

Consensus

Volume 39

Issue 1 *Seeing Through the Eyes of the Other*

Article 6

5-25-2018

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Recommended Citation

Balmer, Brice (2018) "Deeper Understanding through Novels and Biographies," *Consensus*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol39/iss1/6>

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Deeper Understanding through Novels and Biographies

Brice Balmer¹

Most urban Canadians now live in diverse multifaith neighbourhoods, and many wish to have a more in-depth understanding of their neighbours. Yet there is some fear about asking questions or being intrusive. Much harm occurs when friends and associates do not take time to understand another's culture or faith and then make assumptions that many ideals, values, and practices are universal. On the other hand, some people are too reserved and do not extend a hand or begin a friendship because of differences and the unknown in "the other."

With people now coming to Canada from all over the world, it is impossible to know everyone's culture as well as their religious, social, and political experiences. Books – novels, biographies, and autobiographies – can start or advance cultural and religious learning, not only of the history of fellow workers, students, friends, or acquaintances but also of their emotions, struggles, and cultural practices and values. Through novels, we learn of their personal struggles and may intuit cultural and religious values and ideals as part of learning to know one another. Canadian literature now has many bicultural books, as new Canadians tell their stories of their country of origin and their life in Canada. Many of these novels have won Governor General's awards, Man Booker prizes, and other forms of recognition during the past ten years.

David Augsburger says that to know one's own culture one needs to have been immersed in another culture.² Not everyone can live in different countries or in the midst of different cultures, even within our own continent, but most people can read novels, biographies, and autobiographies. Reading books, using one's imagination, and then having conversations with people from other cultures aids one in seeing one's own culture, as well as the ways others differ in customs, traditions, values, and ideals.

The neighbour, the immigrant or refugee, and the co-worker need to be known within their former and current contexts. If friendship is to develop, a person needs to know how to discuss the other person's background and experiences. Novels give a deeper penetration into the emotions, the relationships with many people in their former context, and their difficulties of moving to Canada, leaving behind so many friends, family, schools, businesses, and previously normal activities.

From India to Africa to Canada

Many Indian people from East Africa settled in Waterloo Region – and all of Canada – during the 1970s. Most families had moved from India to Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and other eastern African countries and lived there for two or three generations. They were encouraged by the British who had previously colonized India and needed merchants and administrators in East Africa. Indian people established industries, began commercial ventures, and brought professional practices into these African colonies. After independence

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² David Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

in the early 1960s, they felt pressure to leave. Some were forced to relinquish their businesses to Africans. In Uganda, the dictator Idi Amin (in power 1971–79) exiled most of the Indian families.

This story of Indian people's movement from India to Africa and then to Canada as refugees is well told in Tasneem Jamal's *Where the Air Is Sweet*.³ Because the grandfather in the novel sees little hope for economic success in India, he goes to Uganda and gradually establishes himself by working very hard at manual labour and then establishing a business in which his sons join him. They become adults and leaders in the community both in business and in their Ismaili faith.

As Idi Amin's rise to power eventually excludes Indian merchants and businesspeople, their businesses and assets are confiscated by the government and they are forced to exit the country, leaving everything behind except for one suitcase per person. Even those suitcases are often inspected, with customs officials taking any jewelry, money, or other items of value. Jamal portrays the many scary times as the family prepares to leave. The two sons struggle and face dangers as they decide whether to leave or stay to try to keep the businesses and their wealth.

Eventually the extended family goes to the U.K. without the two sons and then comes to Canada. There are continuing problems settling into this culture, especially for the now widowed grandfather. The women, older family members, and children are safe outside Uganda, but worry about the adult males still in Uganda and Kenya, unsuccessfully trying to save as much of the family wealth as they can. In the end the sons come to Canada.

Though these Indian-Ugandan families are now doing well in Canada and are our neighbours, their background and history includes terror and trauma. Knowing the story in the novel leads to personal conversation and increased rapport with them as they remember their own experiences in my presence. Friends who have read *Where the Air is Sweet* have gladly shared their own families' stories because they parallel the story in this novel. At this point in their lives, remembering is important, not only for our deepening relationship but also as they tell their children about their heritage.

The Refugee's Journey

Mohsin Hamid portrays the refugee's journey in *Exit West*.⁴ Parts of the novel are imaginative as a couple goes through a door from one experience to another. The transit seems easy but the experiences and possible dangers in the different environments are very real.

