of “going native.” Kroeber’s insightful rendering of this adventure portrays it wryly as both scientific field work and boyish good times. Of Ishi’s value to the world, Kroeber concludes:

...he was unique, a last man, the last man of his world, and his experience of sudden, lonely, and unmitigated change-over from the Stone Age to the Steel Age was also unique...a living affirmation of the credo of the anthropologists that modern man—homo sapiens—whether contemporary American Indian or Athenian Greek of Phidias’ time, is quite simply and wholly human in his biology, in his capacity to learn new skills and new ways as a changed environment exposes him to them, in his power of abstract thought, and in his moral and ethical discriminations.

About the author

Theodora Kroeber (1897-1979) and her husband, Alfred L. Kroeber, were associated with the University of California Museum of Anthropology in San Francisco and were Ishi’s close allies in the “wilds of civilization.” She made use of her husband’s notes and her own experiences with Ishi to compose this account after Alfred Kroeber’s death in 1960.

Ordeal by Hunger

by George R. Stewart

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 3

by
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Discussion questions

Stewart says the Donner tragedy was unique in the history of the westward migrations—no more typical, he insists, than the maiden voyage of the Titanic was typical of transatlantic crossings. He also tells us that apart from proving Hastings' shortcut to California was a fraud and helping to carve out a new route to Salt Lake City, the Donner Party experience was of no historical consequence. Why then has it remained so memorable an episode in American history and legend?

Much has been said about the trait of “rugged individualism” that supposedly existed in settlers of the American West—a quality some say still defines our national character. How did this trait help or hurt the Donner Party?

Additional readings

- Louise Clappe. *The Shirley Letters: From the California Mines 1851-1852*, 1970.
- Bret Harte. *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, 1879.
- J.S. Holliday. *The World Rushed In*, 1981.
- Virginia Reed Murphy. *Across the Plains in the Donner Party*, 1996.
- Sarah Royce. *A Frontier Lady: Recollections of the Gold Rush and Early California*, 1977.
- George R. Stewart. *The California Trail*, 1962.
- Mark Twain. *Roughing It*, 1872.

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Ordeal By Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party

by George R. Stewart

“The misadventure of the Donner Party,” George R. Stewart writes, “constitutes one of the most amazing stories of that land of amazing stories, the American West.” Reader be warned: this book may be difficult to read because it recounts in detail the spiraling tragedy of a group of ill-fated California-bound settlers, half of whom died along the trail. The few who did complete the journey survived almost unimaginable human deprivations, including being forced by starvation into cannibalism.

Reader be encouraged: also within this dark account “runs the scarlet thread of courage and the golden thread of heroism,” says the author. For many, the Donner Party disaster has been reduced to a ghoulish folk tale. But historian Stewart painstakingly traces the facts of this real-life drama, casting a more informed and compassionate light on these events as a worthy reminder of “what human beings may achieve, endure, and perpetuate in the final press of circumstance.”

What went wrong? The Donner Party originated in a fairly typical emigrant train of wagons heading westward in 1846 along the Oregon Trail. With 20 wagons and 87 settlers, the group was truly a “microcosm of humanity”: middle-class farmers and their families from Illinois, teamsters, servants, Irish and German immigrants, and a number of independent adventurers who joined along the way. In July of 1846, these 20 wagons made the fateful decision to separate from a larger group and leave the established trail in favor of a new shortcut to California.

The new route, south of Salt Lake and across the desert, had been publicized by Lanford Hastings, a youthful adventurer and respected author of emigrant guides. But Hastings’ route, though perhaps shorter, was much more treacherous, and the Donner Party wasted precious weeks cutting timbers, clearing away boulders, and building the trail in front of them as they pushed westward. At times, they gained no more than a mile a day.

