

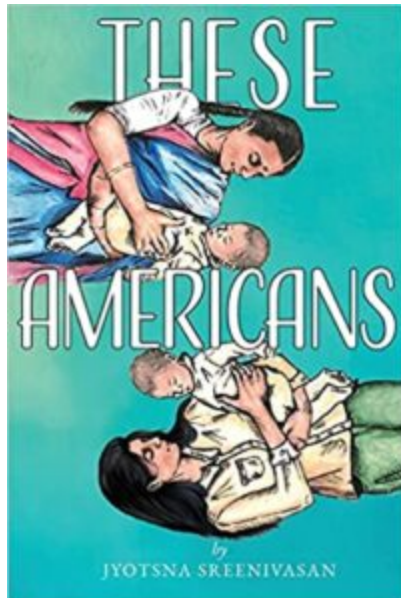
Second Generation Stories

LITERATURE BY CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS



My new book, These Americans

By Jyotsna_Sreenivasan On May 6, 2021 · Add Comment · In Fiction



I'm so excited to introduce my new book of short stories and a novella, [These Americans](#). These women-centered stories are based on my life growing

up Indian-American in the Midwest.

The book won a bronze award in the [Foreword Reviews INDIES awards](#) in the multicultural category!

Check out this [short introductory video about These Americans](#). This video is part of the Lakewood (Cleveland) public library's Meet the Author series.

About this web site

This site features book lists and reviews of fiction and memoir by children of American immigrants. This site is put together by Jyotsna Sreenivasan, an author, second-generation American, and teacher. You can find out more about me at <https://jyotsnasreeniva>
Contact me at: jyotsna1sree@gmail.co

Authors with origins in .

..

Africa
Asia
Europe
Latin America and the Caribbean
Middle East and North Africa

Categories

About this web site
Author profiles

Access [reading group discussion questions](#), and find out how to invite me to a virtual Q & A session with your class or group, by [clicking here](#).

These Americans explores what it means to live between Indian culture and American expectations. An Indian-born immigrant mother gives birth to her daughter in a small Ohio town. A girl recently returned from India strives to become “American” again. A naïve immigrant mother is in denial about her lawyer daughter’s lesbianism. An elderly doctor keeps a shocking secret from her daughter.

This collection won the Rosemary Daniell Fiction Prize from the publisher (Minerva Rising Press). The novella, “Hawk,” is a revised version of the novel “On the Brink of Bloom,” which was [a finalist for the PEN/Bellwether Prize in 2014](#).

You can buy [These Americans from Amazon.com](#), or [Bookshop.org \(to support independent bookstores\)](#).

If you wish, you may [read some excerpts \(1st page of each story\)](#).

The title, *These Americans*, comes from a phrase that my immigrant parents often said to refer to non-immigrant Americans. Often, the phrase was used as a way to contrast their Indian culture with the mainstream American culture, as in “I have gotten used to these Americans smiling all the time.” (This is a quote from the first story in the collection.) But the phrase “these Americans” can also refer to immigrants and their children because, after all, we are Americans too.

Here are some nice things people have said about the book:

Children's/Young
Adult
Fiction
FREE LESSON PLAN
Memoir
Poetry
Self-Help
THESE AMERICANS
discussion questions

Jyotsna's Books

And Laughter Fell
from the Sky (novel)
Aruna's Journeys
(novel for ages 8-12)
These Americans
(short stories and a
novella)

Jyotsna's other web
sites

About Jyotsna
Sreenivasan (bio and
more)
HerStory Novels

Search this site

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"Readers looking for accessible short stories capturing immigrant experiences and women's lives will find *These Americans* a study in contrasting cultures. . . . Thought-provoking, diverse, yet interconnected by Indian heritage, American experience, and women's lives and concerns, *These Americans* offers a rich set of insights."

- [Midwest Book Review](#)

"Sreenivasan's stories offer many teachable moments, without losing the ability to entertain us. The poise with which she navigates the comic and tragic aspects of immigrant life left me wanting to read more from her."

- [India Currents magazine](#)

"The crafted stories of Jyotsna Sreenivasan's collection *These Americans* offer the perspectives of immigrant and native-born Indian Americans as they balance Indian culture with the expectations with American life. . . . Though there are subtle variations in tone and setting, the stories of *These Americans* form a cohesive, captivating collection."

