
Re: UMMA tour for your World Lit classes

1 message

Frontier, Amy <frontiera@aaps.k12.mi.us>

Wed, Oct 26, 2016 at 3:43 PM

To: Pamela Reister <preister@umich.edu>

Hi Pam,

Thanks so much for your work on all of this! We are currently finishing up "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven." We have been focusing quite a lot on the importance of storytelling, so it sounds like some of the artwork you are proposing would work well with that theme! We read *Between Shades of Gray* next and will read *Purple Hibiscus* in December.

Here is the year-long reading list:

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (Sherman Alexie)
-Native American short stories

Some recent themes and ideas we have been exploring include:
'What is an authentic Indian?'
Identity
The importance of storytelling

Between Shades of Gray (Ruta Sepetys)
-Lithuanian Holocaust novel / historical fiction

Relevant ideas from this text:
The role of art as characters deal with trauma. Edvard Munch's art is mentioned multiple times throughout the text.

Purple Hibiscus (Chimamanda Adichie)
-Nigerian novel

The importance of symbols
The clash between religion and pagan world / Belief Systems
Educated vs. Rural life

Interpreter of Maladies (Jhumpa Lahiri)
-Indian / American short stories

Immigrant experience
Traditional versus assimilation

In the Time of the Butterflies (Julia Alvarez)
-Dominican Republic novel

Response to Dictatorship
Feminism / Strong Women

The Kite Runner (Khalil Hosseni)
-Afghanistan novel

Redemption
The Class System

Please let me know if you have any other questions / thoughts! I showed the students the brochure about 'Traces' and they are intrigued by the story of the mask.

Best,
Amy

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven Study Guide

THEMES: 'What is an authentic Indian?
Identity; The importance of storytelling

Sherman Alexie became an overnight literary success in 1991, when his poetry collection *The Business of Fancydancing* was published by an independent press. Alexie was 26 years old at the time. The English scholar James Kincaid published a positive review of the collection in *The New York Times* as part of a survey of contemporary Native American literature, which brought Alexie a great deal of attention from mainstream publishers and agents. Alexie followed up *The Business of Fancydancing* with this collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, which consists of 30 to 40 stories that Alexie had mostly written prior to *Fancydancing*.

Published in 1993, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* includes 22 stories about life on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Many central characters - most notably Victor Joseph, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and Norma Many Horses - appear in multiple stories. The stories often refer to plot events in other stories, meaning that in some respects, the collection is more like a novel than a traditional book of short stories. Like much of Alexie's fiction, this collection addresses the many serious problems that modern Native Americans face, including alcoholism, poverty, racism, limited educational opportunities, and geographical isolation. When the book was first released, Alexie insisted that it was not autobiographical, although in the introduction to the tenth-anniversary edition, he admits that he "was full of shit. The book is a thinly disguised memoir" (xix).

The tenth-anniversary edition was released in 2003, and it is the version that is most easily available today. The 2003 edition includes two stories - "Flight" and "Junior Polatkin's Wild West Show" - that were cut from the original printing. In the new edition's introduction, Alexie explains that "Junior Polatkin's Wild West Show" was cut because its themes were already addressed elsewhere in the collection, and that "Flight" was cut because of its similarities to children's literature. Ironically, Alexie would publish two well-received young adult novels in 2007 - *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was adapted into a film called *Smoke Signals* in 1998. The film is primarily based on "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona", although it incorporates characters, themes, and plot events from other stories as well.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven refers to Native Americans almost exclusively as 'Indians', a term that is controversial in some circles. The Summary sections of this ClassicNote use the word Indian because that is the term used in the text.

<http://www.gradesaver.com/the-lone-ranger-and-tonto-fistfight-in-heaven>

POSSIBLE TOUR STOP

Esther: storytelling, identity.

The Esther story has held powerful appeal through the centuries as an example of spiritual and physical courage for Jews and Christians alike. Artists, composers, playwrights, no less than theologians and scholars, have used its drama to convince audiences of the human capacity to transcend powerlessness and triumph over evil. The story is only loosely based on historical fact, and the actions of the characters are extreme. Yet the victory of this unlikely heroine—disenfranchised, female, Jew—over self-doubt and abusive power is a believable and hopeful tale that history continues to validate.