Next the party faced the three day and three night-long ordeal of crossing the salt flats, followed by a grueling push through long, repetitious miles of desert. Cattle, oxen and horses died of thirst and exhaustion. The travelers became more and more dispirited, quarreling among themselves as provisions became scarce. Wagons broke down; family treasures were jettisoned to lighten the load; more than one hundred horses, cattle and oxen were lost to Indians. One man killed another in

what might be argued as self-defense, but the survivor was banished after nearly being hanged.

By the time the Donner Party reached the mountain passes of California, it was the middle of October. Time had run out; snow at higher elevations already blocked the passes. Still, the group pushed on until a succession of winter storms halted their progress entirely. By early November, they were forced to erect crude shelters—three log huts—in which 79 people huddled in desperation, certain they would starve as the snow continued relentlessly.

The image of the noble pioneer is present throughout American history. Ordinary people who ventured westward, enduring extraordinary circumstances in the wilderness, were thought to be strengthened physically and purified in character by their experiences. In some instances, this may have been true. Many in the Donner Party responded courageously to life-threatening circumstances. Tamsen Donner, for example, was ever charitable to her fellow travelers, sharing provisions and lending support however she was able. She cared tenderly for her children, combing their hair daily amid the squalor of their primitive hut. In the end, she sacrificed her own life, sending her children on alone with the rescue party because she could not desert her husband on his deathbed.

Other members of the party, such as James Reed, displayed almost unimaginable bravery and determination in returning or attempting to return to camp on rescue missions of pitiable consequence. They are proof that within the spectrum of possible human responses to extreme stress is the choice to risk one’s life for others. But the opposite response is also possible. Evidence suggests that Lewis Keseberg may have murdered Tamsen Donner before cannibalizing her body. The would-be rescuers who abandon the Donner children after plundering their meager belongings prove that under extreme stress, some willingly sacrifice others for their own survival.

In the end, 47 people out of 87 survived. Five died along the trail through the desert. Thirty-four (plus two Indians sent to aid them) died in the mountains. One small child, after miraculously surviving the winter in camp, was carried out by rescuers, but died tragically upon arriving safely at the fort on the other side of the pass.

Those who had survived through long months under the deep snow had first eaten dogs, mice, their own shoes and the hide roofs of their huts. Finally, seized by the delirium of near starvation, they began to cut up, cook, and consume the bodies of their dead.

In 1869, not long after the Donner Party disaster, the trip west across the continent was simplified greatly by the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Today, the lake near the Donner camp (formerly Truckee Lake) is called Donner Lake in honor of this much discussed event in western history, and there is a wide highway across what is still known as Donner Pass.

It is difficult to imagine what motives propelled settlers west in spite of the dangers along the way—and in the case of the Donner Party, especially—what forces enabled them to persevere in the face of the overwhelming odds against them. Some in the Donner group, like other emigrants before and after them, were motivated by gleaming promises of economic gain and greener pastures elsewhere. Some were driven by a thirst for adventure. But as “flatlanders,” they were ignorant of dangers they would face in the mountains, and they lacked the leadership of experienced guides, for which they paid dearly.

Americans live in a very mobile culture. How much of the restless pioneer spirit—always seeking a better life in some new place down the road—is still within us? How difficult do we expect the journey to be? What price are we willing to pay?

About the author

George R. Stewart (1895-1980) was a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, for nearly 40 years. He wrote a number of novels set in California, such as *Fire* (1948) and *Storm* (1941), but *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* remains his best-known work.

Pocho

by
José Antonio Villareal

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 12

by
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Discussion questions

When people move to another country, how much should they be expected to change to fit the norms of their new environment? What might immigrant families gain by resisting change?

Some Mexican families did not come to this country so much as the country came to them when lands that once belonged to Mexico became American soil. Should these families be expected to assimilate?

Was the disintegration of the Rubio family inevitable? What might have helped the family to weather assimilation? Is anyone to blame? Why is change easier for some people than for others?

Additional readings

Arturo Islas. *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*, 1984.

Alejandro Morales. *The Brick People*, 1989.

Gary Soto. *Living Up the Street: Narrative Recollections*, 1985.

