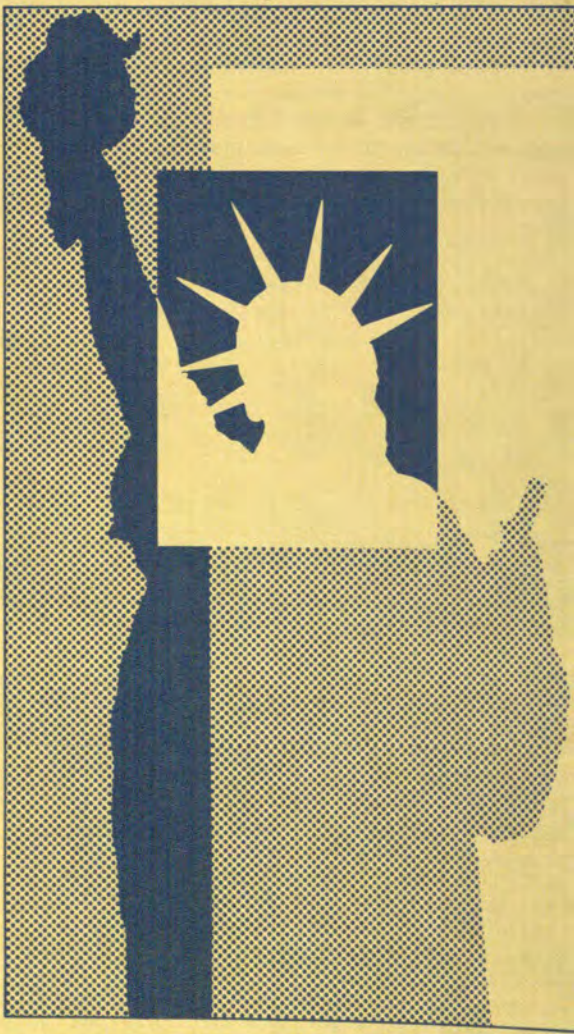


Bless Me



BEING ETHNIC, BECOMING AMERICAN

Being Ethnic, Becoming American: Struggles, Successes, Symbols

Let's Talk About It
Reading and Discussion Programs in
America's Libraries

Introducing:

- Bless Me, Ultima*, by Rudolfo A. Anaya
- Go Tell It on the Mountain*, by James Baldwin
- An Orphan in History*, by Paul Cowan
- The Way to Rainy Mountain*, by N. Scott Momaday
- Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, by Maxine Hong Kingston

In 1976, a journalist named Alex Haley completed a 12-year study of his heritage that went back to 1750, to the West African village of Juffure, where his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Kunte Kinte was born. Haley's story, *Roots*, became, of course, a best-selling book and, translated into a 12-hour TV mini-series, the most popular television event of its time, viewed by nearly 85 percent of the households in America.

While Americans had certainly been conscious of their heritage before the book appeared, *Roots* clearly awakened an extraordinary hunger in people of all backgrounds in this country to discover their own origins. How to explain this newfound ethnic consciousness?

The overwhelming reason is that in a society marked by unremitting change, an ethnic identity—whether fully realized or not—is one constant each of us possesses. Although many of us are theoretically assimilated into the mass culture of America, in truth we are not. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the homes and neighborhoods we live in, our family life and traditions, the manners by which we associate with others—all are largely determined by our ethnic heritage.

In one sense, however, we are no longer a nation of immigrants, a "teeming nation of nations," as Walt Whitman once described us; rather, we have become

a nation composed of the children and grandchildren of those immigrants. Thus, if there are vestiges of our ethnic heritage to be found in our day-to-day lives, there is much that has been lost or discarded, for our ancestors were—willingly or not—quick to relinquish the old ways in order to adapt to the new. "At first, it must have seemed like a marvelous bargain," Paul Cowan writes in *An Orphan in History*. "For most of the twentieth century, melting-pot America was like the pot of gold at the end of history's rainbow. In this land of limitless possibilities one's past seemed to be an encumbrance: something that was filled with atavistic superstitions, that was anathema to enlightened people, that presented an obstacle to personal progress."

