

TEACHING THE INVISIBLE:  
ETHNIC HISTORY THROUGH ETHNIC LITERATURE

Paul McBride  
Ithaca College

At the close of one of the most remarkable American novels of the postwar era, Ralph Ellison's protagonist in Invisible Man explains his purpose in sharing with us his wrenching quest for self identity. "What else could I do?" he queries, "What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"<sup>1</sup> For historians, Invisible Man's parting question presents a disturbing challenge. We readily teach our students about slavery, black abolitionists, the clash between W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington, the civil rights movement and the rise of black militancy. Likewise, we routinely survey immigrant and ethnic groups, Handlin-like,<sup>2</sup> attending to the saga of migration, settlement, generational disjunction, the alienation of pre-industrial people thrust into the twentieth-century city, the role of ethnic institutions, the debilitation of the slums, and the inexorable forces of assimilation. Also, relying upon the fine recent studies of various ethnic groups, we contrast Jewish and Italian mobility, describe the weariness of the Chinese track gang member, frolic with the nineteenth-century Irish boss, or attend the strikes of Slavic steel workers.

Indeed, many of the better ethnic history courses do this and more. Yet, Invisible Man's haunting question still lingers. What if we only look through the black slave or the Jewish mother? What if our careful research does not enable us to see--in Ellison's words--those

birds of passage who were too obscure for learned classification, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound; of natures too ambiguous for the most ambiguous words, and too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents? We, who write no novels, histories or other books. What about us?<sup>3</sup>

How are we historians to understand, much less teach, the valuable historical insight that remains invisible to us, beyond or beneath our comfortable crutch of documentation? Luckily, in the field of ethnic studies, we have valuable allies in the fiction writers of the ethnic groups themselves. In their pages are often revealed the inner dimensions of the ethnics, the heart and viscera of their people. The best of the writers, unbound by the limitations of historical evidence, yet often mindful of the historians' contributions, share with us the aspirations and ideals, the feelings and fears of their people.

The novels I shall discuss here are obviously not exhaustive. I recommend them because my students have responded enthusiastically to them over the years in a number of courses and because I have greatly enjoyed teaching them.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic novelists have provided insight into the condition of their people that the historian would find difficult to document and discuss. James T. Farrell's masterpiece Studs Lonigan, for example, travels far beyond historical insight in describing the ferocious tribalism of the Irish in the United States, and he faces without flinching the depth of Irish working class racism and anti-Semitism. John Okada's bitter No No Boy depicts beyond the historian's ken the anguish of the relocation centers for the Japanese-American citizen and the pain of reentry when the war ended. Pietro DiDonato in his anguished Christ in Concrete has described the world of the Italian-American construction worker in terms that scald the senses

and indelibly imprint the memory. And so the litany continues. In this brief introduction to the uses of ethnic literature, I can only discuss one issue in depth. Consequently, I have prepared an annotated bibliography covering about forty novels for your additional information.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of ethnicity that historians seem to have blurred or ignored is the female experience. I do not mean to imply that ethnic studies have omitted women, but I do suggest that the histories leave it very difficult to imagine the female ethnic's thoughts, feelings, or aspirations. Male fiction writers have not been much more successful than historians in dealing with the female side of the ethnic experience.

There have been hints that the best of the novelists understand their lack of understanding. For example, in his famous battle royal chapter, Ralph Ellison allows his protagonist to observe of the stripper brought in by the crowd of rowdy rednecks, "Above her red, fixed-smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys."<sup>5</sup> The author was implying that women may suffer the same invisibility as blacks, but since he develops no female characters in his masterpiece beyond the superficial level, the reader cannot continue the comparison.

While most male ethnic novelists allow women only bit parts in their novels, some have made women their central characters. Mario Puzo's brilliant examination of Italian-American family life in The Fortunate Pilgrim revolves around the power and command of Lucia Santa Angeluzzi Corbo, mother extraordinary, who protects and defends Italian values and culture against all comers. Central to those values is the Italian family. In the course of the novel, Puzo brings to life the meaning of the term "amoral familism" and describes the tenacity of family loyalty among Italians.<sup>6</sup> At one point, her daughter Octavia, harboring American ambitions, asks permission to quit her job as a dressmaker to attend night school in preparation for a career in teaching. Octavia defends her request by citing the insidious promise of the Declaration of Independence--she wants to be happy. At this, Puzo writes:

the older woman had become a raging fury, contemptuous--the mother who had always defended her daughter's toity ways, her reading of books, her tailored suits that were as affected as a lorgnette. The mother had mimicked Octavia in the perfect English of a shallow girl, "You want to be happy." And then in Italian, with deadly seriousness, "Thank God you are alive."<sup>7</sup>

By novel's end, Lucia Santa has permitted her daughter to marry a Jew whom she describes in angrier moments as "the only Jew who does not know how to make money," but Octavia has remained quintessentially Italian. As our further discussion will reveal, both Lucia Santa and her daughter Octavia may have been developed much differently had Mario Puzo been female.