Victor Villasenor. *Rain of Gold*, 1991.

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Pocho
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Richard Rubio, the protagonist of this novel, is a “Pocho,” an American-born child whose parents have immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Richard’s father, Juan, fought in the Mexican Revolution with Pancho Villa, and crossed the border from Mexico into the United States to hide after he realized the tide of the revolution had turned against him.

The story of immigration is the story of great struggle. In Mexico, Juan Rubio had been a man of stature as a “vaquero,” a horseman of great skill who had lived the rough and independent life of a strong-willed man on the frontier. In Texas, Juan, like other immigrants, made a meager living picking cotton or sharecropping. A proud man, Juan eventually makes his way to California, seeking the promise of a better life elsewhere. He is joined there by his wife, Consuelo, who soon gives birth to their first and only son, Richard.

Richard grows up in the difficult position of straddling two worlds: the Mexican heritage of his parents and the American ways of his playmates at school. Juan Rubio holds firmly to his dream of someday returning to Mexico; he wants his son to become a vaquero. Consuelo wants her son to become a priest. Both parents pressure the child accordingly, and disagreements over the child’s future underscore and exacerbate a widening rift in the marriage.

The Mexico of his parents seems only a fictional place in the distant past; Richard does not see himself as Mexican. He does not want to be a priest or a vaquero. As he matures, he openly questions the tenets of the church and challenges the priests to reason with him. He also challenges his parents’ way of life in general, considering their ways backward and foolish.

Education is Richard’s key to his own identity and maturation. He is an avid reader, devouring a book a day and five or six each weekend until he has exhausted the shelves in his school’s library. He learns English and, importantly, he learns to read and write in Spanish also. Gradually Juan sees that his son’s talents are not the same as his own. By now Juan dreams that if his son cannot be a vaquero in Mexico, he will one day be a lawyer or a doctor in Mexico.

Understanding the language of both cultures, Richard brings to his parents’ home a bridge between the two worlds. He reads for his parents at night and translates the ways of American culture to them. Repeatedly, he tries to prompt his parents into change; equally often he is fearful of the consequences of the very changes he has set in motion. It is difficult for his father, especially, to watch the destruction of his family’s old way of life as changes in his home move inevitably forward and out of his control. When Richard speaks English in the home, Juan roars, “Silence! We will not speak the dog language in my house!” Richard replies, “But this is America, Father. If we live in this country, we must live like Americans.”

The immigrants eventually purchase a home, but just when it appears they finally have found a firm foothold in their new land, their family falls apart. In buying the home, Juan concedes that his dream of returning to the homeland will never be realized. He drinks more often and begins, as he had openly done in Mexico, to consort with women. Consuelo rebels. She has learned that women in America are not as powerless as women in her homeland. There are laws that protect women in America, and she challenges her husband’s extramarital affairs and asserts her right to assume some authority in the household.

Richard is painfully aware that his family is undergoing a “strange metamorphosis” in assimilating the new culture:

One day Juan Rubio cooked his own breakfast, and soon after he moved into another room. Now there was no semblance of discipline whatever, and even the smallest child screamed at either parent, and came and went as she pleased. The house was unkempt and the father complained, but Consuelo, who had always been proud of her talents for housekeeping, now took the dirty house as a symbol of her emancipation, and it was to remain that way until her death.

That day, Richard saw clearly what he had helped create, and sought to repair the damage, but it was too late. What was done was beyond repair.

Richard will not deny his Mexican heritage like some of his friends who talk of changing their name when they grow older to hide their families’ origins. On the other hand, although he befriends the “pachucos,” who in their counterculture manner of dress and language have rejected both Mexican and American cultures, he is boldly able to declare, “I am a Pocho, and we speak like this because here in California we make Castilian words out of English words.”