Today, we are not so certain of that notion. Many of us are understandably resistant to giving up valued Old World traditions for an America that can guarantee neither the fulfillment of dreams nor a culture "better" than the one left behind. And where assimilation was the best, or only, alternative for those millions of immigrants arriving in America, it often only postponed the inevitable conflict—and resolution—between "being ethnic" and "becoming American" that the descendants of those immigrants face today.

The quest for ethnic identity in America is a journey of sorts, not unlike the journeys our ancestors made in search of a better life. However, it is a voyage of the spirit, in which the traveler seeks a trail covered over from years of neglect, or pieces of a puzzle he or she had not even known existed. With this quest comes self-realization, a communion with those who share the same heritage, a sense of connection that modern life does not always give us. But there are hazards, too. In sheltering its members, the ethnic group threatens to insulate them from people of other backgrounds. What was a pride in one's group becomes chauvinism. What was self-respect becomes self-absorption and disrespect for others. In a statement made at the turn of the century but which is no less resonant today, W. E. B. DuBois said, "And herein lies the tragedy of the age. Not that

men are poor—all men know something of poverty. Not that men are wicked—who is good? Not that men are ignorant—what is Truth? Nay, that men know so little of men."

And so, through the five books in this series, we journey not only perhaps into our own ethnic pasts—Hispanic, black, Jewish, American Indian, or Chinese—but also into those of our countrymen, our brothers and sisters. The books can in no way cover the spectrum of ethnic backgrounds found in the United States, nor is any of them intended to offer a definitive portrait of the group represented. Instead, it is hoped that within these works those qualities—the struggles, successes, and symbols—that make each group unique, and those that are common to every ethnic American experience, are revealed to the reader.

If one truth could be drawn from these books, it is that the quest for ethnic identity in this country is one of infinite variation—from era to era, region to region, group to group, person to person. In Rudolfo A. Anaya's spellbinding *Bless Me, Ultima*, there is Antonio Márez, a young Hispanic boy who learns all too quickly that there are conflicts he must resolve as the son of a Márez and a Luna, as a Hispanic living in an Anglo society, and as a human being coming of age.

Antonio's mother would like him to follow the settled ways of her farming family and become a village priest, while his father urges on him the wandering, *vaquero* ways of his people. Then, too, Antonio must begin his education, painfully learning the "foreign" symbols of his Anglo education. (What will the boy gain in this process, and what will he lose?) Finally, he must make sense of the ambiguities of "right" and "wrong" and of the inescapable loss of innocence every adult faces. "My own mother had said that losing your innocence and becoming a man was learning to sin," Antonio tells us. "I felt weak and powerless in the knowledge of the impending doom." There to guide him, though, is the wise, mysterious *curandera* Ultima, who alone

knows Antonio's destiny. The boy pleads, "But I want to know, there are so many things I want to know."

For now, though, *Ultima* will reply only, "A *curandera* cannot give away her secrets, but if a person really wants to know, then he will listen and see and be patient. Knowledge comes slowly—"

Like Antonio Márez, young John Grimes of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is coming of age, but in the streets of Harlem in the 1930s. Unlike Antonio, John has no guiding hand of an *Ultima*. He does have the Gospel, but it is obscured by what he can see with his own eyes: the hypocrisy of his preacher father, the poverty of his Harlem, the baubles of the city beyond, and the injustice of the white powers that be. But in a journey that takes him above the earthly, John makes his first, purposeful steps toward self-discovery.

