

ETHNIC FICTION

Ethnic fiction is about an ethnic group, usually in the traditions of Realism and Naturalism, dramatizing problems of loss, identity, inequality, adaptation, assimilation, and retention of heritage. “The literature that seems important...is being written mainly by members of minority groups.” (Wallace Stegner) Ethnic is arguably the most socially valuable form of literary Realism because it gives voices to minorities and increases racial understanding, even when the minority voice is hotly polarized, such as David Bradley in *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) and John Edgar Wideman in *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), sermons against racism based upon *true* historical events.

Less censored by *white* Political Correctness, ethnic minority writers are more likely than white writers to include the spiritual dimension—religious faith, ghosts, visions, myths--giving their works a greater depth and resonance, sometimes in the international mode of Expressionism called “magical realism.” Carlos Castaneda from Peru became a guru of the 1960s drug culture in America with his series of anti-social self-help books, supposedly anthropology but actually paranormal fiction celebrating hallucinatory drug experiences and his apprenticeship with the Yaqui Indian sorcerer Don Juan—the best is *Journey to Ixtlan* (1972). The distinguished Oscar Hijuelos is not overtly political in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), in the genre of immigrant assimilation stories. *The Open Hearth* (2000) by Thomas Doulis is an historical novel of Greek immigrants in the steel industry in the early 20th century, masterful Realism with colorful characters, warm humanity, and humor.

After the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s ethnic fiction became widely popular as exemplified by the television miniseries adapting *Roots* in 1977, attracting 130 million viewers. Perhaps the most deeply moving ethnic fiction of the period is *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), by Ernest J. Gaines, black history told through the memories of a former slave woman 110 years old--adapted on television in 1974. Also outstanding is *Middle Passage* (1990) by Charles R. Johnson, dramatizing the final voyage of an illegal American slave ship in 1830, winner of the National Book Award. Usually an ethnic fiction is so universally human it transcends race through archetypal experience, “To Hell with Dying” (1968) for example, by Alice Walker. Toni Morrison insists on her Feminist Afrocentricity yet likewise often transcends identity through her art, especially in *Song of Solomon* (1977). Ishmael Reed, another black Postmodernist, is a male counter to Morrison in the gender war, as in *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986).

Unlike the Postmodernism of elite white Academic Expressionists such as Barth and Pynchon, who are playing intellectual games, the Postmodernism of many ethnic writers is a serious authentic expression of their deepest experience—invisibility, alienation, double consciousness, discontinuity, fragmentation, and so on—fundamentally Realistic in the sense of being true to their real lives. Black writers such as Morrison are popular because they have heart and soul, in contrast to white academics like Barth who seem to have none. In this respect, ethnic minority Postmodernists are exceptions to some of the generalizations here about white Postmodernists, especially in their spirituality.

The Joy Luck Club (1987) by Amy Tan, portraying the Chinese-American experience, became such a popular novel it got translated into 35 languages and was adapted into a successful movie in 1993. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), rendering the girlhood and adaptation of a Chinese girl to American life, is widely taught in universities. Kingston has a Postmodernist sensibility and aesthetics that sometimes distance the common reader.

The most transcendent of the ethnic novels from this period is *Love Medicine* (1984) by Louise Erdrich, about relationships of Chippewa Indian families on their reservation. Indian pastoralism is contrasted to the puritanism of local Catholic nuns. The best historical American Indian novel dramatizes the last stand of the southern Blackfeet, *Fools Crow* (1986), by James Welch, culminating in the Marias Massacre of Blackfoot women and children by the U.S. Cavalry in 1870. As the first western tribe to acquire rifles, from British fur traders, the Blackfeet had driven other western tribes out of their former hunting grounds and were trying to drive out the whites. *The Open Hearth* (2000) by Thomas Doulis is an historical novel of Greek immigrants in the steel industry in the early 20th century, masterful Realism with colorful characters, warm humanity, and humor.

The major Jewish novelists transcend ethnicity. Their context is usually the world, as in *Catch-22* (1961) by Joseph Heller, whose later subjects became more Jewish, and in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) by Bellow, who was criticized by some Jewish critics for not being Jewish enough. His most Jewish novel is probably *Herzog* (1964), while his transcendence of ethnicity is greatest in his novella *The Victim* (1947) and in his Modernist novel *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). Isaac Singer is ethnic in that he wrote in Yiddish, yet his fiction attains universality. Cynthia Ozick is perhaps the leading Jewish woman fiction writer in America, as in *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (1971). So far as I have seen there is no evidence of his ethnicity in the fiction of Norman Mailer. Bernard Malamud tends to write fables transcending race even in his short story "The Jewbird" (1963), but especially in his baseball novel *The Natural* (1952), though in *A New Life* (1961) his professor is a hero for being a Jewish radical in a conservative college. Malamud is most Jewish in his prizewinning historical novel *The Fixer* (1966) about the persecution of a Jew in Russia. Philip Roth writes about being Jewish as a critic rather than an advocate, alienating many Jews from the start with his debut collection *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959).

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