At the close of the novel, World War II is bringing even greater changes into the lives of Americans from many different backgrounds and orientations. Consuelo tells Richard he is the man of the house; she expects him to care for and support the family now that the father has moved out and wants to marry another woman. Richard decides to enlist, thus entering farther into the tides of change, and he knows “that for him there would never be a coming back.”

About the author

José Antonio Villarreal was born in California, the son of a Mexican migrant worker. He graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1950, after serving four years in the Navy. He lived and taught in Mexico, California, Colorado and Texas. His other novels include *The Fifth Horseman* (1974) and *Clemente Chacon* (1984).

Ramona
by
Helen Hunt Jackson

**StoryLines California
Discussion Guide No. 2**

by
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Discussion questions

In *Ramona*, the early Spanish culture of California is portrayed as distinctly superior to that of the cruel and greedy new Yankee settlers of the 1840s. Jackson suggests that the Native American culture of Alessandro and his people is ethically superior to both. Is the author's comparative ranking of the three major California cultures fair?

Ramona invites discussion on the nature of honor and nobility. Who is honorable in the book? Who is noble? Why? How does Senora Moreno define honor and nobility? How does Ramona define honor and nobility?

Additional readings

Ida Rae Egli, ed. *No Rooms of Their Own: Women Writers of Early California*, 1992.

Helen Hunt Jackson. *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some Indian Tribes*, 1881, reissued 1995.

Limerick, Patricia N. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, 1987.

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Ramona
by

Helen Hunt Jackson

Warfare between Mexico and the United States ended in 1849, with the United States adding to its southern border vast tracts of land that are today the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Spanish colonists and Mexicans were already living in these newly acquired territories, however, as were dozens of tribes and bands of indigenous Native Americans.

As Anglo-American settlers moved into these territories, conflicts arose concerning land ownership. Old Spanish land grants and deeds signed by Spain and Mexico were no longer valid, and American settlers eagerly claimed much of the American Southwest as their own. Tribes of Native Americans, who had created villages and settlements in these territories centuries before, were forced out of their homelands, lost in the frenzy of land-grabbing immigrants.

Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* portrays the plight of these indigenous tribes as the world closes in on them. *Ramona* is a love story, but it was also intended to attract public attention and to incite political reform. In this light, *Ramona* is much like Harriet Beecher Stowe's politically-motivated *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a sympathetic portrayal of Blacks in nineteenth-century America.

Before writing *Ramona*, Jackson was already an influential voice in political affairs regarding Native Americans. Her earlier, controversial work, *A Century of Dishonor*, had offered a view of native peoples as victims, not aggressors. Its publication led to her appointment by President Chester Arthur as Commissioner of Indian Affairs for southern California. Jackson traveled by wagon to Indian villages in the region gathering information, intervening in land rights disputes, and gaining firsthand knowledge of the hardships suffered by Native Americans. Much of *Ramona* was created out of her experiences as commissioner.

In *A Century of Dishonor*, Jackson "tried to attack the people's conscience directly," but in *Ramona* she "sugared the pill" with the intention of influencing a wider audience. Romantic novels were popular reading at the time, so Jackson chose to couch her political message in that more widely accepted form.

Central to the plot of *Ramona* are the complexities of cultures intersecting during a time of dramatic political change. The novel opens on the ranch of Señora Moreno, the descendant of Spanish Colonialists, widow of a Spanish officer, and proprietor of an estate that once stretched from the interior of California 40 miles to the ocean, but has been greatly reduced in size since American rule.

With her Spanish heritage, Señora Moreno fancies her breeding superior to the mixed-blood Mexican laborers and the local Indians. She carries out her daily affairs with an air of Spanish nobility, ruling the household with an authority born of her desperate resistance to the changing social structure of the world beyond her ranch. She dotes on her son, Felipe, her last hope for the purity of the Moreno blood line. Ramona, a step-daughter of sorts, has lived with Señora Moreno since age four, but because of her questionable, mixed-blood heritage, the Señora views Ramona with disdain.