- [Foreword Reviews](#)

"Sreenivasan brings her characters to life, and in reading these stories that move from birth to death we learn the breadth of what it means to be an Indian-American, to try to blend your own culture with the culture of the people now surrounding you. *These Americans* will help you to be more empathetic to others, a goal of reading great fiction. I highly recommend it."

- Diane LaRue, [BookChickDi Blog](#)

"The stories in *These Americans* explore with lightness and eloquence the complexity of living between cultures. Sreenivasan writes beautifully about childhood and about the very particular complications that women face as wives and mothers. A wonderful novella, "Hawk", completes the collection with a heartrending account of a mother and daughter navigating prejudice at home and at work. A dazzling and lovely collection."

- Margot Livesey, award-winning author of *Mercury* and *The Hidden Machinery*

"Jyotsna Sreenivasan's short stories are clearly, and aptly entitled: *These Americans*. These are stories about everyday Indian American people in the United States. We learn more details of lives that are lived parallel to the mainstream, Hollywood vision of America. The stories are a valuable addition to the more complex panorama of American life that readers are, at last, eager to read."

- Breena Clarke, author of *River, Cross My Heart* (Oprah book club selection) and *Stand the Storm* (named one of the 100 best books of 2008 by the *Washington Post*)

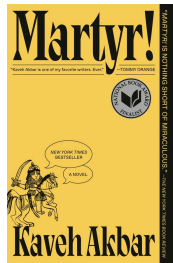
"A quietly tender—and occasionally hilarious—meditation on life, family, and immigration."

- Marie Myung-Ok Lee, author of *The Evening Hero* and *Finding My Voice* and a founder of the Asian American Writer's Workshop

Click [here for more reviews and interviews about *These Americans*.](#)

Martyr! by Kaveh Akbar

By Jyotsna_Sreenivasan On July 18, 2026 · Add Comment ·
In Fiction



Martyr! by Iranian-American author Kaveh Akbar was a big hit when it was first published in 2024. It was a New York Times bestseller, a finalist for the National Book Award, and it made Barack Obama's list of recommended reading. However, the first time I read the opening pages, I abandoned the book. The scene starts with alcoholic Cyrus in a filthy room, asking for a sign from God. I was not interested in reading about an alcoholic and I assumed his longing for a religious experience would be treated cynically in the novel. I did not trust these sentences on the second page of the prologue: "He asked God to reveal Himself, Herself, Themselves, Itself, whatever. He asked with all the earnestness at his disposal" (p. 4). Earnestness is not fashionable in modern literary fiction. Cynicism is.

When I went back to the book recently, encouraged by acquaintances to try it again, I soon discovered that the book is heartbreakingly earnest. I did have to slog through some cynicism at first, because Cyrus,

a recovering alcoholic, is cynical about his life. The death of his father, during Cyrus's sophomore year of college, hit him hard: "What was left of his life had no intrinsic meaning, he knew, since such meaning could only be shaped in relation to other people" (p. 54).

Cyrus Shams, raised in Indiana, is the child of an Iranian immigrant father whose mother died when he was a baby. This novel is less about growing up between two cultures and more about growing up between life and death. Cyrus's father Ali discourages Cyrus from speaking Farsi. Afraid of deportation, Ali instructs Cyrus not to tell people where they are from. And when Cyrus balks at the idea of a "Higher Power" and says he needs to find a Persian higher power to believe in, Cyrus's Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor says, " 'You're the most American kid I know' " (p. 25). Cyrus's cultural heritage is a minor player in this novel.

Death, however, looms large. First of all, the deaths of his parents. And Cyrus seems fascinated by death. Chapter one starts with a sober Cyrus working as a medical actor, impersonating dying people or their relatives, to help medical students deal with dying patients. He is cynical at this point, and his cynicism translated into disdain and even hatred for the medical students he is supposed to be helping.

The chapters about Cyrus navigating his life are interspersed with facts about the plane crash that killed his mother, as well as back-story chapters from the points of view of his mother, father, and uncle. We learn that Cyrus's uncle had acted as an "angel of death" during his time in the Iranian army. I was impatient with these interludes and did not understand their significance until later in the book.

I would say the book becomes earnest in Chapter 7 (page 71). Cyrus and his friends are in a café for an open mic night and Cyrus begins talking about his fascination for martyrs. He's been reading about martyrs in the library and has taped printouts of their faces above his bed. He wants his death to be meaningful because he sees his mother's death as meaningless. "Meaningless at the level of empire is what I mean by meaningless," he explains on page 75. One of his friends mentions a dying artist, Orkideh, who is doing a performance art exhibit in New York City, talking to visitors every day while waiting to die. Cyrus realizes the artist is Iranian. His friends persuade him to make the trip from Indiana to visit her. What could be more earnest than a search for meaning in one's life?