Guercino and many other artists base their work on the Book of Esther, a text written between 400 and 200 B.C.E. In the Jewish tradition, the Book of Esther is one of the Five Scrolls, each one of which is read on a holiday. In Hebrew called simply The Scroll (*hamm'gillah*), implying its premier status, the Book of Esther is the only text relating to the Diaspora, the life of the Jews in exile. The Scroll tells the origins of the holiday of Purim and instructs the Jewish community in the importance of celebrating their salvation.¹

As a book of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible, the story of Esther carries a second layer of meaning. In Christian typology, every Old Testament story corresponds to one in the New Testament. Esther pleading with Ahasuerus prefigures the Virgin Mary interceding with her Son, Christ in the role of final judge, on behalf of all sinners. Christian, specifically Roman Catholic, interpretations of the story also included Additions to the Book of Esther, composed around 100 B.C.E. These passages focus on divine intervention and on the piety of the Jewish characters. The Additions impose an overtly religious tone on the original text, which quite pointedly makes no reference to God.²

The Esther story is a complex interweaving of suspenseful events and strong personalities. Ahasuerus (Xerxes), King of Persia, deposes his queen, Vashti, because she refuses his summons to “display her beauty” at a banquet.³ Searching his kingdom for a beautiful woman to replace her as queen, he chooses Esther. Ahasuerus does not know that Esther is the ward of Mordecai, a member of his court. Nor does he know that Esther is a Jew.

Haman, Ahasuerus' prime minister, vows to destroy Mordecai and all his people because Mordecai will not bow to him. Haman convinces Ahasuerus that the Jews must be exterminated for their refusal to keep the king's laws. To decide on the date that he will have the Jews killed, Haman casts lots, or *pur*.

Mordecai learns of Haman's plot and appeals to Esther to intercede with her husband on behalf of her people. Esther hesitates. She could be killed simply for entering the king's presence unbidden. Revealing herself as a Jew could also be fatal. Finally, she agrees: “If I perish, I perish.”

Esther fasts for three days, dresses herself in her royal garb, and enters the king's throne room. The king accepts Esther's presence, holds out his scepter as a sign of acceptance, and offers to fulfill her unknown request “unto half my kingdom.”⁴ Surprisingly, she does not make her plea but invites the king and Haman to a banquet.

Before the feast, the king recalls Mordecai's role in saving him from a plot and promotes him, forcing Haman to honor his enemy. At the banquet, Esther issues yet another dinner invitation.

At the second banquet, Esther finally reveals Haman's treachery. Ahasuerus sentences Haman to hang on the gallows he had built for the Jews. Esther's request that the Jews be allowed a day to take revenge on their enemies is also granted.

This story of deliverance is celebrated on the holiday of Purim, which takes its name and date from the lots cast by Haman.

Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called Il Guercino (“the squinter”), was born at Cento, a small town between Ferrara and Bologna in Northern Italy. He is best known as one of the great masters of the expressive, energetic, and naturalistic style of painting that characterizes the Italian Baroque period. A leading light of the Bolognese school, Guercino continued to build his reputation in Rome while enjoying the favor of another Bolognese, Pope Gregory XXIII. It was during this Roman sojourn, from 1621 to 1623, that he painted his famous *Aurora* on the ceiling of the residence of the papal family, the Villa Ludovisi. Most students of art history are first introduced to Guercino through this vigorous, startlingly illusionistic fresco, which is often compared to another *Aurora* by Guido Reni, his countryman and foremost rival. The Michigan *Esther*, finished in 1639, represents a later phase of the painter's career, when the classical theories of the Carracci Academy in Bologna exerted a certain formal and emotional restraint on his work (Figure 1).⁵

Il Guercino (1591-1666)

He had also absorbed the lessons of Roman antiquity and of contemporary classicizing painters, such as Domenichino, during his stay in the Eternal City. When Reni died in 1642, Guercino was the preeminent painter of the Bolognese school. However, Guercino refused invitations to travel to distant, would-be patrons, only leaving his home in Cento to take up residence in Bologna after Reni's death.

Esther before Ahasuerus was commissioned by Cardinal Lorenzo Magalotti, one of the most powerful men in the court of his brother-in-law, Pope Urban VIII Barberini. Magalotti had the means and refinement to choose the best; in selecting Guercino, the Bolognese cardinal not only directed an important commission to one of his countrymen but also brought into his patronage the work of one of the most sought-after artists of his time.