The image of woman as mother-defender of the ethnic culture is echoed in the pages of Ole Rolvaag's masterpiece of Norwegian-American literature, Giants of the Earth, the first novel of a lengthy trilogy in which the central character is Beret, wife of Per Hansa, for whom America represents endless challenge and accomplishment. But for Beret, there is little joy in her husband's accomplishments. She sees her values being eroded from without by the savagery of the relentless prairie and the inescapability of American acquisitiveness. Where her native Norway had offered stability, parental love, and cultural certainty, America brought only endless change,

physical and emotional hardship, and bitter loneliness. Despite all the opportunity that the new world offered, Beret could only long for the comfort of the old. In one moving passage, Beret is reminiscing about the old country:

. . . Often, now, she found herself thinking of the churchyard at home. . . . It would have been so pleasant to lie down there. . . . The churchyard was enclosed by a massive stone wall, broad and heavy; one couldn't imagine anything more reliable than that wall. She had sat on it often in the years when she was still her father's little girl. . . . In the midst of the churchyard lay the church, securely protecting everything round about. No fear had ever dwelt in that place; she could well remember how the boys used to jump over the graves; it had been great fun, too--at times she had joined the game. . . . Within that wall many of her dear ones slumbered: two brothers whom she had never seen, and a little sister that she remembered quite clearly, though she had died long, long ago; her grandparents, on both her father's and her mother's side, also rested here, and one of her great-grandfathers. She knew where all these graves lay. Her whole family, generation after generation, rested there--many more than she had any knowledge of. . . . Around the churchyard stood a row of venerable trees, looking silently down on the peace and the stillness within. . . . They gave such good shelter, those old trees!<sup>8</sup>

As the novel ends, the mighty Per Hansa has succumbed to the American wilderness, having frozen to death during a vicious snowstorm, while the woman he brought with him, and whom he suspected of not having the strength to migrate, survives and endures and sustains her family.

Both Puzo and Rolvaag view the ethnic woman as mother, as protector of established wisdom and values, as source of cultural stability. These views of the ethnic woman are important in their own right and valid as far as they go. But these are characteristics imposed upon women by men. They reflect the male view of women but not necessarily women's view of themselves. Still, the male perspective provides a plausible starting point for examining the gulf between the male and female worlds. It is equally intriguing to probe the reasons that few male ethnic writers are very adept at developing the personalities of their female characters. They tend to see women, so far as they see them at all, as mothers and wives who accept, even relish, their traditional cultural images and roles. Male writers such as Puzo and Rolvaag have recognized an important ingredient of the ethnic female experience--a preoccupation with the dimensions and demands of their culture. However, if we look at a few of the female ethnic novelists, we can quickly see that the relationship between women and their culture is much more complex and ambivalent than male novelists have seen. Moreover, female ethnic writers introduce us to the world of the unattached, single woman, full of aspirations and self definitions, that is simply invisible except through their writings. More often than not, female ethnic writers have used their pen both to describe and declare their independence from the confines of their male-determined culture. The unrestrained and unformed environment of the United States offered the writers the opportunity to create their own image and to voice self-directed aspirations rather than endure the patriarchal cultural definition that their history had imposed upon them from antiquity. In short, while male characters fled their culture in search of accomplishing things, females fled theirs in search of

their own personalities. Like Invisible Man, they had come to understand their own invisibility.

Consider, for example, Zora Neale Hurston, author of the poetic and haunting 1937 novel Their Eyes Were Watching God.<sup>9</sup> Her novel presents a brilliant description of black folk life and culture. She is the equal of any writer in capturing black dialect and none are better in telling folk stories. Her novel is all the more remarkable in that it has nothing to do with racism or white domination. It is about southern Blackfolk. Her ear is uncanny. When her heroine, Janie Starks, returns from a carefree fling with a much younger man, Teacake, Hurston describes the reaction of the citizenry awaiting her on the porch of the general store:

What she doin' coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?--Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?--Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?--What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?--Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?--Thought she was going to marry?--Where he left her?--What he done wid all her money?--Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs--why she don't stay in her class?

