

# Contemporary Novels of Exile and Assimilation

BY JESSICA TEISCH

"I am an American, Chicago born," Augie March declares in Saul Bellow's 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March*, "...and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way." Bellow's novel, resonant in its pledge to redefine American traditions, epitomized immigrant fiction of the postwar era by portraying the hardships of the old world, the trials, joys, and reinventions of the new, and the constant negotiation between the two.

Fiction of the past century shared the experiences of immigrants and, to a lesser degree, the makeshift communities to which they moved—from Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918), which tells the story of Bohemian immigrants in Nebraska at the end of the 19th century, to Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925), featuring a young Jewish immigrant woman struggling with life in New York's Lower East Side in the 1910s and 1920s. A few decades later, Vladimir Nabokov's playful *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938) introduced a divorced Russian expatriate troubled by the subtleties of American culture.

As the world grapples with the recent migrant crisis and the U.S. presidential election cycle sparks new debate about immigration reform, the upheaval of people across national borders, just as it did in the late 19th and in the 20th century, has again become of dire global concern. But today, the main players differ from those of the last century; they speak Mandarin or Igbo or Spanish. In recent years, literature has seen an explosion in fiction about the contemporary immigrant experience, much of it written by first- or second-generation immigrants. We present some representative (but not inclusive) novels below, grouped by homeland, that are notable for their depiction of what it means to leave one's home for a new world in the late 20th century and beyond.

that Maribel can receive the necessary treatment. Their run-down apartment building, filled with other recent immigrants from Central and Latin America, houses the Toros, a Panamanian family. The families' lives soon become intertwined, with repercussions for everyone. Henríquez draws on her family history—her father came to the United States from Panama in 1971—to explore the diverse experiences of immigrants and the meaning of becoming American.



## The Tortilla Curtain

By T. C. Boyle (1995)

◆ PRIX MEDICIS ETRANGER

When Delaney Mossbacher, an environmental writer, accidentally hits an illegal Mexican immigrant, Cándido, with his car, he remains more concerned with the coyotes roaming his prosperous gated community in Southern California than with the fate of that man, who lives in a makeshift camp in the nearby canyon with his pregnant wife. As Cándido's problems multiply and Delaney's wealthy neighborhood starts to fall apart under the weight of xenophobia, Delaney's liberal politics—as well as his sanity and life—are put to the test.



## Further Reading

FROM THIS WICKED PATCH OF DUST | SERGIO TRONCOSO (◆ SOUTH-WEST BOOK AWARD, 2011)

## CENTRAL AND LATIN AMERICA

### MEXICO

#### The Book of Unknown Americans

By Cristina Henríquez (2014)

◆ NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK

◆ DAILY BEAST NOVEL OF THE YEAR

After Maribel, 15, suffers a brain injury, the Riveras sacrifice everything and move from Mexico to Delaware so

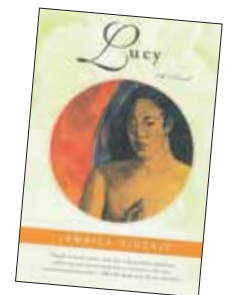
## CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES

### ANTIGUA

#### Lucy

By Jamaica Kincaid (1990)

When Lucy Potter, a teenager from Antigua who wishes to reject her family and colonial past, comes



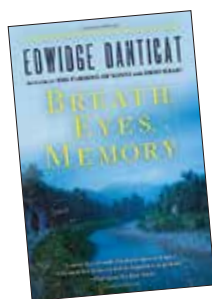
to America to work as an au pair in New York, she finds her wealthy employers' lives seemingly perfect. But as their marriage starts to erode, Lucy reflects back on her life on the island, including her unresolved relationship with her mother, and her present-day lack of emotional connections. *Lucy*, told in a first person narrative that closely mirrors Kincaid's own experiences growing up in Antigua and being sent by her impoverished mother to work in New York as an au pair, also grapples with questions of identity, sexuality, and assimilation.

## HAITI

### Breath, Eyes, Memory

By Edwidge Danticat (1994)

When Sophie, 12, leaves her aunt and Croix-des-Rosets, Haiti, to live in New York City with a mother she has never known, she leaves an impoverished, but loving, childhood for a great unknown. Once in New York, Sophie starts to uncover shameful secrets and suffers the weight of the past. Danticat, who, like her protagonist, was raised by an aunt in Haiti until she immigrated into the United States at age 12, offers piercing insight into Creole culture, including sexuality and matters of family honor, as well as coming-of-age and attempting to assimilate in a foreign place. See also *The Dew Breaker* (★★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2004).