I started to love the novel at this point. The book includes several chapters of interactions between Cyrus and Orkideh. It also includes Cyrus's poems about martyrs from around the world. Cyrus is putting his life back together after years of battling depression, insomnia, and addiction. I don't want to give any spoilers, but I would encourage you to stick with this book even if you find the first chapters off-putting. I think you will find it richly rewarding, as I did.

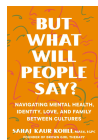
**But What Will
People Say?
Navigating
Mental Health,
Identity, Love,
and Family
Between
Cultures by Sahaj
Kaur Kohli**

On December 15, 2025 By
Jyotsna_Sreenivasan

**Seventeen
Syllables and
Other Stories, by
Hisaye
Yamamoto**

On July 25, 2023 By
Jyotsna_Sreenivasan

I wish I had been able to read [*But What Will People Say?*](#) when I was a teen and young adult. But that was in the 1970s and 1980s. Sahaj Kaur Kohli, the author of this enlightening self-help book, hadn't even been born. My parents were among the first Indians to immigrate to America when the U.S. government was recruiting foreign-born doctors.



As I read this book I flagged so many passages. For example, on page 36, Kohli reveals that, according to an informal survey of 6,000 children of immigrants, 91% said they would label their families of origin as at least

Hisaye Yamamoto was a Japanese American writer active from the 1940s to the 1990s. I decided to check out [*her book of stories*](#) after seeing it listed in this article, [*"The Best Books About Asian American Identity, According to Experts."*](#)

The stories (and a few essays) in this collection span the entire career of this insightful author. The earliest piece was first published in 1948, and the final story first appeared in 1995. Several of the stories are concerned with second-generation Japanese-Americans



somewhat dysfunctional. I was surprised by this high percentage since immigrant parents tend to be very focused on their children's well-being.

(called Nisei). Yamamoto herself was Nisei. Her parents (the Issei generation) were immigrants from the Kumamoto Prefecture in Japan.

My own parents, for example, provided not only the basics of food, clothing, and shelter, but also music lessons, educational and fun vacations, and holiday celebrations. They paid for my college education and for my wedding.

Kohli explains that "the most common forms of dysfunction in immigrant families are rigidity; clearly defined or differentiated hierarchies and rules/expectations; hypercriticism; corporal punishment; emotional neglect; and substance abuse by a parent" (p. 36). Looking at this list, I realized I had experienced most of these. My parents

My two favorite stories in this collection are "Seventeen Syllables," which is apparently Yamamoto's most anthologized story, and "Yoneko's Earthquake." Both stories are about Japanese-American girls growing up in farming families in California. In both stories, the girls are only dimly aware of the passions and ambitions of their Issei mothers who are both in difficult marriages. In "Seventeen Syllables," Rosie is aware that her mother has begun writing haiku, but her knowledge of Japanese is shaky and she is not able to fully appreciate her mother's art. In "Yoneko's

raised us the way they were raised back in India, and they no doubt experienced many of these as well, which were considered “normal.” Kohli asks, “If these dysfunctions are commonplace in many of our immigrant families, that begs the question: where does culture end and where does trauma begin?”

When I was a teen and young adult, counseling was taboo in my family. Mental health issues were swept under the rug. Even though my sibling and I were clearly struggling as teens, my parents would not consider seeking any kind of mental health care. My mother’s viewpoint was that an “American” (i.e., not Indian) counselor would not understand her culture, and an Indian would gossip about us within the community. My mother’s fears may have been justified. At that time we did not have access to a community of South Asians who were open to dealing with

Earthquake,” young Yoneko develops a crush on their handsome Filipino farmhand without realizing that her mother is having an affair with him. In fact, the characters in these stories are so similar that they were combined into one movie, “Hot Summer Winds,” directed by Emiko Omori and aired in 1991 on PBS American Playhouse. I very much enjoyed seeing the characters brought to life, particularly details of everyday life such as the process of sorting tomatoes, and the Japanese-style bathhouse. This movie is available through Turner Classic Movies and on [YouTube](#), and is well worth watching. The cover of the book shows a still from this movie.