Ramona and Felipe accept each other lovingly as brother and sister, but Señora Moreno is so threatened by and ashamed of Ramona's mixed blood that she hides the fact even from the child. All might have gone smoothly had Ramona not fallen in love with Alessandro, a hard-working, likable, and handsome young Indian man who has come to the Moreno ranch to shear sheep.

When Señora Moreno finds out about Ramona's attraction to Alessandro, she locks her in her room and forbids any further contact between the two. Alessandro returns to his village for a few days to let the crisis cool, but he discovers alarming news at home—American settlers have taken possession of his tribe's lands. Eventually Alessandro and Ramona elope and have a daughter of their own, but their marriage becomes a long, sad struggle with homelessness, poverty, and trouble with greedy, encroaching whites. One night, Alessandro becomes distracted, mistakenly rides another man's horse home, and is shot as a horse thief.

Ramona nearly dies from grief. She and her daughter are cared for by local Indians until, miraculously, in the tradition of nineteenth-century romantic novels, Felipe appears at the last moment, rescues Ramona from poverty, professes his long-standing love for her, marries her, and takes her child as his own.

To modern sensibilities, *Ramona* may seem contrived and sentimentalized. Alessandro, for example, is the perfect image of the "noble savage"; he is handsome, brave, and true to such an extent that even Señora Moreno remarks "how the boy makes one forget he is Indian!" Ramona has remarkable will power and is flawlessly kind, compassionate, generous, and persevering. The late Native American scholar/writer Michael Dorris reminds the reader that "Ramona was propaganda," and the characters were idealized for a purpose:

By peopling these communities with characters who exemplified the highest American attitudes and behaviors, Mrs. Jackson invited her readers to empathize with Native Americans whom the public had been educated—by a century of U.S. dishonor and conquest—to disdain.

About the author

Helen Fiske Hunt, born in 1830 in Amherst, Mass., was a friend of poet Emily Dickinson. She married William Jackson of Colorado in 1875 and moved west, where she heard from Indians of their mistreatment by whites. She researched the situation and wrote *A Century of Dishonor*, an indictment of the U.S. government's policies toward Indians. As Commissioner of Indian Affairs in southern California, Jackson was a powerful political force for Native Americans. A "Ramona Festival" is still held each year in the town of Hemet in Riverside County, Calif.

The Octopus

by
Frank Norris

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 5

by
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Discussion questions

In the mystical visions of Vanamee there is the suggestion of eternal reconciliation, a final moral rectitude in the universe. Is this vision justifiable given the fact that evil so obviously triumphs over good throughout the novel?

Although the outline of this novel is drawn from real events, are the actions of the characters and the outcome of their individual transformations entirely believable?

Additional readings

Frank Norris. *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, 1899.

Frank Norris. *The Pit*, 1903.

Josiah Royce. *The Feud of Oakfield Creek: A Novel of California Life*, 1971.

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The Octopus
by
Frank Norris

Frank Norris's epic novel of California's wheat ranching era (1870-1900) is an examination of an important issue in American life: the rights and freedoms of the individual versus the collective strengths of the impersonal corporation. This issue was a prominent concern in other turn-of-the-century novels such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, as America became industrialized and big business monopolized markets. Large trusts (or corporations, as we call them today) such as the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad in *The Octopus*, in some cases ruthlessly exploited the country's resources and people to amass huge profits and vast corporate holdings. The 1880s through the 1920s were years of escalating resentment toward unrestricted corporate growth and power, culminating in labor unions, antitrust laws and child labor laws.

Norris based the pivotal events of this novel on a real-life drama that had unfolded in California's San Joaquin Valley in 1880: a bloody shoot-out between ranchers and representatives of the railroad. As an incentive for the construction of transcontinental railways, the federal government had granted to the railroads ownership of large tracts of land adjacent to the path of the rails, thus creating a checkerboard of railroad lands in alternating sections along the tracks. Because of this policy, the Southern Pacific Railroad was in 1880 the greatest landholder in California. Most of the railroad's lands were relatively worthless parcels of sand until they were leased to rancher-tenants, who arduously dug irrigation ditches and made enough improvements to plant successful crops.