Guercino selected for his composition an episode of the Esther story found in the Catholic Bible, which includes the Additions, but not in the original Hebrew texts. Dressed "in splendid attire," the fearful Esther enters the presence of the king uninvited, a capital offense. The painting follows the text carefully: "The queen faltered and turned pale and faint, and collapsed upon the head of the maid who went before her. But God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness."⁶ A subsequent moment is also indicated, when "he raised his golden scepter and touched it to her neck," a gesture of forgiveness for her transgression.⁷

Guercino creates drama in our first instant of looking at the picture by directing the viewer's attention to neither Esther nor Ahasuerus but to the figure of the maid in the center of the canvas. Her spotlighted face, mostly in shadow, turns quickly toward the left. Her open mouth and a tear on her cheek telegraph the peril of the situation. Her gaze directs us to the pyramidal figure of Ahasuerus, who seems transfixed. Finally, by following his gaze we discover the unconscious Esther. Now the viewer peruses these two richly dressed figures and the slight touch of the king's finger that breaches the slender barrier of the scepter, the emblem of authority, and thereby signals his forgiveness. Guercino's flickering light encourages one to scan the picture, from the fur mantle over the king's shoulders, through the curving row of hands, to the white sleeve of the maid on the right, whose inward-curving arm and gaze contain the composition, as does the tall throne at left. Finally, the viewer dwells on the details of the royal garb: jeweled crowns, golden chains and brocades, and hundreds of pearls embellishing the border of the king's cloak, the central maid's headdress, and the dramatic queue of ornament running the length of Esther's gown. The painter is able to lavish attention on the "full array of majesty, all covered with gold and precious stones" described in the biblical narrative without losing the tension and emotional power of the scene.

*Guercino's Esther:
A New Focus*

Esther was a popular subject in the Baroque period precisely because of this combination of high drama and luxurious costume. Rembrandt, Artemisia Gentileschi, Steen, and Anthony Van Dyck each rendered scenes from the narrative that give full play to its suspense and elegance.⁹ However, this particular canvas may well have a secondary political message, as Shelley Perlove has argued in a persuasive and important study of the painting (Bibliography). Guercino's patron, Cardinal Magalotti, was the Bishop of Ferrara, a city with many problems that plagued the papal government. Chief among them, as the Church would have it, was a large, relatively well-integrated Jewish community. Counter-Reformation zeal sweeping the 17th-century Roman Catholic Church called for the punitive suppression of the Jews and their separation from Christians. Magalotti, an energetic supporter of the Inquisition, imposed many restrictive laws during his tenure, beginning in 1628.

Another solution, from the point of view of the Church, was conversion. A decree of 1637 ordering Jews in Ferrara to wear the yellow star also states, "we were made shepherds, not assassins. We take up sheep to be tended, not oppressed, indeed... free men to be helped whom the Lord handed over to our spiritual power."¹⁰ Perlove convincingly concludes that Guercino's *Esther*, meant to hang in the Cathedral of Ferrara itself, makes an offer of leniency to converts. Ahasuerus, the monarch won over by a brave but submissive supplicant, extends favor where violence was expected. The Church, it is implied, will also forgive and welcome, though past actions and the law suggest otherwise. Through this painting, the prelate might have been promising forgiveness and acceptance to Jews who found courage to come forward and renounce their faith. This new use of the Esther iconography in the service of the Inquisition, so ironically at odds with the original meaning of the story, would set this *Esther before Ahasuerus* quite apart from other renditions.

Between Shades of Gray

Lithuanian Holocaust novel / historical fiction

Relevant Ideas from this text:

The role of art as characters deal with trauma. Edvard Munch's art is mentioned multiple times throughout the text.

Have you ever wondered what a human life is worth? That morning, my brother's was worth a pocket watch.

In 1941, fifteen-year-old Lina is preparing for art school, first dates, and all that summer has to offer. But one night, the Soviet secret police barge violently into her home, deporting her along with her mother and younger brother. They are being sent to Siberia. Lina's father has been separated from the family and sentenced to death in a prison camp. All is lost.