When she got to where they were she turned her face on the bander log and spoke. They scrambled a noisy "good evenin'" and left their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope. Her speech was pleasant enough, but she kept walking straight on to her gate. The porch couldn't talk for looking.

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day.<sup>10</sup>

Thereby did Janie Starks strut her stuff--assert her own personality.

Janie had run off with Teacake after her husband, the mayor of the town, died. But her separation from Mayor Starks had begun long before, when he treated her as a possession rather than as a person. At one point, speaking as much to her readers as to the men of Eatonton who were heatedly debating the merits of beating their wives, Janie shocked her friends into silence:

Sometimes God gits familiar with us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised he was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens.

Throughout the novel, Janie refuses to accept her Nanny's definition of black women ("De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see")<sup>11</sup> and insists on creating her own. Nor can there be any doubt that she means to speak to all black women. When she has finished her story to

her close friend Phoebe about the love she had discovered with Teacake and how he had treated her as a whole human being, Phoebe exclaims, "Lawd! Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo.' Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this. Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin'."<sup>12</sup> Thus, while Zora Neale Hurston takes us on a tour de force of rural black culture, she also invites us to enter the silent world of black women and perceive visions that might otherwise have remained invisible.

If Nora Neale Hurston remained comfortable with her culture yet uneasy with the role it ascribed to black women, Maxine Hong-Kingston seems to want to flee her culture and redefine herself. In her magnificent memoir, The Woman Warrior, Hong-Kingston provides a dazzling display of the enormity of Chinese culture--and an unmistakable ambivalence toward it. How could she feel otherwise towards cultural values that hold women worthless? Her mother, Brave Orchid, was a midwife in China and a great story teller as well. She told her daughter that she prepared a dish of ashes for all birthings in case the child were a girl. "The midwife or relative would take the back of the baby's head in her hand and turn it into the ashes," said her mother, "it was very easy."<sup>13</sup>

In her adulthood, Hong-Kingston became a success in American terms, a teacher and award-winning novelist. Yet she recalls vividly the force of those folktales upon her sense of self:

I live now where there are Chinese and Japanese, but no emigrants from my own village looking at me as if I had failed them. Living among one's own emigrant villagers can give a good Chinese far from China glory and a place. "That old busboy is really a swordsman," we whisper when he goes by, "He's a swordsman who's killed fifty. He has a tong ax in his closet." But I am useless, one more girl who couldn't be sold. When I visit the family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl; I am worthy of eating the food. From afar I can believe my family loves me fundamentally. They only say, "When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls," because that is what one says about daughters. But I watched such words come out of my own mother's and father's mouths; I looked at their ink drawing of poor people snagging their neighbors' flotage with long flood hooks and pushing the girl babies on down the river. And I had to get out of hating range. I read in an anthropology book that Chinese say, "Girls are necessary too"; I have never heard the Chinese I know make this concession. Perhaps it was a saying in another village. I refuse to shy my way anymore through our Chinatown, which tasks me with the old sayings and the stories.

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The ideographs for revenge are "report a crime" and "report to five families." The reporting is the vengeance--not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words--"chink" words and "gook" words too--that they do not fit on my skin.<sup>14</sup>

She rebels against her parents and their Chinese-limited vision of her horizons comes when they seem to be trying to wed her to a particularly undesirable and ugly Chinese prospect. She explodes in indignation and issues her own American declaration of independence:



I want you to tell that hulk, that gorilla-ape, to go away and never bother us again. I know what you're up to. You're thinking he's rich, and we're poor. You think you can give us away to freaks. You better not do that, Mother. I don't want to see him or his dirty boxes here tomorrow. If I see him here one more time, I'm going away. I'm going away anyway. I am. Do you hear me? I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded. There's nothing wrong with my brain. Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts say about me? They tell me I'm smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. I've already applied. I'm smart. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get A's, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. I can make a living and take care of myself. So you don't have to find me a keeper who's too dumb to know a bad bargain. I'm so smart, if they say write ten pages, I can write fifteen. I can do ghost things even better than ghosts can. Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. I am not going to be a slave or a wife. Even if I am stupid and talk funny and get sick, I won't let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I'm getting out of here. I can't stand living here anymore. It's your fault I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn't teach me English, and you gave me a zero IQ. I've brought my IQ up, though. They say I'm smart now. Things follow in lines at school. They take stories and teach us to turn them into essays. I don't need anybody to pronounce English words for me. I can figure them out by myself. I'm going to get scholarships, and I'm going away. And at college I'll have the people I like for friends. I don't care if their great-great-grandfather died of TB. I don't care if they were our enemies in China four thousand years ago. So get that ape out of here. I'm going to college. And I'm not going to Chinese school anymore. I'm going to run for office at American school, and I'm going to join clubs. I'm going to get enough offices and clubs on my record to get into college. And I can't stand Chinese school anyway; the kids are rowdy and mean, fighting all night. And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you make up. Ha! You can't stop me from talking. You tried to cut off my tongue, but it didn't work." So I told the hardest ten or twelve things on my list all in one outburst.<sup>15</sup>

Yet for all her efforts to escape the confines of her culture, Hong-Kingston cannot. "Before we can leave our parents," she poignantly admits, "they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with home-made underwear."<sup>16</sup> In the end, she concedes that her culture is inescapable, inexorable, timeless. The best she can do is try to translate some of it into barbarian, ghost culture. Her concluding sentence is "It translated well." At the same time, her book stands as persuasive testimony that her quest for a voice of her own did not go unanswered.

Perhaps translation rather than escape is all that ethnic women, indeed, ethnic writers, can expect when the American experience has launched them in so many new directions. Anzia Yezierska, like her sister writer, Maxine Hong-Kingston, tries desperately to flee the oppression inflicted upon her by her ancient culture. She too sets out to find an American

definition of herself, to escape her Judaic inheritance that allows men to thank God each morning in prayer that they were not born women. In her moving novel, The Breadgivers, Yezierska keenly depicts the limitations her culture has imposed upon its women. Her protagonist, Sara Smolinsky, one of four daughters of Reb Smolinsky, soon becomes aware of those limitations. "No one was allowed to put their things in Father's room," she remembers:

Of course, we all knew that if God had given Mother a son, Father would have permitted a man child to share with him his best room in the house. A boy could say prayers after his father's death--that kept the father's soul alive for ever. Always Father was throwing up to Mother that she had borne him no son to be an honour to his days and to say prayers for him when he died.

The prayers of his daughters didn't count because God didn't listen to women. Heaven and the next world were only for men. Women could get into Heaven because they were wives and daughters of men. Women had no brains for the study of God's Torah, but they could be servants of men who studied the Torah. Only if they cooked for the men, and washed for the men, and didn't nag or curse the men out of their homes; only if they let the men study the Torah in peace, then, maybe, they could push themselves into Heaven with the men, to wait on them there.

And so, since men were the only people who counted with God, Father not only had the best room for himself, for his study and prayers, but also the best eating of the house. The fat from the soup and the top from the milk went always to him.<sup>17</sup>

After her tyrannical father has ruined the chances of each of her sisters for personal happiness, they escape his tyranny through hasty and, it turns out, unhappy marriages. When Sara announces her decision to leave home, she tells her astonished father "I'm smart enough to look out for myself. It's a new life now. In America, women don't need men to boss them. . . . My will is as strong as yours. I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country, I'm American!" When his astonishment turns to rage, her father strikes her and she leaps for the door with the thought "The Old World had struck its last on me."<sup>18</sup>

Yet like Maxine Hong-Kingston, Yezierska soon discovers that cultural escape is not possible. The best she can do is translate Yiddish culture into American. She leaves home, performs Herculean tasks in passing high school while working full time, earns honors at college, and becomes a respected teacher--back in the old neighborhood, planning to marry her principal, a fellow Jew who convinces her to allow her father to live with them and on his terms at that. The book closes with Father chanting in the background while Sara realizes that her culture is not to be escaped. "It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me."<sup>19</sup>

The writings of these female ethnic writers provide a fascinating insight into their cultures as well as their attempts to transcend their heritage. Yet they also provide a sense of the depth of the hold their traditions have upon them and the guilt they feel as they strike out on their own. Finally, more often than not, they settle for accommodation with their past rather than total rejection of it.