Yamamoto’s style of writing is simple and understated. It’s clear that she is fond of her characters, and sometimes views them with gentle humor. Here is her description of Rosie’s mother when she first started writing haiku

mental health issues. Kohli set up such a community in 2019, which she named Brown Girl Therapy.

Kohli's book alternates between her own personal story of growing up in Virginia as the youngest daughter of Sikh immigrant parents; data from informal surveys of the Brown Girl Therapy community; and advice for children of immigrants from her work as a counselor. As a young adult, Kohli tried to adhere to her parents' expectations by studying pre-med in college. However, she failed her classes. On top of that, a sexual assault sent her into a mental health crisis. Her parents were ashamed when she moved back home to heal. She, herself, was ashamed. When she was finally able to earn her bachelor's degree twelve years after she started, she kept this long delay hidden from most people.

under the name "Ume Hanazono":

So Rosie and her father lived for awhile with two women, her mother and Ume Hanazono. Her mother [Tome Hayashi by name] kept house, cooked, washed, and, along with her husband and the Carrascos, the Mexican family hired for the harvest, did her ample share of picking tomatoes out in the sweltering fields and boxing them in tidy strata in the cool packing shed. Ume Hanazono, who came to life after the dinner dishes were done, was an earnest, muttering stranger who often neglected speaking when spoken to and stayed busy at the parlor table as late as midnight scribbling with pencil on scratch paper or carefully copying characters on good paper with her fat, pale green Parker (p. 9).

I wish I could have been part of a community like the Brown Girl Therapy group. I wish I would have sought out therapy as a young adult. Instead, I allowed guilt, shame, and hidden anger to run my life. I chose a boyfriend who was not good to me partly, I believe, because it upset my mother. I refused to attend medical school or to even think about a career partly, I believe, to upset my father. I was convinced that my parents hated me (because they tried to force me to follow their pre-conceived notions of who I should be), so I was going to do things to hurt them even while on the surface being friendly and respectful (because a child of immigrants should never be angry at parents who have sacrificed so much for us). I was an emotional mess. I would have benefited from knowing that guilt, shame, and difficulty dealing with emotions are very common among children of

Seek out this gem of a book. And check out this [series of interviews](#) with the soft-spoken Hisaye Yamamoto. By the way, the [Google Doodle on May 4, 2021 featured Hisaye Yamamoto!](#)

immigrants. I was not some freak who couldn't figure out my own life.

Kohli points out that many immigrant parents were not taught how to handle their emotions in a mature way. Many immigrant parents therefore have a young "emotional age" and we, as their children, might also be emotionally immature. We might be uncomfortable with our emotions and we might resort to defense mechanisms such as "redirecting our feelings onto others, refusing to accept our feelings, and regressing to childish behaviors when dealing with uncomfortable feelings" (p. 148). I found this to be an eye-opening perspective. Reading Kohli's book has given me more empathy for my own struggles, as well as more sympathy for my parents' struggles.

When We Were Sisters, by Fatimah Asghar

On June 22, 2023 By
Jyotsna_Sreenivasan

The first 6 pages of [When We Were Sisters](#) do not invite the reader in. These pages are written from the distant point of view of an uncaring universe. We learn that an unnamed man has been murdered in an unnamed city—not the one he was born in, but where his children were born. We learn that upon his death, the man’s brother-in-law, who married a white American woman, “celebrates” by renovating his house. We learn that the murdered man’s wife has also died,



We Had Our Reasons: Collaborative Poetry by Ricardo Ruiz

On June 21, 2022 By
Jyotsna_Sreenivasan

 [We Had Our Reasons](#): Poems by Ricardo Ruiz and Other Hardworking Mexicans from Eastern Washington - Ruiz, Ricardo

I don’t normally include books of poetry on this website, because I’m interested in the stories (true or fictional) of the second generation. I made an exception for [We Had Our Reasons](#), published in 2022, because it is based on true stories. Ricardo Ruiz is a Mexican-American poet born and raised in Othello, Washington. His parents were farm workers at first, but once they became permanent residents of the U.S., they were able to find jobs in a potato factory. Ruiz spoke to me recently about what inspired

leaving the orphaned nieces with “their dead dad’s money up for grabs.” The brother-in-law’s white wife refuses to take in the orphans, so the man promises, “It’ll be like they never existed.” The reader struggles to understand and to care about these people.