Lina fights for her life, fearless, vowing that if she survives she will honor her family, and the thousands like hers, by documenting their experience in her art and writing. She risks everything to use her art as messages, hoping they will make their way to her father's prison camp to let him know they are still alive.

It is a long and harrowing journey, and it is only their incredible strength, love, and hope that pull Lina and her family through each day. But will love be enough to keep them alive?

Between Shades of Gray is a riveting novel that steals your breath, captures your heart, and reveals the miraculous nature of the human spirit.

See author video, discussing this book: <http://www.betweenshadesofgray.com/>

Possible Tour Stop

Giacometti, holocaust

Alberto Giacometti
Standing Figure (1958/1.137)

March 28, 2009

Giacometti often proclaimed his interest in exploring in sculpture his ideas about vision and perception, and particularly in rendering in three dimensions the phenomenon of vanishing point perspective so easily captured in painting. Notwithstanding his own description of his formal concerns, by the late 1940s, Giacometti was widely regarded as the artist who best represented Existential angst in the aftermath of the two World Wars. Some scholarship suggests that the skeletal thinness of his figures during this period was a manifestation of working through trauma from the ever-increasing flow of evidence from the Nazi concentration camps; the artist is also said to have begun to sculpt in this style soon after he visited the exhibition "Art and Resistance" (1946), where he would have seen grisly images of emaciated prisoners and piles of naked corpses, some drawn and painted by his friend and neighbor Boris Taslitsky, who had been interned at Buchenwald. While we cannot know if Giacometti is directly referencing these powerful images, his work was produced in a historical moment deeply affected by them, and they heavily influenced the prevailing interpretation of his sculpture.

After World War II, Giacometti turned from his earlier Cubist and Surrealist work and became especially interested in creating figures that would always appear to the viewer as if from a great distance, no matter how close one stood. He achieved this by paring the figure down to its essential components and by making the figure as lean as possible. But Giacometti's fragile men and women are also inseparable from the post-war attitudes that were crystallized in the writings of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. An ardent admirer of Giacometti, Sartre believed that it was naive to hope for any higher purpose in life since man, though free, was alone and responsible only to himself for his actions. Giacometti's emaciated, post-Holocaust figures with their eroded, crumbling surfaces suggest the antithesis of heroism or nobility, associations traditionally linked to European sculpture.

An avid people-watcher, Giacometti drew his inspiration from the world around him:

"In the streets people astound and interest me more than any sculpture or painting. Every second the people stream together and go apart, then they approach each other to get closer to one another. They unceasingly form and re-form living compositions in unbelievable complexity...It's the totality of life that I want to reproduce in everything do."
Sean M. Ulmer, University Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, for "A Matter of Degree: Abstraction in Twentieth-Century Art," November 10, 2001 - January 27, 2002

While studying sculpture in Paris in the 1920s, Alberto Giacometti became intrigued with the carved wooden African and South Pacific artifacts on display at the ethnography museums and botanical gardens in that city. He saw a new level of realism in the pieces, believing that their distorted features expressed spiritual truths more effectively than naturalistic representations ever could. After the inhuman devastation of the Second World War, Giacometti also became interested in the philosophy and literature of existentialism, and sought a way to depict the spiritual alienation of human beings. Out of the artist's struggle to communicate this existential desolation and metaphysical despair came the thin, broad-shouldered and spindly-limbed faceless figures Giacometti sculpted from 1952 to 1958. "Standing Figure" was done a year after he first exhibited a series of these figures in the French section of the Venice Biennale, a major international exhibition.

(A. Dixon, 20th Century Gallery installation, June 1999)

Boris Tislitzky site: <http://boris-taslitzky.fr/accueil.htm>
images: <http://lesvoivres88240.over-blog.com/2015/01/il-y-70-ans-la-liberation-d-auschwitz-birkenau.html>



Purple Hibiscus Study Guide

Nigerian novel

The importance of symbols

The clash between religion and pagan world / Belief Systems

Educated vs. Rural life

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was widely acclaimed when it was published in 2003. Shortlisted for and awarded several prestigious prizes, *Purple Hibiscus* was praised for capturing a character and a nation on the cusp of radical change. Adichie uses her own childhood experiences to inform the lives of her characters. She was born in Kambili's home town of Enugu, raised in Auntie Ifeoma's university environment in Nsukka, is of Igbo descent, and is a Catholic.