In the brilliantly argued The Madwoman in the Attic, the authors conclude that for nineteenth-century female writers it had been especially difficult to assert the self because they had first to define it, a process

made torturous by "all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself."<sup>20</sup> In ethnic writing, something of the same dynamic of self-definition is at work, but the discovery of self, indeed the opportunity of self-discovery, is boldly presented by the American environment itself. With its bewitching promise of the right to happiness and its sustained faith in the philosophy of rugged individualism (a faith whose obeisances are paid even by the antithesis of individualism, the United States Army, in its recruiting slogan, BE ALL THAT YOU CAN BE!), the United States beckons all immigrants, male and female, to discover, even to create, their own personalities. Thus, in the world of female ethnic writers in the United States there has been little room for the selfless figures of Lucia Santa or Beret. For as the authors of The Madwoman in the Attic have correctly observed, "to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story, . . . is really a life of death, a death-in-life . . . [a female character such as this] having died to her own desires, her own self, her own life, leads a posthumous existence in her own lifetime."<sup>21</sup> Such has not been the case of female American ethnic writers or the women who inhabit their writings.

By escorting us into their invisible worlds, their secret aspirations, and self definitions, ethnic writers of both genders defy us to look on through them. They illuminate themselves and their culture in ways that often transcend historical research. In short, they refuse to be invisible.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage, 1972), 568.

<sup>2</sup>Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

<sup>3</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, 429.

<sup>4</sup>My two courses in ethnic studies are "Ethnic America since the Civil War" and a seminar "Immigrant History through Ethnic Literature;" but I include at least one novel in each course I teach, including the United States survey courses.

<sup>5</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, 20.

<sup>6</sup>The term comes from Edward C. Banfield, The Moral Basis of a Backward Society (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958).

<sup>7</sup>Mario Puzo, The Fortunate Pilgrim (New York: Fawcett, 1978), 15.

<sup>8</sup>Ile Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 222.

<sup>9</sup>Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 117, 29.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 284.

<sup>13</sup>Maxine Hong-Kingston, The Woman Warrior (New York: Vintage, 1977), 101.



<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 234-235.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>17</sup>Anzia Yeziarska, The Breadgivers (New York: Persea Books, 1975), 9-10.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 137-138.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 297.

<sup>20</sup>Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 17.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 25.

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#### Ethnic and Immigrant Novels and Memoirs: A Sampler

##### Afro-Americans

Claude Brown, Manchild in the Promised Land (New York: New American Library, 1971), 432 pp., \$3.95 paper.

A memoir of the streets of Harlem in the 1950s written with disarming candor and unflinching courage. Superb for its description of the devastating impact of narcotics on black life in the city. Works well with Gilbert Osofsky's Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto.

Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Random House, 1972), 568 pp., \$3.95 paper.

One of the great classics of black literature presents a surrealist history of blacks since slavery and explores in unforgettable terms the psychological impact of social and cultural rejection and alienation. The search for self-definition is applicable to all American ethnics.

Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 1978), 286 pp., \$3.95 paper.

An absolute gem from a black woman who deserves more attention than she has received. This novel reveals much of the universal confinement of being a black female, while simultaneously celebrating the richness of black culture. Some of the very best black dialect in literature as well as a goldmine of black folklore is contained in this fine novel.

Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 295 pp., \$4.95.

While I have not used this book in class, it would clearly fit any course exploring the tension between sexism and racism in the writings of current black female writers. Despite the author's searing

indictment of sexism within the black community, her respect for and abiding love for black culture are unmistakable.

Margaret Walker, Jubilee (New York: Bantam, 1975), 432 pp., \$4.50 paper.

A black Gone With the Wind but much more evocative of slave culture than Margaret Mitchell is of master culture. Very rich in folk songs, sayings, folk remedies. Recreates the world the slaves made in a way that supplements beautifully Eugene Genovese or Herbert Gutman.

Richard Wright, Black Boy (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 288 pp., \$3.95 paper.

Memoir of growing up in the South during the 1910s and 1920s. Wright's southern Jim Crow setting provides an interesting juxtaposition to Claude Brown's memoir of Harlem in the next generation. Also, Wright's quest for self-definition in a social and cultural context defined by whites reveals many parallels with female ethnic writers seeking liberation from their patriarchal roots.

\_\_\_\_\_, Native Son (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 397 pp., \$3.95 paper.

Wright's scalding creation of life in black Chicago. The novel works particularly effectively in conjunction with James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan and Allan H. Spear's excellent Black Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). Another classic Chicago novel is Upton Sinclair's The Jungle which provides more insight, however, into the author's socialism than into the protagonist Jurgis's ethnic characteristics. Standing alone or contrasted with other Chicago novels, Wright's work is simply extraordinary.

