

Being Ethnic, Becoming American

As the title of this theme implies, all of us, to some extent, have a complex identity with roots in many places, not only in the place where we live. Today, many of us are actively seeking to learn more about our original heritage, whether it be European, African, Asian, or American Indian. Even if we are separated by many miles and generations from an immigrant heritage or tribal tradition, our lives today--our homes, our manners, our clothing, and the food we eat--still reveal the influence of our ancestors and their homelands. On the other hand, many Americans feel they must turn their backs on their past in order to succeed as Americans. In either case, it would seem that identity for Americans must be a matter of complexity.

The books in this series show us intergenerational conflicts as well as confrontations between ethnic heritage and American identity. The two novels and two memoirs reveal people struggling with similar problems--trying to understand their heritage and its relevance to their lives as Americans, coming of age and coming to terms with the expectations of their elders, and becoming themselves.

Bless Me, Ultima

by Rudolfo A. Anaya

Rudolfo Anaya's novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, is a coming of age story set in New Mexico in the years during and immediately after World War II. The novel begins with two crucial experiences in the life of the protagonist, Antonio: Ultima, a curandera--a folk healer, herbalist, and midwife--comes to live with his family; and Antonio--who has grown up speaking only Spanish--starts school, where he must learn English and Anglo ways. Due to the influence of Ultima, Antonio learns to bring together the different parts of his world--his Mexican heritage, his Catholic faith, the magic Ultima teaches him to find in nature, and the magic of being able to manipulate the English language.

The Way to Rainy Mountain

by N. Scott Momaday

Scott Momaday was born in Lawton, Oklahoma, and Rainy Mountain is near Gotebo, Oklahoma. Momaday represents a generation of American Indians who grew up speaking English rather than their tribal language and who grew up, as a result, with only a fragmented sense of tribal culture. This book is Momaday's attempt to piece together the history of the Kiowa People and of his own family. Momaday presents the story of the Kiowa as a human story--the story "of three things in particular: a landscape that is incomparable, a time that is gone forever, and the human spirit which endures."

Woman Warrior: Memoirs of Girlhood Among Ghosts

by Maxine Hong Kingston

In her book, Kingston combines memoir, traditional myths, and family stories in an attempt to discover her place as a Chinese-American. She finds in all these stories paradoxes: the strength of her mother in contrast with a tradition that devalued female children and once bound the feet of its women. But her experience of Chinese tradition is also contradictory: "How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness."

Go Tell It on the Mountain

by James Baldwin

James Baldwin's semi-autobiographical novel takes its title from a gospel song, and the use of lyrics and the rhythms of gospel music throughout the novel create its sensual texture. Music, as depicted in the novel, also symbolizes one of the novel's central conflicts. The fourteen-year-old John Grimes is caught between the church--represented by gospel songs and representing his parents' desires for him--and the lure of the city, the streets of Harlem--represented by the blues and jazz and representing sin in the eyes of the church. The novel is set in the period prior to 1920 when many African-Americans moved from certain poverty in the South to an uncertain future in the North. In New York City, the characters of the novel find themselves insulated and isolated from the white community, and white people in the novel are generally presented as evil antagonists. The novel prompts us to consider whether or not the insulation of a ghetto is protective or harmful to its inhabitants and to ask if things are different today.

"Being Ethnic, Becoming American" was developed by the American Library Association.