Purple Hibiscus is a story of the corruption and religious fundamentalism that grips Adichie's native country. Told from the point of view of a child, overt political messages are held at an arm's length, but they inform Kambili's coming of age. The wave of bloody coups and corrupt military rule that comprises Nigerian politics are touched upon in the novel through certain characters. Though Papa can be viewed as a metaphor for the dangers of fundamentalism, he tries to put his power to good use by raising social consciousness. Adichie modeled the character Ade Coker after Dele Giwa, a journalist and outspoken critic of the Nigerian government. Giwa was killed by a mail bomb in his home in 1986. Adichie echoes real political activism and events in her novel.

Adichie was a good student in school but, unlike Kambili, she had a reputation for butting heads with her teachers; Obiora is more like Adichie. *Purple Hibiscus* is a coming of age story for both Kambili and Jaja. While Jaja is not allowed to participate in the Igbo ritual of initiation, both children are able to take considerable steps towards their own adult identities throughout the novel. Inspired by her outspoken aunt and cousin Amaka, Kambili in particular learns to use her voice. Adichie uses *Purple Hibiscus* to give a voice to African experience that is not typically presented by Western media.

<http://www.gradesaver.com/purple-hibiscus>

POSSIBLE TOUR STOP:

Traces exhibition: covers issues of colonialism, complexity of identity.

TRACES

This exhibition tells the story of one African artwork and how it traveled 7,500 miles to its current location at UMMA. Its presence here is the result of a long and tumultuous journey, spanning more than a century, three continents, and numerous people whose lives are forever connected to the artwork that passed through their hands.

Carved near the current city of Dundo, Angola, in a region bordering the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia, this mask is a representation of an ideal woman (*pwo*); its artist found inspiration in the features of an extraordinarily beautiful woman in his community. The wooden mask was one small part of a full-body costume used in an elaborate performance, one that continues to be danced in the region today.

In 1905 it was removed from this context by Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) a German explorer who visited the Chokwe region during a two-year expedition into Central Africa. Frobenius's bounty was substantial and he returned to Germany with eight thousand objects, which he sold to several museums and dealers in order to fund his subsequent Africa expeditions.

The Museum's *pwo* mask was among these objects, and ended up in the hands of the well-known German dealer J.F.G. Umlauff, whose gallery in Hamburg provided many European and American museums with their early collections of African art. At the time, African art was underrated and Umlauff was a visionary in recognizing the value of these pieces.

From Hamburg, through the hands of the Belgian dealer Marc Leo Felix, the mask was sold to Helmut Stern, a businessman and philanthropist based in Ann Arbor. Helmut and his wife Candis Stern, both passionate art collectors, compiled an exquisite collection of Central African art, which they donated to UMMA in 2005.

Tracing this complex and meandering journey deepens our understanding of the *pwo* mask and our appreciation of its significance, both culturally and historically. By looking at one piece in greater detail, it becomes clear that artworks and people are deeply intertwined—our lives are defined through the material objects we encounter, as much as artworks are transformed by the people that see, touch, and interact with them.

Laura De Becker
Curator of African Art

An artist

The Museum's *pwo* mask was carved by a male Chokwe artist near the city of Dundo, Angola, most likely toward the end of the nineteenth century. For inspiration, the

In 1905, during his first expedition, Frobenius visited the southern region of what we now know as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. After nineteen months, he returned with nearly eight thousand artworks collected among the Kete, Pende, Kuba, Luluwa, Luba, Songye, Kongo, and Chokwe peoples. The Museum's pwo mask was among them.

Frobenius was a complex and controversial figure. Like many of his European peers, his writings reflect the ingrained feelings of Western superiority common among explorers of his time. For example, to account for the high quality of Yoruba culture and art, Frobenius infamously claimed that these Nigerian peoples were the descendants of the lost city of Atlantis, thereby dismissing their African origin.

Though Frobenius's thinking was in many ways in line with the colonial worldview of the time, he was ahead of his time in recognizing the value of African artworks. When the majority of the world was still classifying these works as exotic curios, Frobenius stated that "every cup, every pipe, every spoon [is] a work of art."

A dealer

Leo Frobenius returned to Germany with his vast collection of eight thousand Central African artworks in 1906. Before his departure, he had agreed to a partnership with the Museum für Völkerkunde [Ethnological Museum] in Hamburg: the museum would buy his collection at ten marks apiece, which would provide him with much-needed funds for his next expedition.