From this distant beginning, the novel plunges us into a very personal, first-person story from the point of view of a little girl with two older sisters. We gather that these girls are the orphans, and that their father has been murdered. Because the novel starts from the point of view of the little girl, the situation is confusing to the reader, as it was to little Kausar. An uncle takes them to an apartment he owns, which they must share with many

him to write the book, and how he put it together.

Ruiz’s children, ages 13 and 14, provided one inspiration for the book. His children live in Texas with their mother, who is not Mexican-American. They don’t speak Spanish. Ruiz wanted to tell them not only his own stories, but also the stories of other Mexican-Americans. Another inspiration for the book was William Wordsworth’s preface to [Lyrical Ballads](#).

“Wordsworth wanted to write poems for the average man in the average tongue,” Ruiz told me. “I thought, why not do this? Poetry in its original form was a form of storytelling.”

He conducted interviews with 13 Mexican-Americans, including his older brother, who happens to work for ICE. He then selected the stories which had poetic potential, wrote poems based on those stories as well as his own stories, and chose 48 poems for the book.

caged birds and other animals. Gradually, we learn that the uncle, whose name is blacked out throughout the novel, is using their father's money, as well as the government checks that each girl receives, while keeping them isolated and in poverty, sometimes without even money for food. The uncle eventually rents another room of the apartment to a couple newly arrived from Pakistan. This couple begins to take care of the girls, acting as parent figures. However, when the uncle finds out about the bond between this couple and the girls, he evicts the couple. The girls must grow up on their own.

Most parts of the novel are in prose. However, Fatimah Asghar, who is also a poet, has also included several poems, as well as a few experimental sections. One passage, printed sideways, has many words missing, with the missing words printed on the facing

Each poem was then translated into Spanish by Brianna Salinas. The English poems are printed on the left-hand page, and the Spanish translations on the right. Ruiz tried to reflect in each poem the language of the teller. He points out that the poems tend to be short. "I wanted to tell a story with a lot of emotion, and with speed and quickness," he says, "for the short attention span of my kids."

The book is divided into five sections, starting with border crossing poems and continuing on to arrival in the United States, working, deportation, and joining gangs or groups. "Often people only want to talk about the border crossing," Ruiz says. "But what happens next? What happens to the children?"

One poem that contrasts the experiences of two generations is "We Had This Camcorder: Mother and Son Duet" (p. 42). Ruiz

page. Although I don't normally enjoy experimental novels, in this case I was drawn in by Kausar's intensely emotional story. The piecemeal way the story is told reflects Kausar's fragmented view of life.

This novel is somewhat different from many of the other second-generation novels I've reviewed. Kausar does deal with the usual questions about where she is from. At one point, she is called "Pocahontas" (p. 106). However, her suffering and struggles as an orphan and as a survivor of abuse overshadow her attempts to navigate her Pakistani heritage and her American reality.

I was curious about whether the story was based on the author's life. [In an interview](#), Asghar said that, like Kausar, she is an orphan with two sisters. She says the book has "auto-fictional elements." I highly recommend this novel. Stick with

wrote the poem based on stories by Jose and his mother Lorena.

The hardest thing from that move
He always did love videos

I remember we had this camcorder
We had this camcorder

I would take it everywhere
He would always take it everywhere

I don't know what happened to it
I know what happened to it

There are no pictures from back then
There wasn't enough money to get us here back then

it past the difficult
first pages, and I think
you will be as
absorbed as I was in
this deeply moving
story.

It was one of the
most valuable
things we had
It was one of the
most valuable
things we had

It must of got
lost
We had to sell it

I still think
about it
I still think
about him
looking for it

I wish we still
had it
I wish we didn't
need to sell it

That was the
hardest part
That was so
hard to part
with

We Had Our Reasons
fulfills Ruiz's goal of
poems which tell
emotion-filled stories
in the common
person's language.
This is a big-hearted
book suitable for
teens and adults. The
last section of the
book introduces us to
the collaborating

storytellers, including snippets from their interviews. It is fascinating to compare the raw interview language to the finished poem. Find out more about Ricardo Ruiz on his website, <https://www.poetruiz.com/>

