Book Choices for Spring 2010

The RCOE Diversity Committee has selected the following books for possible reading choices during spring 2010. We ask that you review the book choices and if you would like to participate in a reading group related to a particular book, please email Precious Mudiwa (mudiwap@appstate.edu) with your first and second preference. Please submit your choice by November 20th. Responses will be compiled and books selected on the basis of number of responses. Results will be communicated to you before the end of the semester. We look forward to your engagement in a reading group for spring. –The RCOE Diversity Committee.

When the emperor was divine by Julie Otsuka. (2003)

Julia Otsuka’s quietly disturbing novel opens with a woman reading a sign in a post office window. It is Berkeley, California, the spring of 1942. Pearl Harbor has been attacked, the war is on, and though the precise message on the sign is not revealed, its impact on the woman who reads it is immediate and profound. It is, in many ways she cannot yet foresee, a sign of things to come. She readies herself and her two young children for a journey that will take them to the high desert plains of Utah and into a world that will shatter their illusions forever. They travel by train and gradually the reader discovers that all on board are Japanese American, that the shades must be pulled down at night so as not to invite rock-throwing, and that their destination is an internment camp where they will be imprisoned “for their own safety” until the war is over. With stark clarity and an unflinching gaze, Otsuka explores the inner lives of her main characters—the mother, daughter, and son—as they struggle to understand their fate and long for the father whom they have not seen since he was whisked away, in slippers and handcuffs, on the evening of Pearl Harbor.

Moving between dreams, memories, and sharply emblematic moments, When the Emperor Was Divine reveals the dark underside of a period in American history that, until now, has been left largely unexplored in American fiction.


From American Book Award-winning author Ana Castillo comes a suspenseful, moving new novel about a sensuous, smart, and fiercely independent woman. Eking out a living as a teacher’s aide in a small New Mexican border town, Tía Regina is also raising her teenage nephew, Gabo, a hardworking boy who has entered the country illegally and aspires to the priesthood. When Gabo’s father, Rafa, disappears while crossing over from Mexico, Regina fears the worst. After several days of waiting and with an ominous phone call from a woman who may be connected to a smuggling ring, Regina and Gabo resolve to find Rafa. Help arrives in the form of Miguel, an amorous, recently divorced history teacher; Miguel’s gregarious abuelo Milton; a couple of Gabo’s gangbanger classmates; and a priest of wayward faith. Between the ruthless “coyotes” who exploit Mexicans while smuggling them to America and the border officials who are out to arrest and deport the illegal immigrants, looming threat is a constant companion on the journey.

Ana Castillo brilliantly evokes the beautiful, stark desert landscape and creates vivid characters with strong voices and resilient hearts. “Like Sandra Cisneros’s acclaimed The House on Mango
“Street,” wrote Barbara Kingsolver when reviewing So Far from God, “Castillo’s writing is seasoned with Mexican aphorisms [and] rich symbolism. . . . Impossible to resist.” The Guardians serves as a remarkable testament to enduring faith, family bonds, cultural pride, and the human experience.

A Thousand Splendid Suns” by Khalad Hosseini (2008)

Whereas “The Kite Runner” by Hosseini focused on fathers and sons, and friendships between men, his latest novel, “A Thousand Splendid Suns,” focuses on mothers and daughters, and friendships between women. Whereas “Kite Runner” got off to a gripping start and stumbled into contrivance and sentimentality in its second half, “Splendid Suns” starts off programmatically and gains speed and emotional power as it slowly unfurls.

Like its predecessor, the new novel features a very villainous villain and an almost saintly best friend who commits an act of enormous self-sacrifice to aid the hero/heroine. Like its predecessor, it attempts to show the fallout that Afghanistan’s violent history has had on a handful of individuals, ending in death at the hands of the Taliban for one character, and the promise of a new life for another. And like its predecessor, it features some embarrassingly hokey scenes that feel as if they were lifted from a B movie, and some genuinely heart-wrenching scenes that help redeem the overall story.

Mr. Hosseini, who was born in Kabul and moved to the United States in 1980, writes in straight-ahead, utilitarian prose and creates characters who have the simplicity and primary-colored emotions of people in a fairy tale or fable. The sympathy he conjures for them stems less from their personalities (the hero of “Kite Runner” was an unlikable coward who failed to come to the aid of his best friend) than from the circumstances in which they find themselves: contending with unhappy families, abusive marriages, oppressive governments and repressive cultural mores.—from New York Times Book Review

Not My Turn to Die: Memoir of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia by Savo Heleta (2008)

Savo Heleta's memoir, Not My Turn to Die: Memoirs of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia [is]… set in 1992 to '94; Heleta addresses those years where he lived in a Muslim occupied part of Bosnia as a young boy. As life outside began to grow more dangerous, he and his parents, along with his younger sister, are forced into hiding. There he talks about living in isolation, without food or immediate comfort, and the attitudes needed for one desperate to survive.

The story is told in a very straightforward, matter-of-fact approach. The narrative moves quickly, yet the pages aren't filled with rhapsodizing, poetic prose, but is spare in its manner, and the dialogue serves more as an exchange of information rather than the development of character quirks. Yet, this isn't necessarily a bad thing, since the book does provide readers with a first hand account of what went on during those times, and certainly for that purpose, the book succeeds.

Because those years are not that long ago, most of us have a vivid memory of what those times were like. I recall hearing about the struggles going on in Bosnia, but to me then, it was more of an abstraction, since I was too busy with my own adolescence to really take it all in. Now, after reading this, I clearly was in my own little American bubble, as we often are…. 
Many of the events described in this book are not far off from what many experienced during the major World Wars: killing, hunger, living in hiding, horrible sanitation, and humiliation, just to name a few. *Not My Turn to Die: Memoirs of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia* is a book that you will likely read through quickly. I did so in just two sittings, and it's a story for anyone interested in this violent time that many have overlooked. After all, what better history lesson is there then a first hand account?—From New York Times Book Review