\_\_\_\_\_, Uncle Tom's Children (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 215 pp., \$3.50 paper.

This collection of short stories takes place in the South during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The first, "Big Boy Leaves Home," is alone worth the price of admission. Stories also reveal Wright's growing enchantment with Marxism during the 1930s and thus compare interestingly with other 1930s writers such as Pietro DiDonato, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck.

#### Jews

Mary Antin, The Promised Land (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 400 pp., \$12.50 paper.

This book was so popular that it was required high school reading for many years in the teens and twenties. Antin's memoir is an unrelenting glorification of Americanization and for that reason alone is still worth the read. Students today do not respond as well to Antin as to Yeziarska.

Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1945), 530 pp., \$7.95 paper.

A classic Jewish-American novel written by the famous editor of the Jewish Daily Forward. Keen insight into the inner agony experienced by

those who have fled their cultural and social roots to achieve success on American terms, to those whose "past and present do not comport well." Unparalleled for its description of the Eastern European Jews' takeover of the garment industry. Chapter on the Borscht belt is timeless.

\_\_\_\_\_, Yekle and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto (New York: Dover, 1978), 240 pp., \$4.50 paper.

Yekle, a novella, is particularly poignant and served as the basis for the fine movie "Hester Street." Few writers have been able to capture the richness of New York's Jewish lower east side during the early part of the century as has Abraham Cahan. Cahan's characterization of Yekle, the female protagonist, serves well as a contrast to female Jewish authors' view of the Jewish female.

Chaim Potok, My Name is Ascher Lev (New York: Fawcett, 1978), 352 pp., \$2.95 paper.

Probably Potok's finest novel. It depicts beautifully the fragility of Hasidic life as it has been transplanted in New York. Like The Chosen, this novel contrasts the tribal pressures of Hasidic life with the novel opportunity that America provides to pursue personality and self-fulfillment.

\_\_\_\_\_, The Chosen (New York: Fawcett, 1978), 284 pp., \$2.95 paper.

In some ways, The Chosen is a stronger novel for the teaching of history than is Ascher Lev. It explores brilliantly the tensions between Orthodox and Hasidic cultures and places that tension within the historical context of the end of World War II, the growing awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust, and the emergence of the state of Israel. Made into a very moving motion picture starring Rod Steiger and Robbie Benson.

Ann Roiphe, Generation Without Memory: A Jewish Journey in Christian America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 254 pp., \$8.95 paper.

Neither a novel nor, properly speaking, a memoir, Roiphe has set before us an unusually provocative selection of essays examining the problem of self-definition of Jews in a Christian society, as well as Jewish women who must try to come to terms with their patriarchal culture. Roiphe's observations upon the Holocaust and its meaning to Jews are especially moving and provocative. She calls into question the fundamental direction of modernism.

Henry Roth, Call It Sleep (New York: Avon, 1964), 447 pp., \$4.50 paper.

A simply brilliant novel of Jewish life in New York. Told through the eyes of a young boy, the novel creates unforgettable images of the rigors of the cheder, the budding of sexuality, and the psychological dimensions of Jewish home life. Roth is a master of ethnic dialect and he is unequalled in hearing the cacophony of the lower east side ethnic mix. No writer has better recalled the world of a Jewish child.

Philip Roth, Portnoy's Complaint (New York: Fawcett, 1985), 320 pp., \$3.95 paper.

This book still angers and embarrasses many Jews and so must be carefully taught. It is not so much an attack upon Jewish culture (or Jewish mothers) as it is a sad commentary on what immersion in American materialism has done to Jewish culture. The book is bitter, biting, funny, and insightful into the world of successful (New York) Jews and the inner cost of their success.

Anzia Yezierska, The Breadgivers (New York: Persea Books, 1975), 297 pp., \$4.95 paper.

Invariably, my female students love this novel. Written in English with Yiddish rhythms, the author traces the relentlessness of her protagonist's quest for self-fulfillment and the escape from Jewish culture that it made necessary. Excellent descriptions of orthodox family life in New York in the 1920s. The chapter on teaching Jewish children in the inner city is simply precious.

#### The Irish

James T. Farrell, Studs Lonigan (New York: Avon, 1976), 819 pp., \$3.95 paper.