### An Untamed State

By Roxane Gay

While visiting her wealthy parents in Port-au-Prince, successful Haitian American attorney Mireille Duval Jameson, who lives in Miami with her husband and child, is abducted by several armed men in broad daylight in full view of her helpless husband and young son. Mireille, whose parents refuse to pay ransom for her release, has to summon all of her strength and willpower if she is to survive. The child of Haitian immigrants, Gay, whose gripping novel explores issues of immigration, as well as complex social issues in Haiti, aptly portrays a city's social disparities and desperation. (★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2014)



## DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

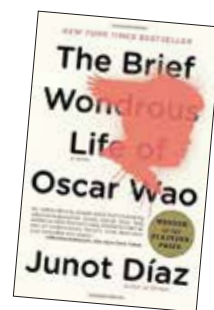
### The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

By Junot Díaz (2007)

- ◆ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD
- ◆ PULITZER PRIZE

This funny, ferocious, and affecting debut by the Dominican American recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant

dives into identity, cultural expectations, oppression, and the power of storytelling through Oscar de Leon, an obese Dominican teen growing up in Paterson, New Jersey. An outcast at school, Oscar buries himself in science fiction and fantasy novels, searches for true love, and dreams of becoming the "Dominican J. R. R. Tolkien." Moving through time, the story also revolves around his rebellious sister, as well as his mother, his grandfather, and their traumatic experiences under Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2007) Trinidad



### Netherland

By Joseph O'Neill

- ◆ PEN/FAULKNER AWARD

Manhattan-based Dutch equities analyst Hans van den Broek copes with loneliness after his English wife returns to London with their infant in the wake of 9/11. When he stumbles across a cricket league made up of West Indian immigrants, his childhood love for the sport is revived, and he embarks on a tentative friendship with a Trinidadian immigrant. O'Neill, who is Irish, explores contemporary immigrant life in America through the two men's vastly different experiences. Wise and insightful, *Netherland* gives readers an unforgettable portrait of the post-9/11 immigrant subculture in New York City and a detailed account of the unraveling of the American dream. (★★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2008)



## Further Reading

PRIMITIVE PEOPLE | FRANCINE PROSE (1992)

## ASIA

### INDIA

### Blue Boy

By Rakesh Satyal (2009)

Kirin Sharma, 12, feels out of place in 1990s Cincinnati, where his parents have settled from India; he likes ballet, plays the flute, and is convinced that, with his flamboyant personality and artistic and musical soul, he is actually the 10th reincarnation of Krishna. As he prepares to disclose



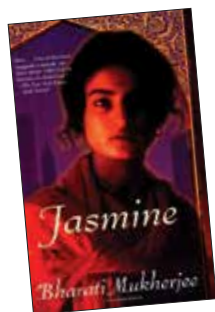
his real identity at his elementary school talent show, something strange happens: his skin turns blue. A novel of self-acceptance, *Blue Boy* humorously explores the trials and fate of a Hindu boy coming of age in Middle America and struggling to define his identity.

## Jasmine

By Bharati Mukherjee (1989)

◆ NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK OF THE YEAR

When Jyoti, 17, leaves rural India and moves to Florida after her husband's murder, she finds herself reinventing herself many times over as she becomes American and a Western-thinking, liberated woman: first as Jase, an illegal "day mummy" in Manhattan; in Iowa as Jane, a mother to an adopted Vietnamese refugee; and ultimately Jasmine as she reflects on her past in India. Mukherjee, who was born in Calcutta but lived in Canada and the United States, won the National Book Critics Circle award for *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1987), a collection that focuses on the immigrant experience around the diaspora.



## BURMA

### The Road to Wanting

By Wendy Law-Yone (2010)

◆ ORANGE PRIZE LONG LIST

Law-Yone grew up in Rangoon but relocated to America in 1973, after being imprisoned for attempting to escape to Thailand. Her most recent novel recreates the life of a woman in limbo on the Chinese-Burmese border, dreaming of a new life in Thailand but intending to commit suicide. Law-Yone, who has written about the Southeast Asian experience in prior novels (1983's *The Coffin Tree* and 1993's *Irrawaddy Tango*), explores isolation, the alienation of migration, and the legacy of colonialism, repression, and poverty.



## CHINA

### Preparation for the Next Life

By Atticus Lish (2014)

◆ PEN/FAULKNER AWARD

◆ NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK

Zou Lei, a Muslim woman from a remote desert region of China where tribal nomads prevail, illegally immigrates to New York. Though she finds herself working in a Queens kitchen



and selling bootleg DVDs, she is determined to live a better life. Then she meets Brad Skinner, a traumatized veteran with three tours in Iraq behind him—and, despite their unlikely romance, it's unclear whether they can survive together. In this astounding debut novel, Lish explores how one can feel alienated in the United States, no matter his or her origin. The novel also explores the great recent failures of the country, from immigration policy to poverty, racism, prisons, and war.