If John Grimes succeeds in beginning to reconcile his inner conflicts, it is a chance Paul Cowan never had as a boy. Cowan was truly an "orphan in history," exiled from his Jewish heritage when his father changed the family name from Cohen in his desire to become Americanized, to be indistinguishable from "real Americans." Of his father's decision, Cowan writes, "For all the Cowan family's warmth, for all its intellectual vigor, for all its loyalty toward each other, our pasts had been amputated." Combing his family history in search of an explanation for his cultural estrangement, Cowan would find a complex web of internecine feuds, unmet hopes, anti-Semitism, and alienation, but he would find also a transcendent dignity, love and a heritage upon which he could rebuild his life.

The heritage of N. Scott Momaday is vastly different from that of Paul Cowan. His people, the Kiowa Indians of the southern Plains, lasted but a mere hundred years. But where some harbor only bitterness over the disenfranchisement of the Indian natives from their land—their soul—Momaday can find redemptive meaning. "It is a whole journey, intricate with motion and meaning," he writes of his people's brief history in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, "and it

is made with the whole memory, that experience of the mind which is legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural. And the journey is an evocation of three things in particular: a landscape that is incomparable, a time that is gone forever, and the human spirit, which endures."

To the young Maxine Hong Kingston, a Chinese American growing up in San Francisco, ethnic identity is paradox. How else is she to explain the Chinese idea of female subordination juxtaposed beside the obvious strength and force of her own mother, a native-born Chinese? Or the presence of a Chinese American tradition that is suffocating in its demands and yet incomprehensible to those who would obey it? Or the inability of Kingston's family to accept either the China of their past or the America of their present? Such questions, puzzling as they may be for the reader—and for Kingston!—might inspire, however, rich contemplation and discussion of Kingston's absorbing autobiography, *Woman Warrior*.

If Kingston's account is steeped in paradox, so too, in its way, is the very study of ethnicity in America. Clearly, there is a price to be paid for assimilation into American ways, but nonassimilation has its costs as well. And one could argue that while a quest for one's ethnic identity is a worthy enough goal, its fulfillment might only make an America of 227 million people that much more ungovernable.

In a final paradox, where does this fascinating quest for our roots truly end? Does Alex Haley's end, as he implies, with Kunte Kinte? What of Kunte Kinte's father's father's father? Or the thousands of generations before him? W. E. B. DuBois spoke the truth when he said that "men know so little of men," yet how is it that we all can share the pride and loss of N. Scott Momaday, the spiritual disconnection of Paul Cowan, the inner torment of John Grimes and Maxine Hong Kingston, and the hurtful growing pains of young Antonio Márez? Perhaps it is as *Ultima* gently explains to Antonio: "You have been seeing only parts . . . and not looking into the great cycle that binds us all."

Bless Me, Ultima, by Rudolfo A. Anaya

In this, his first novel, Rudolfo A. Anaya has transformed the archetypal "coming of age" story into an atmospheric tale that conveys with simplicity and eloquence the Hispanic experience in America's Southwest. Antonio is the seven-year-old son of Gabriel and Maria Márez, between whose different temperaments the boy is tossed. As his father explains to him: "I came from people who hold the wind as brother, because he is free, and your mother, well, she came from men who hold the earth as brother, they are steady, settled people."

Other forces pull at Antonio as well. The sheriff is murdered by a local madman, who himself is killed with equal senselessness by a band of townspeople—an act Antonio witnesses. In addition, Antonio longs for the companionship of his three older brothers, off to the war, yet when they return the boy is confronted by three grown men who have become strangers to their family. Then there is Antonio's painful but challenging education where he must learn the ways of Anglos and their "foreign" language. Finally, there is the battle between his already deep Catholic faith and the mystical forces he sees in the natural world around him and in the magical ministrations of Ultima.

Always there is Ultima, who has delivered Antonio literally and figuratively into this world of contradictions. She is the village *curandera*, or folk healer, who lifts the evil spells cast on townpeople by local witches. "Ultima has sympathy for people," Antonio's father tells him, "and it is so complete that with it she can touch their souls and cure them—"

When Ultima comes to live with Antonio's family, we know Antonio will be changed forever and indeed he is. It is Ultima who will explain to Antonio the meaning of the killing he has witnessed, who will face evil unblinkingly, who will show him how opposites are reconciled, and who will explain to him in the end that one takes life's experiences and builds strength from them, not weakness.

