

Immigration Stories in Contemporary Literature: Suspended Between Borders

Brother, I'm Dying by Edwidge Danticat, 2007.

The Beekeeper of Aleppo by Christy Lefteri, 2019.

Native Speaker by Chang-rae Lee, 1996.

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears by Dinaw Mengestu, 2007.

Enrique's Journey by Sonia Nazario, 2006.

A bronze plaque on the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty contains the 1883 sonnet "The New Colossus" by American poet Emma Lazarus. The most memorable lines read:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Many have sought and seek that "golden door." The United States now has more immigrants than any other country even though other countries over time have been the destination for waves of migration. Immigrants have willingly sought a new home or fled as refugees or exiles from historical, environmental, and social conditions. These situations include war, repression, religious persecution, poverty, racism, famine, climate crisis, misogyny, sexual orientation, and more. Desire for a better life compels many to emigrate from their original home, and yet the drama of leaving one's homeland is fraught with danger and uncertainty. In the new country, conditions are not necessarily better, and the culture shock almost always challenges survival in varied ways, most often far beyond one generation.

Like perhaps no other recent period, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are characterized by large-scale migration. According to many, the migrant has become the protagonist of the twenty-first century. Naturally, the phenomenon of migration has influenced different aspects of social and cultural life, one of which is literature. For more than two centuries, authors have examined what it means to be uprooted, willingly or by force, from one's homeland, as well as the problems of adjusting to an entirely new environment. This tradition has a long record in literature as one of the influential issues of every society. At times, nationalist ideologies, xenophobia, and

fundamental economic issues lead citizens to question or oppose immigration even though the influx of people from elsewhere can offer new ways of thinking, needed additions to the work force, and cultural diversity.

The five books in this series span genres, from memoir to nonfiction to novel, as well as in the gender and national origin of authors and characters. Different ethnicities and nationalities are represented. They were published between 1996 and 2019. The list of authors includes a Pulitzer Prize winner, the laureate of the 2018 Neustadt International Prize for Literature from the University of Oklahoma, two MacArthur Fellowship "Genius Grant" recipients, National Book Critics Circle Award winners, and more. The characters emigrate from Haiti, Syria, South Korea, Ethiopia, and Honduras. These books talk to each other, challenging us to reflect on our own experience and observation of global immigration. They ask us to consider the similarities and differences between the immigrant and those who already are citizens. In what ways do they share different narratives and yet resemble each other? Each book offers us the possibility to develop empathy for characters living with challenges that while different can also approximate the ones we or our fellow citizens face. As with any area of literature, the best books are the ones that depict life honestly and accurately, present characters that evoke understanding or even self-identification, and offer insights into experiences both familiar and unknown.

***Brother, I'm Dying*, Edwidge Danticat**

In *Brother, I'm Dying*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for autobiography, Edwidge Danticat reflects on the history of her parents' decision to journey to the United States to escape tyranny and exploitation in Haiti even though that meant leaving her brother and her behind. The two children spend more than ten years adjusting to life with their uncle and aunt, who become viable surrogate parents. In many ways, the two develop a closeness that provides them with a dual set of parents, and yet they are separated from their birth parents, the reality of many immigrant families who attempt to relocate. The birth parents arrive illegally and must wait years to become eligible for permanent residency. Compared to lighter skinned Cubans and South Americans, Haitians experience extreme prejudice because they are Black. When her uncle finally flees Haiti during violence and political upheaval, he gets permission to seek asylum in the United States, but is detained in Miami to be interviewed by the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. His treatment by the U. S. Customs and Border Protection officers provides the series with an infamous example of what immigrants can experience with the destination country's authorities. The process of telling her family's story represents how memoir can help one find a cohesiveness in personal history. That her father gives her a typewriter when she arrives

in the U. S. underscores the symbolic gift of paternal authority passing on to her the approval to be a wordsmith, an author, to record an essential chapter in the story of immigration. In the autobiographical nature of migration literature, Danticat, a University of Oklahoma Neustadt International Prize winner, suggests that through the act of writing she explores her cultural memory or identity to redefine herself, a phenomenon that will characterize the other books in the series.