The director of the museum, however, had sorely underestimated Frobenius's collecting prowess and nearly bankrupted the institution in an attempt to purchase the Congo bounty. Out of financial necessity, duplicates and surplus pieces were sold and entered the European art market, where collectors had just started paying attention to African artworks.

UMMA's pwo mask was purchased and resold by a German firm in Hamburg that specialized in selling "curios" from overseas. The patriarch of the firm, J.F.G. Umlauff (1833–1889), and his sons became the most prominent traders in zoological specimens and cultural objects, providing many museums in Europe and the United States with their core collections of African art in the 1920s.

Interpreter of Maladies Study Guide

Indian / American short stories
Immigrant experience
Traditional versus assimilation

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut collection of stories, published in 1999, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Hemingway/PEN Award in 2000, and several of the stories appeared in *The New Yorker*. The title is taken from one of the stories in the collection which, like all the stories, explores the lives and loves of Indians in their native land and in their adopted, Western homes.

The book was a critical and commercial success, and was lauded for the powerful storytelling and elegant themes of the work. Lahiri writes eloquently about the **immigrant experience and about the divide between cultures**, examining both the difficulties and joys of assimilation. These immensely personal stories form, in one critic's opinion, a story cycle. Overarching themes and narrative styles culminate in an exploration of the Indian and Indian-American experience, through the eyes of a multitude of characters grappling with themes of identity, ethnicity, love, and culture.

Lahiri's other major works, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, draw upon similar themes of assimilation and love. Her work paints a comprehensive portrait of the varying experiences of people everywhere who grapple with their identity

<http://www.gradesaver.com/interpreter-of-maladies>

POSSIBLE TOUR STOP

Picart print: Indian artifacts and European interpretations, of Indian culture.

*Namesake
New: Station*

BERNARD PICART'S ENGRAVINGS OF HINDU DEITIES

Bernard Picart was a French engraver whose greatest work is *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the People of the World* (*Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*), a multi-volume collaboration with Jean-Frédéric Bernard (ca. 1683–1744) that sought to promote religious tolerance and was foundational to the academic field of comparative religion. Published from 1723 to 1743, it includes illustrations of cultures and religious practices from around the world, including those of South Asia. Though Picart sought to maintain a high degree of objectivity, he frequently relied on second-hand accounts. For this set of images from volume three, his reference was a collection of South Asian sculptures similar to ones on display at UMMA.

Bernard Picart

France, 1673–1733

Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the People of the World: Incarnations (Avatars) Nine and Ten of Vishnu and Shiva

1722

Copper plate engraving on paper

Gift of Professor Walter M. and Nesta R. Spink, 2007/2.124

The top two images depict avatars of the Hindu deity Vishnu. On the left, Vishnu is being worshipped by two figures. In the image on the right, he appears in the form of Kalki. The image on the bottom illustrates devotees worshipping the Hindu deity Shiva in the form of an upright, conical *linga*—an abstract or aniconic (symbolic rather than representational) form of Shiva that connotes his energy and potential.

IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES INTRODUCTION

Dominican Republic novel
Response to Dictatorship
Feminism / Strong Women

In A Nutshell

Three brave revolutionary sisters are murdered in cold blood by an evil regime. Sounds like a myth or a fairy tale, right? But no—it's the hard truth of the 20th-century Dominican Republic. Julia Alvarez' 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* gives fictional voices to the real-life political martyrs, the Mirabal sisters.

The book is famous because it's the first English-language literary look at the infamous Trujillo era in the Dominican Republic. Rafael Trujillo was among the baddest of baddies, ruling the island nation with an iron fist and a creepy arsenal of scare tactics, including rape, murder, and downright terror. But Trujillo's name doesn't spring to mind for a lot of people listing off 20th century political Big Bads. In fact, for many readers, this novel may be the first time they're hearing about Trujillo and the US's involvement in the Dominican Republic.

Alvarez is a literary trailblazer: Nobel-Prize-winning author Mario Vargas Llosa would write about the same dictatorship in his *The Feast of the Goat* in 2001 and Junot Díaz does the same in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2007. Alvarez is not only the first in this line but also the first to write about the dictatorship in English. But Alvarez addressed the issue first: her quartet of sisters in *In the Time of the Butterflies* were the original literary heroines resisting Trujillo. And bonus—they were real people.