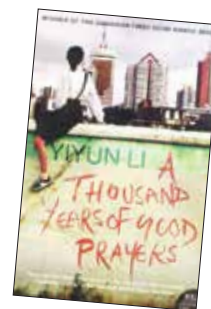
### A Thousand Years of Good Prayers

By Yiyun Li

◆ HEMINGWAY FOUNDATION/ PEN AWARD

◆ CALIFORNIA BOOK AWARD

"That we get to meet and talk to each other—it must have taken a long time of good prayers to get us here," says the old Chinese man to his friend while visiting America. In these 10 stories, we meet individuals befuddled by the heavy hand of Chinese history, but persistent in maintaining their dignity—the old, under pagodas waiting for rain, the young, impatiently lined up at Starbucks. Characters spout Maoisms, obsess over *Casablanca*, take in homosexual lovers, roam the American Midwest, and slump through booming Chinese cities. Li elegantly leaps over the chasms between the young and old. (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2006)



## HONG KONG

### Girl in Translation

By Jean Kwok (2010)

Kwok, who emigrated from Hong Kong to Brooklyn as a young girl and spent much of her childhood working in a garment factory, imagines a double life for protagonist Kimberly Chang: daytime school girl and nighttime sweatshop worker in Chinatown. As Kimberly tries to straddle both her old world and the new as she provides for her impoverished family, she also struggles to reconcile Chinese cultural values of duty and obligation and the dreams she'd rather follow. See also *Mambo in Chinatown* (2014), a novel reflecting Kwok's own experience navigating her family duties in Chinatown and her refuge into the world of ballroom dancing.



### Further Reading

A FREE LIFE | HA JIN (★★★★) Jan/Feb 2008)

A GOOD FALL: STORIES | HA JIN (★★★★) Mar/Apr 2010)

THE MANGO BRIDE | MARIVI SOLIVEN (2013)

PIONEER GIRL | BICH MINH NGUYEN (2014)

THE NAMESAKE | JHUMPA LAHIRI (2003)

INTERPRETER OF MALADIES | JHUMPA LAHIRI (◆ PULITZER PRIZE, 1999)

## EUROPE

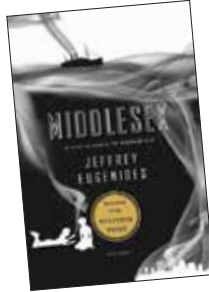
### GREECE

#### Middlesex

By Jeffrey Eugenides (2002)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

"I was born twice," announces Calliope "Cal" Stephanides, "first, as a baby girl, on a remarkable smogless Detroit day of January 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1976." Cal, it is revealed, is a hermaphrodite. To understand his condition, he embarks on a colorful journey across continents and eras, from Greece to Detroit and through three generations of his Greek American family tree, and he discovers some surprising family secrets. Eugenides blends culture, history, and genetics with a moving story about family relationships, ethnic assimilation, and gender identity.



#### Further Reading

MY NEW AMERICAN LIFE | FRANCINE PROSE (2011)

### RUSSIA AND THE FORMER USSR

#### How to Get into the Twin Palms

By Karolina Waclawiak (2012)

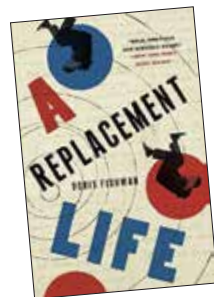
Turning the immigrant novel on its head, Waclawiak's debut novel explores the fate of Anya, a lonely Polish immigrant in Los Angeles who strives to be Russian—not because she isn't ready to become American, exactly, but because she wants to gain entrance into the alluring Twin Palms, the local Russian nightclub. Waclawiak provides intimate details into the Russian/Polish community in Los Angeles while exploring how one's roots affect who you are—and who you strive to become, even if that adopted persona ultimately doesn't pan out.



#### A Replacement Life

By Boris Fishman (2014)

Fishman, who came to the United States when he was nine, casts a sharp eye on the interconnected relationship between first- and second-generation immigrants. When Slava, who works at a literary magazine in Manhattan, decides to write a Holocaust restitution claim for his grandfather, an irascible Russian Jew whose recently deceased

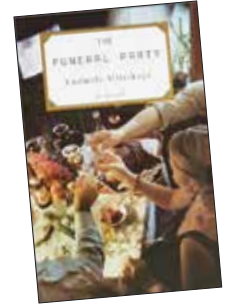


wife truly suffered under Nazism, he realizes that his grandfather suffered—as an immigrant, as a person with low status in the former USSR—but not in the way that makes him eligible to receive restitution. Soon, Slava is writing fraudulent claims for his grandfather's elderly immigrant friends, risking his sense of self-invention and honor but also starting to understand how to tell stories about the departed.