Rudolfo A. Anaya. *Bless Me, Ultima*. 1976. *Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International.

Go Tell It on the Mountain, by James Baldwin

More than 30 years after its original publication, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* remains one of the most powerful statements on what it can mean to grow up black in America—"down the line, through poverty, hunger, wandering, cruelty, fear, and trembling, to death."

This is the story of John Grimes, the 14-year-old son of a Harlem storefront preacher; yet if there is a central "character" in the book, it is the church, where Baldwin's people turn for strength and salvation, for the "symbols" of their suffering and their deliverance. The church has historically been a source of sustenance for black people, protecting them, nourishing them, serving as the keeper of memory and morality. Whenever life's painful realities have become unbearable, there has been this gravitation toward that "unknown other" for hope.

Despite the dominating presence of the Gospel in his day-to-day life, John is faced with a difficult choice between the spiritual and the earthly:

The way of the cross had given [John] a belly full of wind and had bent his mother's back: they had never worn fine clothes, but here, where the buildings contested God's power and where the men and women did not fear God, here he might eat and drink to his heart's content and clothe his body with wondrous fabrics, rich to the eye and pleasing to the touch. And then what of his soul, which would one day come to die and stand naked before the judgement bar. What would the conquest of the city profit him on that day? To hurl away, for a moment of ease, the glories of eternity!

Those glories were unimaginable—but the city was real.

Through Baldwin's novel, we see represented in John Grimes' own family the experiences of blacks who, during the period just prior to 1920, traded the economic barrenness of the South for the uncertain future of the North. "There was only this difference," Baldwin writes, "the North promised more. And this similarity: what it promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and begrudgingly with one hand, it took back with the other." We see also a virtually self-contained black community whose only contact with whites is through the police and, indirectly, the white power structure that stands behind them. The reader might well ask, Does this insulated environment protect or harm the people who live there? Are things any different in the 1980s?

Baldwin once wrote about his novel, "I wanted my people to be people first, Negroes almost incidentally." His moving prose enables us to see them as both.

James Baldwin. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. 1953, Doubleday, *Dell.

An Orphan in History, by Paul Cowan

In 1976, perhaps not coincidentally the year *Roots* was published, *Village Voice* writer Paul Cowan realized at age 36 that he had been existing in a cultural limbo in which he was neither an assimilated American nor a faithful Jew. He could hardly be blamed for his confusion, as he explains:

I am the grandson of Modie Spiegel, a mail-order magnate, who was born a Reform Jew, became a Christian Scientist, and died in his spacious house in the wealthy gentile suburb of Kenilworth, Illinois, with a picture of Jesus Christ in his breast pocket; and of Jacob Cohen, a used-cement bag dealer from Chicago, an Orthodox Jew, who lost everything he had—his wife, his son, his business, his self-esteem—except for the superstition-tinged faith that gave moments of meaning and structure to his last, lonely years.

Thus, Paul Cowan began a four-year spiritual journey that would lead to his great-great-grandfather Jacob Cohen, a renowned rabbi who presided over the nineteenth-century Lithuanian village of Lidvinova. It was Jacob's son Moses who would come to America, where in Chicago he became a successful businessman and leader of the Jewish community. Curiously, though, it was Moses' son Jacob, Paul's grandfather, who would find American life so at odds with his Jewish heritage. "Had he lived in Lidvinova," Cowan explains, "his ancestry, his involvement with religion and his position in the family would have been enough to guarantee him a good match and a great deal of respect.... But in Chicago few people cared about those Old World traditions. Jake Cohen was a displaced religious aristocrat."