Here We Are, by Aarti Namdev Shahani

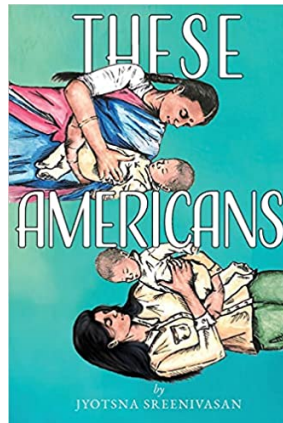
On July 11, 2021 By Jyotsna_Sreenivasan

When we think of the words “undocumented” and “deported,” often the stereotype that comes to mind is an immigrant from Mexico or Central America. In contrast, the stereotype of South Asian Americans is that we are highly educated tech wizards who arrive legally in the United States. And on



These Americans discussion questions

On July 3, 2021 By Jyotsna_Sreenivasan



My new book, [These Americans](#), includes 8 women-centered stories and a novella based on my life growing up Indian-American in the Midwest. Find out more [here](#).

If your class, reading group, or book club is reading [These Americans](#), you might

the surface,
Aarti Shahani
fits the
stereotype:
she is a highly
educated tech
reporter for
NPR.

In fact, as Shahani reveals in [Here We Are](#), her heart-wrenching, gripping memoir, her family was undocumented for a time when they overstayed their visa. And after her father and uncle were wrongfully arrested for allegedly helping a drug cartel to launder money, her family was caught up in a years-long battle to prevent her father's imprisonment and deportation, despite the fact that he was a legal permanent resident by then.

Shahani's parents arrived in the U.S. after already having lived in a number of countries, including India and Morocco, where Shahani was born. Both her parents speak multiple languages. The family landed in Queens, NY, where they made strong

find the discussion questions below useful.

You may also **access a PDF copy** of the reading group discussion questions by [clicking here](#).

If your class or group would like to **host a virtual Q & A session with me**, please contact me at jyotsna1sree@gmail.com.

General discussion questions for any of the stories

1. What do you think of the title of the whole book? How does the title "These Americans" resonate with each story?
2. Talk about a favorite scene or moment in the story.
3. Ask about something that puzzles or intrigues you in the story.
4. Discuss the personalities of one or more characters.
5. Discuss any themes or messages that

friendships with other immigrants in their crowded, roach-infested building. Her father opened his own wholesale electronics store, and her mother picked up work as a seamstress. Studious Shahani was awarded a full scholarship to a prestigious, expensive private girls' school in Manhattan. The family was on its way to fulfilling the American Dream.

Then, police officers visited the store, questioned her father and uncle, and confiscated thousands of dollars in cash. While her classmates enjoyed luxurious vacations, Shahani worked summer jobs and found lawyers for her father and uncle, striving to keep them out of jail. At the time, it was difficult for anyone in the family to understand what was really happening. Years later, Shahani uses her reporting skills to uncover the truth around her father's wrongful arrest and imprisonment.

you noticed in the story.

6. Discuss something in the story that evoked a strong or unexpected emotion for you.
7. Choose a character who is unlike you. Find a point of connection or a way to be empathetic with that character.
8. No matter what your ethnic background, you may have connected personally with some aspect of the story. What characters, incidents, or themes resonated personally with you? Perhaps they reminded you of a feeling, person, or incident in your own life.

"Mirror"

1. Discuss the symbol of the mirror in this story.
2. How does Prema's view of herself change during the story?
3. What do you think Prema's life will

Shahani paints vivid portraits of each family member, from her parents, who call each other “dahling” and give their earnings to each other at the end of each day, to her overbearing uncle who tries to force Shahani to be more submissive, to her older brother and sister, who tease, fight, and support each other. Through the compelling story of Shahani’s family, *Here We Are* opens the curtains on the U.S. immigration system which beckons to those who want a better life, while also meting out heavy-handed and often arbitrary punishment for perceived infractions.

be like going forward?

“At Home”

1. Amiya is a young child. What are some things about her situation and her family’s situation that she does not understand or is not conscious of?
2. Discuss the incidents that cause Amiya to believe that she is not “normal.”
3. What do you think of Amiya’s teacher? When, in your opinion, does the teacher do a good job? What mistakes do you think the teacher makes?
4. What do you think “home” and feeling “at home” mean for Amiya and other members of her family?
5. What do you think of the ending of the story? Were you surprised by it? Do you think Cheryl really wants to look just like Amiya?

“Revolution”

1. Discuss the meaning of revolution in this story.
2. Neel is desperate for male role models. Discuss what he might learn or internalize from the men in his life.
3. How do you think Neel's life will be different (or not) once he returns to his home in the United States?