Perhaps the greatest work of Irish-American fiction. Since it is a trilogy (the above edition containing all three books), it can be taught at once or each volume independently. No other work of fiction so accurately portrays the ethos of conservative Irish Catholicism or the ferocious tribal loyalty of the Irish. Nor has any writer captured more unforgettably the world of the common Irish worker. The novel covers the period 1912 or so to the early 1930s and makes the world war, the speakeasy twenties, and the great depression come startlingly to life. Unblinking descriptions of Irish anti-Semitism and racism. One of the great Chicago novels: see Wright's Native Son and Sinclair's The Jungle.

\_\_\_\_\_, "The Fastest Runner on 61st Street."

Appears in several literary anthologies and is particularly useful in bridging the worlds of Studs Lonigan and Bigger Thomas (Wright's protagonist in Native Son).

Edwin O'Connor, The Last Hurrah (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 448 pp., \$8.95 paper.

Another great novel of Irish America. Lovingly (and loosely) based upon the career of Boston's political boss James Michael Curley, O'Connor's novel is a gold mine of Irish political finagling. Particularly good in portraying the social structure of Boston and the Irish place within it. Unparalleled as a tour of Irish boss politics. The chapter on "Knocko Minnihan's Wake" is simply grand. An excellent companion is the short documentary movie on James Michael Curley, "He Did It For A Friend."



Norwegians

Ole Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 453 pp., \$3.95 paper.

\_\_\_\_\_, Peder Victorious (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 325 pp., \$7.50 paper.

\_\_\_\_\_, Their Father's God (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 338 pp., \$7.95 paper.

While all these volumes in the trilogy are now in print and translated, Giants in the Earth remains the most popular. The novel presents a refreshing change of pace from the urban ethnic scene because it transports us into the Dakotas in the late nineteenth century. This is one of the great pioneer novels in American literature as well as one of the best pieces of Norwegian-American writing. Particularly strong in showing the reserve of Norwegian culture, and its fascination with death. Engaging characterization of Beret as Norwegian wife, mother, and preserver of the culture.

Italians

Pietro DiDonato, Christ in Concrete (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1939), 303 pp., \$3.95 paper [not currently in print].

Excruciating opening chapter of accident on the construction site. The voice is angry, 1930s, Marxist, and pure Italian. Like Farrell, DiDonato takes some vicious cuts at Roman Catholicism. Brilliant and moving description of Italian home and community life--particularly the chapter "Fiesta" that concludes with a wedding celebration common-folk style.

Carlo Levi, Christ Stopped at Eboli (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Girroux, 1947), 268 pp., \$5.95 paper.

Although this memoir recalls the author's exile to Eboli in southern Italy during the Mussolini 1920s in Italy, its evocation of Italian village life is unequalled. Because so many Italian-Americans came from southern Italy, they relate to this book very well. Most surprising is how similar Italian-American family life is today to the depictions in the book.

Jerre Mangione, Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 320 pp., \$10.95 paper.

Pleasantly back in paperback, Mangione's classic memoir provides precious descriptions of Italian-American life in Buffalo early in the century. Told by one who was making his way into American education and working his way up and out of the ghetto. Excellent description of Italian working class and their extraordinary sense of communal loyalty.

Mario Puzo, The Fortunate Pilgrim (New York: Fawcett, 1978), 354 pp., \$2.25 paper.

The best of Puzo's novels in evoking Italian-American family life. Perhaps the best novel in all of Italian-American fiction.



Extraordinary depiction of Lucia Santa, Italian mother, and her unswerving protection of her Italian family. Interesting contrast between old ways of mother and new aspirations of Octavia, her daughter.

\_\_\_\_\_, The Godfather (New York: New American Library, 1979), 446 pp., \$3.95 paper.

Puzo's blockbuster--fair to middling on Italians and crime. Reads much better as tour of Italian cultural strength and family loyalty.

#### Slavic

Thomas Bell, Out of This Furnace (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), 413 pp., \$8.95 paper.

This little-known novel by a little-known author (whose real name was Thomas Belechak) recreates fifty years (1880s to 1930s) of Czech-American life in the steel mills of Carnegie land. Contains piercing descriptions of conditions in the steel mills and a moving portrayal of the simple aspirations and genuine religious sentiment of a peasant people. Novel is excellent for courses in labor history as well as ethnic. Special strength is Bell's analysis of the emergence of the CIO in the 1930s.