#### The Funeral Party

By Lyudmila Ulitskaya (1997)

In the early 1990s, a group of Russian émigrés come together in a stifling downtown Manhattan apartment to celebrate—and mourn the imminent death of—a dying Russian artist, Alik, who loves America. The men and women who have, by turns, drifted in and out of Alik's life reflect on all of their experiences, from Alik's abandoned Judaism to one friend's inability to get his medical credentials certified in the United States to their different notions of religion, homeland, and exile. With deep characterizations and insight into the need of émigrés to affirm their better life abroad, Ulitskaya's first novel in English translation was short-listed for the Russian Booker Prize.



#### Further Reading

THE RUSSIAN DEBUTANTE'S HANDBOOK | GARY SHTEYNGART (2002)

## MIDDLE EAST

### IRAN

#### Together Tea

By Marjan Kamali (2013)

In 1996, Darya, who gave up her dreams to leave Iran a decade earlier, and her daughter, Mina, 25, decide to heal their strained relationship—Mina, in business school, resists her mother's efforts to find the perfect husband for her—by returning to Iran for the first time since they left in 1978. Panning back and forth between the dawn of the Iranian revolution and present-day America and Iran, Kamali, who was born in Turkey to Iranian parents, offers intriguing insight into Persian culture in the United States as well as into modern-day Tehran.



## IRAQ

### Crescent

By Diana Abu-Jaber (2003)

Abu-Jaber, who descends from Jordanian, Irish, and German roots, focuses on the Arab American community of Los Angeles. Sirine, 39, is a chef in a Lebanese restaurant, content in her work, but her boss believes she should be trying to find a husband. Then Sirine meets Hanif, an Iraqi exile and a professor of Near Eastern Studies, and an unlikely affair blossoms. But Hanif's troubled past and painful memories of his imprisoned brother may jeopardize their newfound love. See also *Arabian Jazz* (1993), about a Jordanian American widower in upstate New York.



### Further Reading

**THE KITE RUNNER** | KHALED HOSSEINI (2003)

**HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG** | ANDRE DUBUS III (1999; ♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST)

**SAFFRON DREAMS** | SHAILA ABDULLA (2009)

## AFRICA

### NIGERIA

### On Black Sisters Street

By Chika Unigwe (2007)

♦ NIGERIA PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

When a sex trafficker recruits four disadvantaged African women in Lagos to work as prostitutes in Antwerp's Red Light District, four very different people come together by misfortune and the promises of riches and opportunity in Europe. When one is brutally murdered, the remaining three women slowly reveal their sorrowful memories and stories. Unigwe, who was born in Nigeria and lives in Belgium, frames the novel as a series of flashbacks that reveal the hardship each woman faced in her home country and abroad.



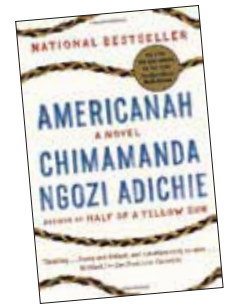
### Americanah

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD

Adichie, who grew up in Nigeria and divides her time between her homeland and the United States, writes about Africa's political and social turmoil and the Nigerian immigrant experience. In *Americanah*, Nigeria is crumbling

under military rule. Two high school students fall in love and take different paths—one to America and a successful career, and the other to an undocumented life in London. When they both return to a democratic Nigeria years later, they both must make difficult choices about their futures. (★★★★ July/Aug 2013)



## ZIMBABWE

### We Need New Names

By NoViolet Bulawayo

♦ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST

Bulawayo, who was born and raised in Zimbabwe, moved to the United States to attend college. In her debut novel, *Darling*, 10, lives in a Zimbabwean shantytown called Paradise. In the "before," she and her friends attended school, but then the paramilitary bulldozers razed their village. Amid the political violence and social decay, Darling's father returns home from working in South Africa to die of AIDS; Darling is later sent to "Destroyedmichigan" (Detroit) to live with her aunt. With wide-eyed clarity, Darling relates the cultural differences between Zimbabwe and America, where she discovers the discord between dreams and reality. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2013)



## ETHIOPIA

### How to Read the Air

By Dinaw Mengestu

Mengestu, born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was raised in a Chicago suburb. He earned critical praise for his debut novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), and for *All Our Names* (★★★★ May/June 2014), which both highlight the African immigrant experience in the United States. Here, an Ethiopian immigrant couple has been separated for their three years of marriage. Finally reunited in America, Yosef, who escaped in a crate on a cargo ship, and his pregnant wife embark on a belated honeymoon, a road trip filled with violence and despair. Thirty years later, their son Jonas, who works in a refugee center revising immigrants' asylum statements and fabricating his parents' history, tries to make sense of this history (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2011)



### Further Reading

**HAPPINESS, LIKE WATER** | CHINELO OKPARANTA (2013) ■