I imagined a young Syrian couple as I read *Exit West*. However, each of the locations could have been in various Middle Eastern countries, Europe, or North America; the reader follows the couple as they together survive the various traumatic situations. How would I as a young person have handled the various difficulties? At various points, it is a relief for them to go through another door to a different environment. They – along with the reader – hope that this will be a place that they can settle and live “normal lives,” whatever that will mean for them or for others. Will this be a place where they can settle?

As individuals come to Canada, they have been through traumatic situations. Imagine going to Greece, walking or taking transit further into Europe and finding that the next

³ Tasneem Jamal, *Where the Air is Sweet* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2014).

⁴ Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017).

country has blocked you. Somehow you need to go in a different direction, but you have less and less money. In the process, you may be separated from family members or friends. Though a similar journey is portrayed in other novels, this couple has the unique experience of passing through doors, and in each environment they struggle not only with language but also with whom one can trust. What if the next door leads to a more dangerous place? Hamid keeps us in suspense, even when the couple enters North America and then later splits up in different directions. This couple is crossing boundaries as refugees, but not sanctioned by the United Nations.

Reporting Difficult Experiences

Coming to the United States with his family as a legal immigrant, Ali Eteraz faces struggles of a different sort. His father is a doctor who finally obtains a position as a physician and can immigrate when Ali is an early adolescent. *Children of Dust*⁵ is his journey from conservative religious western Pakistan, where tradition and male roles are clear, to the United States where this young male experiences much confusion around his male sexuality in a very secular environment. He also goes through many changes as he struggles to be a “good Muslim” and even a religious leader. He finds himself living a much freer sexual life as an American man, but returns to the masjid and a stricter religious life. In between, he is full of remorse and guilt.

How does one change or adapt when one is educated to live in a particular environment and then everything changes? Ali’s story is gripping and the reader experiences his confusion. He seems to have little help from his parents, who themselves are adjusting to the United States and have their own struggles. However, they are more content since they now have a better life economically. They are not in the pressured social environments of high school and then university. Ali helps us see the struggles of deciding how to acculturate as well as the pain of living within the framework of being a Muslim male.

As readers learn the stories of being in one’s country of origin and then moving to Canada, they can feel the emotions and spiritual stress and changes. In *Finishing Well*, Terry D. Hargrave and William T. Andersen describe the significance of the older generations telling of their experiences, especially tragedies and traumas.⁶ The deep and underlying emotions from these experiences are passed on to the coming generations, who need to know the referent experiences from which the emotions derived for difficult emotions to heal. Ali Eteraz and many other authors are reporting difficult as well as joyful experiences so that future generations can more easily work through these underlying emotions.

Novels, autobiographies, and biographies are an important way for relatives to reintegrate the emotional heritage when older people have told them which events are most significant as they do life reviews. Some memories cause significant angst; sometimes older people do not know or remember the history or politics of their situations. But writing by bicultural authors can open doors to exploring one’s history.

⁵ Ali Eteraz, *Children of Dust* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

⁶ Terry D. Hargrave and William T. Anderson, *Finishing Well: Aging and Reparation in the Intergenerational Family* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1992).

Exploring Different Values

The Hungry Ghosts portrays a young male who is both Tamil and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka during the war in that country.⁷ He is not safe because of his mixed heritage and, as he emerges as a young man, he is not safe because he is homosexual. His father has died, so his mother, sister, and he benefit from his paternal grandmother's wealth and power, which becomes very controlling for him. She is a traditional but not religious Buddhist and a wily capitalist who rents many properties. Shivan leaves Sri Lanka with his mother and sister, much to the dismay of his grandmother, who has plans for him to take over her home and her properties. He goes back to Sri Lanka and then back to Canada and encounters the problems of being a gay man in Sri Lanka as well as in Canada. Through his grandmother, the reader learns a traditional way of practising Buddhism in Sri Lanka. His grandmother manipulates businesspeople and monks through various circumstances.

As a reader, I had my own advice for Shivan, but then followed him as he makes his way in the midst of much danger in Colombo. I wanted him to stay in Canada and yet he goes back, wanted him to be free of his grandmother and yet he is drawn back into her power. How will he survive? What will he tell his nephews and nieces about his journey? How will he portray his times in both countries? While immersed in his culture and life, I saw the differences in our values. He is externally controlled and feels strong responsibility to his grandmother and his partner. How does one who is so externally controlled come to terms with strong emotions and the experiences of the past?