***The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, Christy Lefteri**

In the moving novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, Christy Lefteri, daughter of Cypriot refugees, dramatizes the classic contemporary story of refugees fleeing the chaos of violent devastation in their homeland, Syria, and journeying across international borders and through a succession of relocation camps as they try to emigrate to England. Nuri and Afra are beekeepers with a cousin in Aleppo and undergo a long odyssey to try to reunite with their cousin who left before the Syrian Civil War worsened. Like Danticat, the narration is retrospective as the couple journeys with dark secrets from their final days before departure. The bees, the livelihood of the family, have shown them a “small paradise among chaos” and Nuri longs to recreate aviaries again in a better world far away from Syria. Incorporating some elements of magical realism, Lefteri renders their movement by land and by sea as well as through refugee camps from Turkey to the Greek islands. They move with people also fleeing from Morocco, the Ivory Coast, Afghanistan, and more. Along the way they seem to encounter a young boy whom they befriend and care for, perhaps a way to cope with what they have lost in Aleppo. A social worker tries to help them amidst refugee camp complexity, but the vast numbers she must do the same for limits her ability. Afra, an artist, can sometimes cope through her painting, but at other moments she feels that her dreams or inspiration have left her. As with Danticat’s memoir, the important role of the arts in the lives of refugees is again evident. Perhaps suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Nuri and Afra try to negotiate multiple identities and liminal spaces in the recurrent theme of borders, divisions that separate people. Perhaps this external journey to reach England seems dominant, but the two also journey to see if they can reach each other to renew their relationship, to discover that “inside the person you know there is a person you do not know.” Lefteri’s unforgettable narrative, influenced by her Cypriot refugee heritage and volunteer work at a refugee camp in Athens, will linger on within you.

***Native Speaker*, Chang-rae Lee**

Korean America, Chang-rae Lee focuses his non-linear novel, *Native Speaker*, on Henry Park, a Korean American whose father brought him to the U.S. as a child, and thus he is, like Danticat, more a second-generation migrant than a first-generation migrant.

Pleasing his father who wants his son to assimilate into American culture, he will decide to marry a white American, Lilia, who is a speech therapist. Park has spent his entire life trying to become a true American—a native speaker, someone who has learned to speak the language of the place where he was raised as a child rather than learning it as a foreign language. Despite his linguistic sophistication, Park grows to feel a sense of being socially and culturally alienated or “out of place.” Lilia refers to him as isolated from the country in which he lives and the country from which he came. His identity reflects another dimension of some immigrants, hybrid or hyphenated: is he Korean or American or Korean-American? Tragedy like that of the couple in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* strains his marriage and leaves him increasingly isolated. His identity is complicated even more in his espionage work for an agency that responds to requests from multinational corporations or governments for information about immigrants in the United States. Since his relationship with his father taught him to hide his emotions, he can be a natural spy. When he is assigned to spy on a rising Korean American running for mayor of New York, his identity is challenged existentially, for he must figure out who he is amid not only the conflicts within himself but also within the ethnic and political tensions of New York City. Should he sever ties with his native heritage and betray the Korean American politician drawn to him because they both have Korean roots? Like the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, can he ever be himself or even know himself? In a time in the United States when Asian Americans are targeted as outsiders, this novel proves to be very contemporary even though its 1996 date of publication makes it the earliest book in the series to be published.

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears, Dinaw Mengestu

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1978, Dinaw Mengestu and his family migrated to the United States in 1980. For *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, he has received critical acclaim for his intimate depictions of the immigrant experience in America. Like Danticat, he is a MacArthur Foundation Fellow. Like Chang-rae Lee, his protagonist questions his identity as hyphenated: is he Ethiopian or American or Ethiopian-American? In *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Sepha Stephanos, the protagonist, has fled the Ethiopian Revolution and immigrated to the United States where he owns a failing grocery store in an African American area in Washington D. C. and struggles with feelings of isolation and nostalgia. At one point he exclaims, “How was I supposed to live in America, when I had never really left Ethiopia?” When he was only seventeen years of age, he had crossed many borders in fleeing Ethiopia after seeing his father killed in the Red Terror revolution, something that forever haunts him. Friendship with two close friends from other African countries provides rituals for the immigrant travelers in their weekly social gatherings at his store. Also, friendship with Judith, his white female neighbor, hovers on being romantic, and her biracial young teen