In the Time of the Butterflies was selected for the National Endowment for the Arts' Big Read (really cool). Some grouchy reviewers don't think that it does a good enough job of building up the historical context, but we disagree. And hey—if you need more, just click through this study guide: we've got you covered on context.

And for those movie buffs out there, no need to fear. There is a movie version with a star-studded cast (Salma Hayek and Edward James Olmos, not too shabby). For those who dig live action, the novel was recently adapted for the stage by Caridad Svich.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

If you could have lunch with one historical figure, who would it be? Why would you choose that person? What would you talk about? Many of us choose inspirational characters, brave men and women who changed the course of history through their sacrifices, vision, and gumption.

We're willing to bet that by the time you finish reading *In the Time of the Butterflies*, you'll have a new trio of heroines: Patria, Minerva, and Mate Mirabal. The Mirabal sisters were fighters in the underground resistance movement, struggling against Trujillo's brutal dictatorship. Their bravery ended up costing them their lives, though. The sisters are inspiring in their heroism and courage—they made the ultimate sacrifice to try to effect change for their country.

But what's the difference between just reading about them in history books and reading the novel? Well, that's exactly why we think you should care about Julia Alvarez's take on their

THE KITE RUNNER
Khaled Hosseini

Afghanistan novel
Redemption
The Class System

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, on March 4, 1965, and was the oldest of five children. Just as he describes in *The Kite Runner*, Kabul was a cosmopolitan city at the time. Western culture, including movies and literature, mixed with Afghan traditions, such as kite fighting in the winter. Lavish parties were normal at the Hosseini family's home in the upper-middle class neighborhood of Wazir Akbar Khan. Hosseini's father served as a diplomat with the Afghan Foreign Ministry, and his mother taught Farsi and history at a local high school for girls. Then, in 1970, the Foreign Ministry sent his father to Iran. While the family only spent a few years there, Hosseini taught a Hazara man, who worked as a cook for the family, how to read and write. By this time, Khaled Hosseini was already reading Persian poetry as well as American novels, and he began writing his own short stories.

Repeated moves marked the next decade of the Hosseini family's life. They returned to Kabul in 1973, the year Mohammad Daoud Khan, overthrew his cousin, Zahir Shah, the Afghan King, in a coup d'état. The Afghan Foreign Ministry relocated the Hosseini family to Paris in 1976. Though they hoped to return to Afghanistan in 1980, that was not possible because of a military invasion by the Soviet Union. Instead, the Hosseinis moved to San Jose, California after they were granted political asylum in the United States. Khaled Hosseini went on to graduate from high school in 1984 and attended Santa Clara University, where he received his bachelor's degree in Biology in 1988. In 1993, he earned his Medical degree from University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, and in 1996 he completed his residency at Cedars-Sinai medical Center in Los Angeles, making him a full-fledged doctor.

While Khaled Hosseini has said before that his first novel is largely fictional, he acknowledges that the Afghanistan he knew as a child inspired it. Like his main character, Amir, Khaled Hosseini enjoyed Western films and kite fighting. He also lived in a pre-revolutionary Afghanistan that had not yet been ravaged by the Soviet invasion and subsequent Taliban rule. In a 2003 interview with *Newsline*, Khaled Hosseini said the passages in the book most resembling his life are those of Amir and Baba as immigrants in the United States. When the Hosseinis arrived in California, they had difficulty adjusting to the new culture, and for a short time his family lived on welfare. He also remembers the local flea market where he and his father worked briefly among other Afghans, just as Amir and Baba did in the book.

Although the period of adjustment passed and Khaled Hosseini became a successful practicing doctor in 1996, he felt deeply influenced by what he recalled of his homeland, and he began writing "*The Kite Runner*" in March 2001. Two years later, in the midst of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Riverhead Books published the book. "*The Kite Runner*" became an international bestseller, with more than eight million copies in print. It also received numerous book awards, including the the Boeke Prize, the Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, and the Literature to Life Award. In 2007, it was made into a feature film. The movie encountered some problems. The children who played Hassan, Amir and Sohrab, and a fourth boy with a smaller role, had to be moved out of the country. Hassan's