

Growing Up in the Wide World: Perspectives through Contemporary World Literature

The advances in technology in the twenty-first century have transformed communications and expanded our economies from local to worldwide. These changes necessitate a world view that is ever-evolving and global in scope. At the same time, our sense of vulnerability may be heightened by the knowledge that our borders are permeable. The differences between "us" and "them" can be isolating and polarizing unless we strive to understand the perceptions and life experience of others in the wide world.

The contemporary, best-selling novels in this series span four continents, connecting us with characters from England, Nigeria, Sweden, Afghanistan, and India. The five award-winning authors, born between 1959 and 1978, portray a variety of beliefs and customs surrounding birth, coming of age, courtship, marriage, raising children, and death. Their rich novelistic worlds offer perspectives of different cultures and individual families. Two titles in the series deal with emigration and the accompanying cultural dissonance; three titles emphasize cultural conflict within the country of origin. Politics and nationalism influence several characters; others are impelled or limited by issues of class, education, religion, and gender roles.

This series provides unique insights into how early experiences inform our reactions to the world--particularly to people whose ideals, views, and customs are different from our own; in their worlds we are "the others." These titles prick and stretch our empathies, providing views of the universal passage from childhood to adulthood and the ongoing challenge to grow in a world defined by change. They dramatize how we continue to confront "coming of age" at each stage of life.

Whatever our differences, each of us can relate to a dynamic, anxiety-filled, sometimes humorous time of choice as we enter adulthood: accept/reject, stay/go, follow/deviate. These choices differ widely in terms of culture, mores, world view, economics, geography, and family dynamics. Understanding and appreciating the subtleties within these choices enable us to talk to each other, to see beyond our own petrified borders to what others experience.

In many ways, the novels in this series lead us to reflect on our own experience; the degree to which we navigate life's journey straddling multiple origins and the degree to which we see the ambiguity inherent in human experience. The literary theme of

growing up in the wide world has particular power to illustrate and illuminate discussion of these questions.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

by Mark Haddon

Set in contemporary urban England, this title is both funny and deeply moving. Fifteen-year-old Francis Christopher Boone is a math whiz, a lover of animals, a fan of Sherlock Holmes, and autistic. With extraordinary skill, Haddon puts readers into the world of this challenged boy as he sets out to solve the mysterious death of a neighborhood dog. Christopher's world is ruled by precision, logic, and science, where the only choices are between good and bad, black and white. His unique way of looking at things is a result of brain chemistry rather than culture.

Because Christopher narrates his own story, we see the logic of his positions and choices. The rules and schedules he has constructed keep order in his day, his life, his head. Despite Christopher's reliance on logic and science, many of his rules are based on emotions. The colors of cars he sees on the way to school determine what kind of day he will have: four red cars in a row make it a Good Day; four yellow cars mean a Black Day, "when I don't speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don't eat my lunch and *Take No Risks*."

Purple Hibiscus

by Ngozi Adichie

Winner of the United Kingdom's Orange Prize for Fiction, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie depicts a contemporary Nigeria saturated with the legacy of colonialism. At the center of *Purple Hibiscus* are fifteen-year-old Kambili and her older brother, Jaja, living a life of wealth and privilege, but without ease or joy. Their father Eugene's impossible expectations and fanatical religious views are isolating and suffocating. His need for complete control extends to every aspect of his family's life.

Growing up as an African Catholic, Kambili feels paralyzed, unable to straddle the rigid religious walls erected by her father. Does Christianity demand that she disconnect from the traditional animistic tales and ancestral worship of her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu? Amidst the escalation of tension for her mother and defiant brother, Kambili wrestles with "the art of silent crying" as she struggles to discover her own voice as a woman. That Kambili narrates the novel retrospectively accentuates the quivering anxiety at the depth of her being.

Popular Music from Vittula

by Mikael Niemi

Popular Music from Vittula is the bestselling novel in all of Swedish publishing history. Niemi's semi-autobiographical novel takes place in a remote village above the Arctic Circle on Sweden's border with Finland. The intricacies of social life in an isolated rural area come to life through the eyes of two boys, best friends Matti and Niila. We meet them in the early 1960s as paved roads finally reach their region. Their days of childhood play, school, and adolescent angst reveal a variety of experiences: a funeral, snow and darkness, spring and light, a ghost or two, rampant alcoholism, and an obsession with the music of Elvis Presley and the Beatles.

Niemi introduces folkloric overtones that deliberately echo the oral traditions of his culture. In addition, he uses an episodic structure; each chapter could stand alone as a short story and leaves the reader to puzzle over which pieces of the narrative are real and which may be the result of childhood imagination. Although much is familiar about the boys' families and customs, some of their cultural mores challenge our assumptions of how to be in the world.

The Kite Runner

by Khaled Hosseini

While exploring themes of father/son relationships, friendship, loyalty, and betrayal, *The Kite Runner* takes us from the final days of Afghanistan's monarchy through the modern fall of the Taliban. Economic and social classes are important factors in the intertwined lives of Amir and his friend Hassan, the son of a family servant and member of a shunned ethnic minority.

The Kite Runner begins with narrator Amir grown and married, yet haunted by memories. He and his father, Baba, have immigrated to San Francisco. Having emerged from the conflicts of adolescence, Amir is paralyzed with guilt and fixated on the past, while his father can now grasp the words his wise friend Rahim Khan told him when Amir was young: "Children aren't coloring books. You don't get them with your favorite colors." Amir reverses roles with his father, becoming caregiver to the rapidly declining Baba. He learns that the warning Baba gave him as a child reflects his father's guilt too: "When you tell a lie, you steal a man's right to the truth."

Deep emotional scars surface when Amir is summoned to Pakistan by Rahim Khan. When he reaches the old man, secrets are revealed and Amir realizes how much he has become his father's son. He must decide if he can bear the tattoos life has inscribed on him and seek "a way to be good again."

The Namesake
by Jhumpa Lahiri

This final book in the series explores the contradictions, confusion, and divided loyalties that are often legacies of immigrants and the children born to them in a new country. Pulitzer Prize-winning Lahiri offers a closely observed family portrait and wide social vision in this tale of the Ganguli family and their eccentrically named son, Gogol. Because they choose to build their social circle from other Bengalis like themselves, nearly every custom, celebration, and family milestone is dictated by the Indian culture in which Gogol's parents grew up.

This sets Gogol apart from his schoolmates and neighbors. His unusual Russian name, neither American nor Indian, comes to symbolize his inability to feel he belongs in either culture. Will Gogol come to his mother's belief that "being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy--a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts"?

When the time comes for college, Gogol deliberately leaves behind his home and his old name. He becomes Nikhil and learns that other students struggle with the same issues, that there is a name for his state of being: ABCD--an American-born confused/conflicted *deshi*, the term his parents and their friends use to refer to India. By the time Gogol finishes graduate school, he has put considerable physical and emotional distance between himself and his family--but his newly-made self is not adequate when his family suffers a major loss. His future will have to include both aspects of himself, both Gogol and Nikhil.

"Growing Up in the Wide World" was developed for "Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma" by Dr. Harbour Winn, Director of the Center for Interpersonal Studies at Oklahoma City University and Roxanne Rhoades.



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