daughter, Naomi, provides him with companionship and a suggestion of what life with his father or as a father might be like. With frequent echoes of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Mengestu challenges us to think critically about the reality of the American dream, both for native born Americans and immigrants. On the latter, he laments that Christmas is no holiday for immigrants, for they work on that day at convenience stores for Americans. Sepha, though, has no ambition for his store other than hiding behind the counter and reading books all day to himself or Naomi, until the "world comes to an end." In the neighborhood around the store, more of his older neighbors are being evicted to make way for gentrification, and Judith becomes a target for local frustrations. Her American political history professor background adds more reflective analysis to what is happening in the area. Unlike Chang-rae Lee's protagonist, Sepha has learned English as a foreign language and is thus a first-generation immigrant, who even after nearly two decades in America feels displaced: from his local D. C. community, his original Ethiopian homeland, and from the larger country where he has been living. Does he or will he find an identity that would help him move beyond the feeling of displacement? Mengestu gives us pause to reflect on the series theme and the three preceding books.

Enrique's Journey, Sonia Nazario

Even though in our time massive migration from Africa, the Middle East, Ukraine, South and Central America, to list only a few, impacts the world, for the United States the topic focuses mainly on our southern border. In 2003, while working at the *Los Angeles Times*, Sonia Nazario won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing and for Photography for a six-part series entitled "Enrique's Journey," which followed the story of a young Honduran boy's multiple journeys to try to reach the U.S. and find his mother, who had left eleven years earlier to make enough money to support her children. In 2006, Nazario expands on the journalistic essays with a book-length nonfiction narrative, *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother*, that was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. She punctuates the story with firsthand accounts from interviews with Enrique, his family, and people he met during his migration to America. For this investigative journalistic extension, she researches the dangers of her taking the same journey from Honduras to the U.S. border, connects with Enrique whom she shadows for two weeks along the southern side of the Rio Grande River, and then reconstructs his journey through Mexico. She retraces his steps riding the trains and walking the paths to the U.S. for her field research. In describing her objective for this risky immersion, she writes: "Perhaps by looking at one immigrant—his strengths, his courage, his flaws—his humanity might help illuminate what too often has been a black-and-white discussion." Innumerable vivid details emerge to document an issue still incredibly complex today. One woman making Timmy Hilfiger-labeled

shirts, for example, can't support her children on the \$30 she nets in a week. The cost to Honduran families continually torn apart with parents and children separated rings loud, and the failure for children to find peace when reconnected with parents who left long ago to help them reverberates through the narrative. Certain figures emerge memorably along the journey: by the border, for example, Padre Leo opens his church to the migrants while preaching that Joseph and Mary were refugees fleeing Israel for Egypt. This odyssey will provide more questions than answers as the series moves to its close. It echoes the migration journeys in Danticat's and Lefteri's books in the search for that "golden door" Lady Liberty seems to offer. It will leave Enrique with the identity confusion of the protagonists in Chang-rae Lee's and Dinaw Mengestu's novels. Alberto Rios, a contemporary poet, offers a provocative reflection on the issues in this series theme on immigrants. In "Border Lines," he concludes with this nugget of wisdom in referring to maps: "The border is what joins us, Not what separates us."

For Further Reading

Nonfiction

Journeys from There to Here: Stories of Immigrant Trials, Triumphs, and Contributions by Susan Cohen, 2021.

The Devil's Highway: A True Story by Luis Alberto Urrea, 2004.

Fiction

Exit West: A Novel by Mohsin Hamid, 2017.

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2013.

Interpreter Of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri, 1999.

Breath, Eyes, Memory by Edwidge Danticat, 1994.

No-No Boy by John Okada, 1957.

Film

Sin Nombre, directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2009.

Journey of Hope directed by Xavier Koller, 1990.

El Norte, directed by Gregory Nava, 1983.

This theme was developed in 2022 by Dr. Harbour Winn, Professor Emeritus of English at Oklahoma City University, where he has taught courses in literature, film studies, and Montessori education. He has been involved in public humanities programs for many

years and was the Humanities Scholar on the grant that first brought the “Let’s Talk About It” program to Oklahoma. This is the ninth series theme he has developed. At OCU, he directed the Center for Interpersonal Studies through Film & Literature for its first 19 years and the OCU Film Institute for its first 35 years.