"Dreams"

1. Discuss the role of dreams in this story.
2. What are some things the family members do not understand about each other?
3. The story is told from multiple points of view. Whose point of view is not included? Why do you think this character's point of view was left out?
4. What do you think the father will do after the end of the story? How will he interact with his family in the morning at breakfast?

"The Sweater"

1. How does Nandini (the daughter) seek to be like her mother and to distance herself from her mother at the same time?
2. What does Nandini learn from the process of making the sweater?
3. How do you think Nandini's life will be different going forward?

"Mrs. Raghavendra's Daughter"

1. Raghavendra describes himself as a coward. Do you agree or disagree?
2. Discuss the "monster" that Mrs. Raghavendra imagines.
3. What is the turning point in the relationship for Anjana and for her mother? Is it the same turning point for both?
4. Do you agree with Mrs. Raghavendra's definition of the purpose of life?

"Crystal Vase: Snapshots"

1. Discuss the symbol of the crystal vase.
2. Revati and Liz used to be best friends as children. Why can't the women connect with each other anymore? Is it anyone's fault?
3. The story is not told in chronological order. Why not? How does the structure of the story enhance (or not) the story's meaning for you?
4. What do you think Revati and Liz's relationship will be like going forward?

"Perfect Sunday"

1. Discuss the role of religion and/or spirituality in the story.
2. Do you think the main character has a strong marriage or not?
3. How do you interpret the ending?

"Hawk"

1. How are the two main characters, Bhagya and Manisha, alike and

different from
each other?

2. What do you think
of Manisha as a
teacher? Does she
seem like a good
teacher or not?

3. What did you
learn about
Bhagya's career
that was
especially
interesting or
surprising to you?

4. The school
administrator
pushes Manisha to
include more
diversity in the
classroom. Do you
think Manisha
goes too far?
What does
diversity mean to
you?

5. Manisha says that
in her next
teaching job, she
will try not to do
anything that
draws attention
to her ethnicity.
Do you think this
is the right
choice?

6. Do you think
Bhagya makes the
right decision for
herself at the end
of her life?

7. What do you think
the hawk
symbolizes in this
story?

Pioneer Girls from Immigrant Families

On July 2, 2021 By
Jyotsna_Sreenivasan

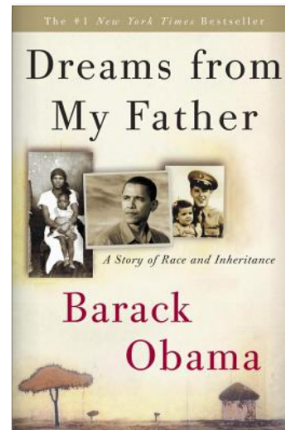


I'm so glad to finally discover the author Bich Minh Nguyen. I believe her name is pronounced Bik Min Ngwen. A refugee from Vietnam, she grew up in Michigan. I was interested to read her novel Pioneer Girl because, like the main character Lee Lien, I was also obsessed with the *Little House* books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder and her daughter Rose Wilder Lane.

Lee, home after earning a PhD in American literature but failing to land a job, discovers a brooch that a journalist named Rose left at her

Dreams from My Father, by Barack Obama

On February 7, 2021 By
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I don't know if Barack Obama would consider himself a "second generation" American. His Kenyan father was not technically an immigrant, although he studied in the United States for many years, earning a graduate degree at Harvard University. Barack's mother was a white woman named Ann Dunham. The marriage deteriorated soon after Ann gave birth to their son, and the elder Obama eventually returned to Kenya. He died in 1982, when his son was in college.

grandfather's Saigon café during the Vietnam war. The brooch looks remarkably like a brooch that Laura Ingalls Wilder owned and described in one of her books. Lee wonders—could this brooch have belonged to the real Rose Wilder Lane, who was indeed a journalist in Saigon during the Vietnam War? Lee sets off on a wild goose chase to figure out the answer, and also to escape the critical eye of her mother.

I got the sense that one reason for Lee's obsession with Laura and Rose is to find a connection between her murky past (she knows very little about her ancestors' lives in Vietnam) and a quintessential American figure. Lee asks herself, "How many times during the years of my *Little House* obsession had I pretended the pin was Laura's secret gift to me?" (p. 46). Later in the book she admits that she was "searching for, maybe hoping for, my own claim on America's

But although Barack Obama did not grow up with his father, and in fact spent only one month with him when his father came to visit his 10-year-old son in Hawaii, his Kenyan name and his brown skin were a constant reminder that he straddled two worlds, just as many second-generation Americans do.