It was Jacob's son Louis who would redeem the family name by, ironically, changing it to Cowan, by attending the prestigious University of Chicago, by marrying into the wealthy Spiegels, and by becoming a successful television producer and, eventually, president of a budding CBS-TV. It would be up to Paul Cowan, however, to redeem the family heritage, synthesizing it with his own very Ameri-

canized upbringing. Cowan and his wife did, in fact, establish a Hebrew school that flourishes in New York City today.

If Paul Cowan's account is sometimes an overly self-absorbed one, it also is an informed portrait of the transplanted Jewish culture in America and of one man's spiritual rebirth.

Paul Cowan. *An Orphan in History*. 1982, Doubleday, *Bantam.

The Way to Rainy Mountain, by N. Scott Momaday

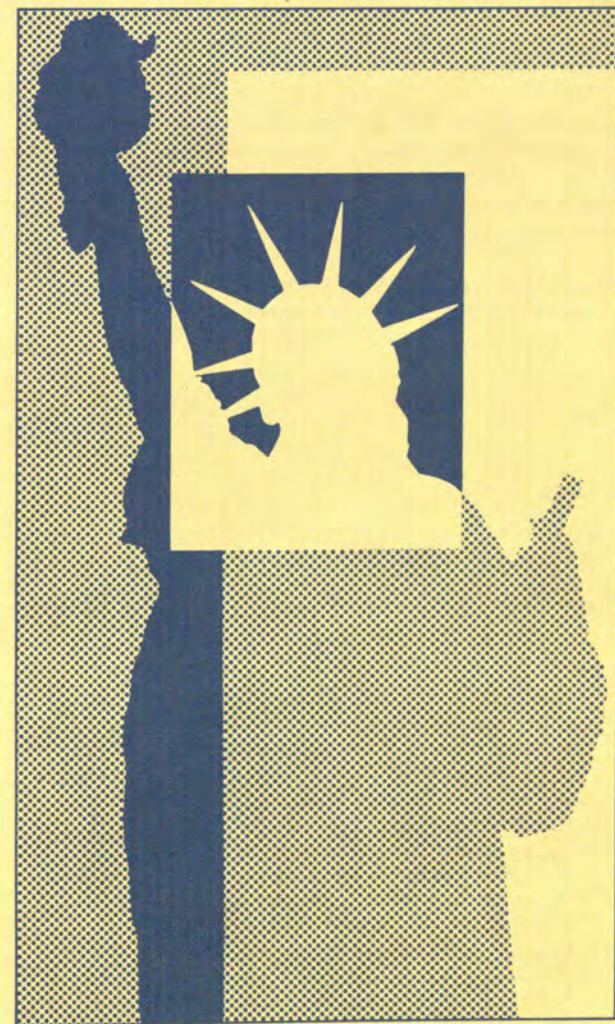
Unlike the past of Paul Cowan, that of N. Scott Momaday cannot be retrieved in any physical sense. "What remains is fragmentary: mythology, legend, lore, and hearsay—and of course the idea itself, as crucial and complete as it ever was," Momaday writes. "That is the miracle." The story begins with the birth of Momaday's Kiowa Indian people in what is now western Montana, then follows their migration to the southern Plains of Oklahoma, their brief but glorious existence there, and their spiritual death with the depletion of the buffalo herds and the settling of the land.

At the beginning of this book, there are three separate strands. First, there is legend, in which the Kiowas are said to have emerged one by one from a hollow log. (An expectant mother became stuck and prevented any other tribespeople from entering the world; that is why the tribe was so small.) Then there is shattered history—often seen through the eyes of the author's grandfather Mammedaty—which can offer only glimpses of the Kiowa's hundred-year story. Finally, there are the modern-day reflections of Momaday himself. As these three strands lead us through the book, they become interwoven so that the distinctions between myth, the past, and the present become muted and what emerges is indeed simply an idea.

"Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe," the author writes. "He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all

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