Indigenous Stories in Our Midst

Newcomers are not the only ones who are writing novels, biographies, and autobiographies. Books by Indigenous people carry us into the different cultures in Canada. Because of marginalization and oppression, most Canadians have not seen or learned how Indigenous peoples survive residential schools, are part of the "Sixties Scoop," live on reserves with too many hardships, or are not welcomed in cities. The structure of Indigenous cultures has only recently begun to be discussed in our media. There is much to learn. An autobiography and a novel are two good examples of the excellent literature coming from Indigenous authors in recent years.

Wab Kinew describes his life up to early adulthood in *The Reason You Walk*.⁸ His father is a residential school survivor as well as an elder in their tribe in Manitoba. His mother is Anglo, which brings more complex dynamics into his growing up, primarily in Winnipeg. Through his father, he has constant connections to their reserve and the various Indigenous people and celebrations in Manitoba and the Dakotas. Kinew does well in school; he has support from his family; yet he struggles socially as he comes more fully into young adulthood. His father, a major influence in his life, is quite rigid, loving his children but not knowing how to discipline and express parental love because of his residential school experiences.

The father's complexity is further emphasized as he struggles with the Catholic Church and then finds deep meaning in the Eucharist and other celebrations. His father brings the Winnipeg bishop into his and the family's life through special ceremonies to

⁷ Shyam Selvadurai, *The Hungry Ghosts* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2013).

⁸ Wab Kinew, *The Reason You Walk* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2015).

connect the bishop to their tribe. Just as Kinew has difficulty understanding his father, so do we as readers. Yet we also feel the father's deep love and compassion.

Kinew's autobiography brings understanding of the complexity of his life, emotions, and relationships. He is successful, but his road into journalism and now into politics is not an easy or well-trodden one. How do Indigenous leaders emerge? *The Reason You Walk* aids in seeing others' journeys as well in exploring our own. Sensitivities to others means acknowledging others' barriers and opportunities. Wab Kinew is now the leader of the NDP in Manitoba. There has been reporting about his past but without the understanding that one gains through reading his autobiography. He will continue to be a leader at the provincial and federal levels. It will be important for other Canadians to read and understand how his values developed as he struggles between white Canadian and Indigenous cultures, honouring who he is.

Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse* has now been made into a movie⁹ It is the story of a young Indigenous boy who is captured by agents and taken to a residential school. The reader sees his success as a hockey player at the school and then beyond. His experience of sexual abuse by the priest who is his coach is hidden from us as it often is in real life. He has a very loving foster family after leaving the residential school. Playing hockey professionally, he encounters insults and prejudices as his career progresses. His story and the prejudice are very imaginable.

As the novel progresses, he needs to come to terms with sexual abuse and the addiction resulting from emotional trauma. When Richard Wagamese came to Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, I asked him about his education regarding trauma and addiction. He replied that he wrote the story as it came to him in his special place. I was amazed because his description of abuse and then recovering from addiction were very clear and reflected theories of both addiction and trauma. Having himself struggled with addiction, homelessness, and other issues, Wagamese wrote out of his own experiences.

Indian Horse is a novel but one can see the kind of journey one must travel to overcome residential school abuse. As we hear and begin to understand the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, both Wagamese and Kinew are helpful. The pain from these years will long be with us but we can walk with the survivors and their children, learning as we walk about the suffering and the implications of abuse for many Indigenous people.

Here I have covered a few books, but there are many more. One shelf in my personal library is already full and overflowing. The bibliography for my interfaith counselling course takes more than a full page single-spaced, and the literature keeps coming. In one recent year, four out of five finalists for the Governor General's Award for English-language fiction were books by bicultural authors and the fifth was about the author's home province of Newfoundland, another Canadian subculture that we need to understand better.

Our neighbours have powerful and important stories for us to explore as they wish to tell them. Our own reading can help us to open conversations into lives beyond our previous imagination and give new depth to what it means to live in our diverse country. I invite you to learn to know the background of your fellow citizens or residents, then explore what their lives might have been before you met them. It's a good and worthwhile journey.

⁹ Richard Wagamese, *Indian Horse* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012).

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