

New York City Area Swarthmore Alumni Reading Groups
U.S. Fiction Rethinking Family, Community, Borders, and Nation
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Introduction and Overview

Peter Schmidt is happy to be this year's advisor for the alumni reading groups in the New York area, for he loves playing hooky from teaching 18-21 year olds to meet alums of all generations, and he knows how much these reading/discussion groups mean to their participants.

PS's introductory talk in Manhattan in October stressed two main points. First, amidst growing but highly restricted national "debates" about security, freedom, borders, and American family values, we need to listen not just to political pundits, public policy advocates, and other "experts" but also to artists and creative writers, who will often have very different takes on the major topics of the day from how they are framed in the mass media. He cited the philosopher Hannah Arendt for her views that freedom in healthy democracies is public and associative, not an individual right; it is created through interactions in the public sphere, what Arendt called (following the Greeks) the "polis." Only such a shared space in which freedom can be rediscovered can bring something new into the world and check a society's flaws, according to Arendt. Peter Schmidt suggested was that discussing works of art together provides a crucial contribution toward sustaining a lively public space, especially in a time when the health of this public sphere is endangered due to the influence of money and mass market corporations narrowing the range of dialogue and debate.

Some of the best U.S. fiction in the last several decades has reimaged what the shared spaces of family, community, and nation might be, as well as how best to invent new and better ways of representing a family's memory and our nation's sense of its own history. There has been much recent interest among writers in exploring in fiction the history of "non-traditional" or extended family networks, including multi-racial families and families with adopted children. (An aside: I place "non-traditional" in quotation marks because of course the notion that the "nuclear" family of father-mother-children is the primary or most natural family unit is not that traditional at all: it basically dates from the nuclear era, i.e., after World War II and the idealization of the single-family suburban home. Remember of course that there are many kinds of nuclear elements, not one, and that such elements like combining to make complex molecules: are other kinds of family structures therefore, by analogy, "compound" rather than "nuclear"?) You'll find that in contemporary U.S. fiction the old multi-generational family novel is back in a big way. But these novels sure as the dickens don't sound like Dickens. (No emails please; that's not a jab at Dickens, whose fiction I love.)

Second, I explained that for this year's alumni "syllabus" I've picked three fine contemporary novels that reimagine both what the history of a family could be and how it should be told: Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*, Jonathan Franzen [1981 grad]'s *The Corrections*, and Gish Jen's *The Love Wife*. To lead into these contemporary readings, I thought everyone would enjoy reading some earlier American literature from the 20th century that gave us unusual visions of family, and community, and nation—just so we

can get a sense that there's a history to contemporary explorations of family, community, and nation. We'll read three short stories by women writers who published in the early twentieth century that focus on women, racial issues, and migration; then a brilliant 1931 satire on race and class by an under-recognized renegade star of the Harlem Renaissance, George Schuyler; then my favorite John Steinbeck novel, *Cannery Row* (1945), full of humorous, humanistic tales about the doings of an unusual community of "bums," iconoclasts, independents, and small business people living in precarious community near cannery factories by Monterey Bay, California.

The three contemporary novels I've chosen certainly have their flaws, but I think these are far outweighed by their virtues. Franzen's novel of course features a conventional "nuclear" family, and one from the Midwest at that, but Franzen's tragicomic Lamberts are hardly a conventional Father Knows Best family. Franzen looks compassionately and satirically at the shift from a work-ethic centered culture of production (represented by Alfred Lambert) to the culture-of-consumption me-now values embodied by the children. The novel also considers what happens when market capitalism (which defines freedom as infinite consumer choice) so influences our personal relations that it becomes hard for us to accept the responsibilities we have towards others, even family, because we see these as negating our inalienable "rights" to be "free" from obligations. I suggested that three of the five characters in *The Corrections* have an unanticipated rebirth or a "correction" at the end that allows them to find a more satisfying ethical life balancing responsibilities toward others with the pursuit of personal freedom.

Desai's novel looks at how undiscovered family history linking England's Cornwall, America's Maine, and Mexico makes even isolated "local" places sites for discovering global connections. The novel follows the circuitous journey of its dreamy protagonist back into the deep time of both his own and Mexico's past, and uses the Mexican *Días de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) ceremonies to provide a brilliant and moving climax. The novelist's daughter, Kiran Desai, won the Booker Prize last year for a novel with a similarly transnational world-view, *The Inheritance of Loss*, which features major scenes in Manhattan, England, and Darjeeling province in India near the Himalayas. Both books are highly recommended, but we'll be reading Anita Desai's finely layered pearl of a masterpiece for our "course" this year.

Gish Jen's comic and tender novel focuses on a multiracial family with two adopted daughters from China and one biological child from the white and Asian American parents. Key themes include: the difficulty even "liberal" whites (like "Blondie," the mother) have adapting to being a minority, not a majority; how nature vs. culture and racial gender, class, and "national" differences both creating family tensions but also bonds; and the question of what is more important for making a "family" anyway—shared blood or shared stories? In this family chronicle all the main characters from three generations of Wongs and Baileys get to participate in telling the story, through wonderfully individualized voices and a brilliant narrative invention of Jen's that is this postmodern writer's tribute to Chinese "talk-story" traditions. Look for the book's surprise ending (which I won't give away here, of course!) that causes us to rethink the meaning of the whole.

An additional feature of this “course” of readings for alums is that you have the option of going to a Swarthmore College webpage and listening to brief podcasts of contemporary students in Peter Schmidt’s classes and seminars reading a favorite passage from some of these works, then discussing them. If your computer can play a podcast or an mp3 file, you can participate! I think you’ll find these students’ readings and insights of great fun and of great interest as you are preparing for your own group discussions. Don’t worry, we haven’t stopped assigning written papers and exams to students. But podcasts have proved to be a superb new medium for assignments in Humanities classrooms: they bring back to the foreground the virtues of reading aloud and doing a “close reading” of a passage to see how one scene can give us a microcosm of a much larger book.

Swarthmore student podcasts are available for the following readings:

Schuyler: <http://acad.swarthmore.edu:16080/weblog/eng152a/>

Steinbeck: <http://acad.swarthmore.edu:16080/weblog/eng152a/>

Desai: see <http://acad.swarthmore.edu:16080/weblog/e116/>

Franzen: see either <http://acad.swarthmore.edu:16080/weblog/e116/> or
<http://acad.swarthmore.edu:16080/weblog/eng1116/>

Jen: see either <http://acad.swarthmore.edu:16080/weblog/e116/> or
<http://acad.swarthmore.edu:16080/weblog/eng1116/>

(When you get to the webpage, scroll down until you find the podcasts on the author you seek.)

Go to the next pdf for study questions on the first set of readings, short stories by Austin, Sin Far, and Yezierska. Pdf’s of these stories are available on this website for you to download and print from your computer.