The rancher-tenants expected to eventually buy their leased lands for \$2.50 to \$5 an acre, the price originally quoted by the railroad. But after ten years of improvements, the railroad insisted on revised sale prices of \$14 to \$40 per acre, bankrupting many ranchers and forcing them off the land. Ranchers organized a "League" in opposition to the railroad and attempted to outmaneuver the Southern Pacific in the courts first.

Consistently the railroad prevailed, proving itself to be an adversary as powerful as the great steam locomotives pounding down the rails, which reached out like great tentacles across the entire state. When the railroad finally assigned ownership of disputed lands to hand-picked dummy purchasers, the

ranchers fought against eviction, standing in armed resistance. In May 1880, in a famous shoot-out between ranchers, U.S. Marshals, and railroad representatives for ownership of wheat lands in Tulare County, California, eight men died.

But Norris's examination of these events is not as simple as the classic "good-guy" ranchers versus the "bad-guy" corporate profiteers. In *The Octopus*, he attempts to convey a broader understanding of how conflicting values between individuals and the corporation reflected a turning point in the history of the American West and in the development of the country in general. Norris was a student at the University of California at Berkeley in 1893 when the prominent historian Frederick Jackson Turner announced that with no more free land available to the public, the American frontier had come to an end. Turner had earlier postulated that in settling the West, the American character had been reshaped by frontier values such as "rugged individualism." Turner described frontier values as:

... that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that dominant individualism, working for good or evil; that practical, inventive turn of mind, . . . that restless, nervous energy; . . . and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.

The ranchers of the San Joaquin Valley in *The Octopus* embody frontier values, but with the frontier coming to an end, their values are in conflict with those of the railroad giants who have supplanted the frontiersmen in dominating the California countryside. Historian Kevin Starr has written that corporate values "wanted things consolidated, organized, predicated—and fixed. The trust wanted ownership, not freedom; conformity, not rugged individualism."

Though Norris would appear to be the most sympathetic to frontier individualism, his characters Presley, the poet, and Vanamee, the mystic, transcend the clash of individual and corporate values and symbolize a point of view beyond easy judgments of good or evil. Norris portrays the ranchers as flawed by "gold rush mentality," aggressively ripping up the earth with

huge plows and planting crops year after year without regard to the depletion of the soil. They feverishly chase profits and stoop to bribery and murder to maintain control of their lands, all the while viewing themselves as honest, self-reliant, and dedicated to fair play.

On the other hand, although railroad profiteers like S. Behrman are depicted as openly ruthless, the business they are engaged in is necessary for transporting California wheat. Thus they contribute to feeding hungry populations in places as distant as India. Ranchers and corporate men alike die in the struggle for the possession of land. Yet the wheat continues to grow, giving sustenance to new life elsewhere.

Presley, the poet, understands the drama played out in the San Joaquin Valley as beyond human control, ruled by unseen currents and tides, a force that "brought men into the world," and "crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation." It is the same force that caused the wheat to grow and to be ripped from the earth to make way for new planting. The mystic, Vanamee, a wanderer in the desert, concludes:

Look at it all from the vast height of humanity—"greatest good for the greatest numbers." What remains? Men perish, men are corrupted, hearts are rent asunder, but what remains untouched, unassailable, undefiled? Try to find that, not only in this, but in every crisis of the world's life, and you will find, if your view be large enough, that it is not evil, but good, that in the end remains.

About the author

Frank Norris (1870-1902) lived most of his life in San Francisco. He studied in Berkeley and Paris and worked as a journalist in San Francisco, New York and South Africa. *The Octopus* was the first book in a planned trilogy of novels about California wheat—its growth, its distribution, and its consumption in countries around the world. The second volume in this trilogy, *The Pit*, was published posthumously. Norris died at the age of 32 before beginning the third volume.