Upton Sinclair, The Jungle (New York: Bantam, 1981), 268 pp., \$1.95 paper.

One of the few novels I know of dealing with Eastern European (Slavic) migration, although this socialist classic is primarily important as a period piece, a socialist tract, and a description of labor conditions in the stockyards of Chicago at the turn of the century. [What do socialists care about ethnic roots they themselves see as provincial barriers to working class solidarity?]

#### Puerto Ricans

Edward Rivera, Family Installments (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 299 pp., \$5.95 paper.

Much superior to Piri Thomas in covering life in Puerto Rico prior to migration but much less biting in the description of life in New York City. Nonetheless, convincing and moving account of Puerto Rican family life.

Piri Thomas, Down These Mean Streets (New York: Random House, 1974), 357 pp., \$5.95 paper.

Not a novel but a memoir, this is among the most memorable pieces of "street" literature. Works well with Claude Brown, Manchild, Richard Wright, Native Son, and James Farrell, Studs Lonigan. Thomas is especially sensitive to the power of race and color in Puerto Rican culture. Great chapter on Piri's early schooling. Uncompromising look at the impact of narcotics and harrowing prison memoir.

Chinese

Louis Chu, Eat A Bowl of Tea (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1986), 250 pp., \$5.95 paper.

An absolute gem of a novel about life in New York's Chinatown in the 1920s. Visits the mahjong parlors, depicts the close ties with China, and movingly portrays the lives of the lonely Chinese males who left their wives and family behind as they journeyed to the golden mountain. The novel has the added bonus of being a clever and slightly ribald comedy.

Maxine Hong-Kingston, The Woman Warrior (New York: Random House, 1977), \$3.95 paper.

Brilliant and penetrating memoir of growing up Chinese-American and female. Parallel between Kingston and Yeziarska is fascinating as they both attempt personal liberation from ancient patriarchal cultures. Beautifully written characterization of mother and daughter and their poignant relationship with each other.

\_\_\_\_\_, China Men (New York: Random House, 1982), 308 pp., \$3.50 paper.

In her second book, Kingston tells the story of China men separated from family, working on track gangs and beset by American anti-oriental venom. Again, Kingston is able to transform the mundane into an almost mystical tour of Chinese culture and folklore.

Miscellaneous

Edward Bellamy, Looking Backward (New York: New American Library, 1960), 222 pp., \$1.95 paper.

Excellent book to use in the U.S. survey course 1865 to present because it allows students to test Bellamy's 1888 predictions of life today with how we really turned out and to reflect on why he was so wrong. Also provocative on the role of women in American society.

Hutchins Hapgood, The Spirit of the Ghetto (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 360 pp., \$7.95 paper.

Excellent period piece written by a progressive journalist at the turn of the century. Hapgood tours the Jewish ghetto on the lower east side and introduces us to Talmudic scholars, socialists, poets, entertainers, the coffeehouse intelligentsia, and many others who comprised the "spirit" of the ghetto. Interesting contrast with the photo-journalist Jacob Riis whose much more popular How the Other Half Lives is far less substantial.

Judith Rossner, Emmaline (New York: P. Bedrick Books, 1984), \$3.95 paper.

An excursion into the world of the Lowell girls. Haunting though improbable story line, beautifully written and highly evocative of the confining restrictions imposed upon women in pre-Civil War America.

John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Penguin, 1977), 473 pp., \$9.95 paper.

If the Oakies are an ethnic group, then Steinbeck is their Woody Guthrie. This great book needs no salesmanship except to point out that it is unequalled as an introduction to the plight of the farm worker and in its ability to conjure the spirit of the depression 1930s. Works well in comparison with the motion picture it inspired, as well as Edward R. Murrow's documentary, "Harvest of Shame," which looks at a later generation of migrant workers.

\_\_\_\_\_, In Dubious Battle (New York: Penguin, 1979), 313 pp., \$3.95 paper.

Also excellent for a course in labor history. Novel describes the hardships of organizing among farm workers in the 1930s through the eyes of a communist organizer.

Nancy Zaroulis, Call the Darkness Light (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), 560 pp. (not currently in paperback).

Not an ethnic novel, but excellent description of the lives of the Lowell girls in Lowell, Massachusetts, in pre-civil war America. Particularly good for labor history, but also very accurate in depicting the millennialist milieu of the 1840s and 1850s. Ends with riveting account of the Pendleton mill disaster in 1860.