Obama wrote [Dreams from My Father](#) when he was just out of law school, before he got into politics. He was invited to write the book after becoming the first African-American president of the Harvard Law Review. The front cover shows a photo of him as an adult, positioned between a photo of his dark father as a young child on the lap of his mother, and a photo of his pale mother as a young child with her father.

Obama struggled to make sense of his identity. One example: he cringes when, on the first day of fifth grade, his teacher, in front of the entire class,

favorite pioneer family" (p. 81).

Interestingly, at the time I was reading this novel, I came across some photos of myself at the age of eleven, dressed in a long, frilly "pioneer" type dress that my mother had made for me. I loved that dress. In fact, the dress was the basis of a skit that I wrote and that my best friend and I performed on her back patio for Mother's Day. We rounded up as many neighborhood mothers as we could to watch the skit. I don't remember how many actually showed up, but my mother must have been there to take the photos. The skit involved two pioneer girls who were grumpy about all the housework they had to do, and decided to run away.



mentions that she used to live in Kenya and asks what tribe his father is from. Obama's white grandparents (who raised him while his mother lived in Indonesia with her second husband) do not understand the young Barack's embarrassment. " 'Isn't it terrific that Miss Hefty used to live in Kenya?' " his grandfather asks. " 'Makes the first day a little easier, I'll bet.' " Barack doesn't even try to explain. "I went to my room and closed the door" (p. 60).

As a teen, Obama is drawn to some of his grandfather's African-American friends. He develops a passion for basketball. After college, he takes a job as a community organizer in an African-American neighborhood in Chicago. Yet he cannot seamlessly fit in with African-Americans either. He does not come from their legacy of slavery and segregation. His heritage is elsewhere, across the ocean. In Chicago, he hesitated

I saw nothing unusual in the fact that I was an Indian American girl pretending to be a pioneer American settler. At that time, I didn't really know what to make of my Indian heritage. I didn't even know the phrase "Indian American," and I'd never read anything about Indian Americans. Pretending I was a pioneer girl was like borrowing someone else's heritage for my own. I think I longed for the close multi-generational family of the *Little House in the Big Woods* book, a family in which parents, children, and community share the same culture, values, and expectations. I didn't realize until I was an adult that the idyllic childhood portrayed in those books was a fiction. Laura's real life was much harder and more tragic than the books reveal. In addition, as a child I only vaguely picked up on the racism that made it acceptable for a white family to displace indigenous American Indian families.

to share his background with the poor African-Americans he was helping to organize. "I was afraid . . . that my prior life would be too foreign for South Side sensibilities, that I might somehow disturb people's expectations of me" (p. 190).

Obama always knew about his family in Kenya, but it wasn't until he visited Kenya, just before entering law school, that he began to fill the "great emptiness" he found inside himself (p. 302). In Kenya, he dances and feasts with his half-siblings. He learns about family conflicts. He hears, from his grandmother (as translated by his sister), the story of his ancestors and especially his father. And he experiences a catharsis as he weeps at his father's grave.

"I saw that my life in America—the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in

The “pioneer girl” in Nguyen’s title could refer to Laura, to Rose (who was a pioneering woman journalist), or to the main character Lee, the first in her family to earn an American PhD. The novel is written in the first person and the style is so natural that one might mistake it for memoir. The characters of Lee, her older brother Sam, her mother, and her grandfather come across as unique, real people. The dialogue flows effortlessly, and interesting bits of backstory are woven in seamlessly. I was kept engaged by the several mysteries that Lee tries to untangle over the course of the novel.

I’m looking forward to reading more by Bich Minh Nguyen. She is also the author of the memoir [Stealing Buddha’s Dinner](#) and the novel [Short Girls](#).

Chicago—all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin” (p. 430).

I would argue that Barack Obama’s divided cultural heritage prompted him to explore more deeply what it means to be an American, and led him to become the President of the United States. He says as much in his new book, [A Promised Land](#): “Ultimately wasn’t this what I was after—a politics that bridged America’s racial, ethnic, and religious divides, as well as the many strands of my own life? . . . As I gave the future more thought, one thing became clear. The kind of bridge-building politics I imagined wasn’t suited to a congressional race. . . . To really shake things up, I realized, I needed to speak to and for the widest possible audience” (pp. 41-42).

