

Multicultural Literature in the U.S.
by Akhil Sharma

Akhil Sharma's first novel, *An Obedient Father*, won the 2000 P.E.N./Hemingway Award, given to the best first novel published in any given year, and the 2001 Whiting Writers' Award. He writes for *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, among other publications. He was named among the best of young American novelists (2007) by *Granta* magazine.

I can only speak from my own experiences, and so I should not be understood to represent all Indian-American writers. I first started writing short stories in the ninth grade because I was very unhappy and wanted attention.

My family came to America in 1979. There was me, my brother, my mother, and my father. Two years after we arrived, my brother had an accident in a swimming pool that left him severely brain damaged. I was 10 then, and my brother, 14.

Anup, my brother, is still alive, but he cannot walk or talk, cannot be fed through his mouth, so he is fed through a gastrointestinal tube that enters his stomach just below his ribs on the right side. Anup does not roll over automatically in his sleep, so someone has to be with him all night to turn him from side to side every two hours to avoid bed sores.

For two years after the accident, my brother was kept in a hospital, and then my parents decided to take care of him themselves. They brought him home and hired nurses. Other than the direct worries of my brother's condition, another pressing worry that I grew up with was concern about money. Because we had so little money and because we were dependent on insurance companies and nurses, we felt that we were always being betrayed, that people were not fulfilling their responsibilities. Many times we had nurses who said they would come and start a shift on a particular day and time but wouldn't show up. Also, because there were strangers in our house, we were always afraid they would steal things. We had one nurse who stole teddy bears that my mother had bought at a flea market. Until the ninth grade, when I was 15, the only time I wrote short stories was when they were assigned in class. In the ninth grade, I had a teacher, Mrs. Green, who praised me for understanding our reading assignments so well, and so, to get more attention from her, I began writing stories.

At first, all the stories I wrote had white American characters. I think this was partially because all the fiction I read was about white people. Equally important though, was that I felt the experience of being an Indian-American was not important. Living as a minority, not sharing the experiences of the majority population, I felt that my experiences, because they were not the majority experience, were not as important as those of white people. Also, to some extent, I felt that my experiences, because they were not shared, were not even as real as those of white Americans.

Among the problems I had in writing about whites is that I didn't know anything about whites. It was only in tenth grade that I first went into a white person's house.

In tenth grade, I read a biography of Ernest Hemingway. I remember starting reading it one morning at the kitchen table and the windows of the kitchen being dark. I read the biography of Hemingway so that I could lie to people and tell them that I had read Hemingway's books. (I used to lie all the time and claim I had read books I had not.)

(Continued on page 2)



American writer, Toni Morrison, receives the Nobel Prize in Literature from King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, in the Concert Hall in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 10, 1993. Morrison, who was born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, and teaches at Princeton University, New Jersey, is the first Black woman to receive this prize. (AP Photo)

The American Center

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H O L I D A Y S

August 19: Parsi New Year

A WORD FROM THE CENTER

Dear Friends of the American Center,

This is both a hello and a goodbye from me, as I have reached the end of my short stay in Mumbai as the Public Affairs summer intern. I'll be sad to leave this seaside city that truly never sleeps, filled with such amazing sights, sounds, and people, but I am excited to return home to New York City. The experience of living in India is entirely unique, but even in the U.S., Indian culture doesn't feel so many oceans away. (Now this could be because my apartment in Manhattan is literally right atop an Indian restaurant, and thus most things in my life smell like aloo gobi, but I'd rather attribute the feeling to something more poetic).

Indian and American cultures, different as they are, fascinate and complement each other. So many facets of the Indian aesthetic and experience have made their way into American lifestyle, design, and cuisine. The same is true for India, and it's hard to imagine our cultures devoid of the other's influence!

My own infatuation with South Asia has led me to study both Hindi and Urdu, two languages I never would have believed I would someday know. When I'm home, my wonderful Hindi teachers at Columbia University make sure I get my daily quota of reading assignments, head nods, and Bollywood films. In India, however, I've learned that for most Indians there is nothing quite as uncanny as hearing a young blonde woman speaking Hindi and Urdu!

My favorite and funniest experiences in India have always involved speaking local languages, and I am always proud to explain the American interest in learning about and interacting with foreign cultures. Here, at the American Center, we've even started a local language initiative with upcoming programs!

You can find our latest program, "Poetry for Social Change," a Hindi-Urdu poetry contest, on our Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/amcentermumbai>.

Khuda Hafiz,



Samantha Hicks

(Continued from page 1)

What amazed me about the book was that Hemingway had gotten to live in France and Spain, that he had travelled to Cuba and appeared to have enjoyed his life. Till then, I had thought that I would be a computer programmer or an engineer or a doctor. When I read the book, I suddenly thought that I could have a lifestyle like Ernest Hemingway and not lead a boring life.

After reading the biography, I began to read other books about Hemingway. I read biographies and collections of critical essays. I must have read 20 books about Hemingway before reading any actual work written by him. I read all this about Hemingway because I wanted to learn how to repeat what he had done and I didn't want to leave any clue unexamined. At first, I was not actually interested in Hemingway's own writing.

I think of Hemingway as the writer who has influenced me most. Hemingway, as you probably already know, wrote about characters whose experience was exotic to American readers. He wrote about gangsters and soldiers in Italy and journalists in Paris. Among the many things I learned from Hemingway – and I could say that almost everything I am as a writer began with Hemingway or as a response against Hemingway – was how to write about exotic things without being bogged down by the exoticism. Scholars who analyzed Hemingway pointed out that his stories began in the middle of the action, that he wrote as if the reader already knew a great deal about the environment that he was writing about, that when he gave direct explanations, this breaking of the reality of fictional experience was a way of saying to the reader that the reason I am breaking this fictional convention is because I don't want to lie.

For me, because I began my education as a writer with Hemingway, and did not really read any non-white writers until I was in college, I have always thought that writing is just writing. Writing is just a string of words and a series of strategies that generate experiences within the reader. I have always felt that in the same way that the race of a surgeon does not matter because a heart and a gall bladder remain a heart and a gall bladder, no matter the race of the patient, the race of a writer also does not matter.

I came to America as part of a great immigration wave. Because this wave of Asian immigrants has created curiosity within American society as to what exactly it is like to be in Asian families, I have been lucky to have had my books read.

The person who gave me the prize was one of Hemingway's sons. I believe it was Patrick Hemingway who gave me the prize. This white-haired gentleman and I sat and talked in a conference room for about 10 or 15 minutes. I did not tell him how much his father had mattered to me because I felt shy. Instead we talked about how his father had found titles for his books in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Sometimes when I think of how lucky I have been, I want to cry.

Source: *America.gov*

NOTES FROM THE AMERICAN LIBRARY

Select Resources Available on Multiculturalism

Books

Best African American Essays: 2009

Edited by Gerald Early
Bantam Books, 2009

This book features essays published by African-Americans. Selected from a diverse array of publications such as *The New Yorker*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Slate*, and *National Geographic*, the essays offer compelling perspectives of a number of well-known and distinguished writers, among them, Malcolm Gladwell, Jamaica Kincaid, James McBride, and Walter Mosley.

Pop Culture Versus Real America

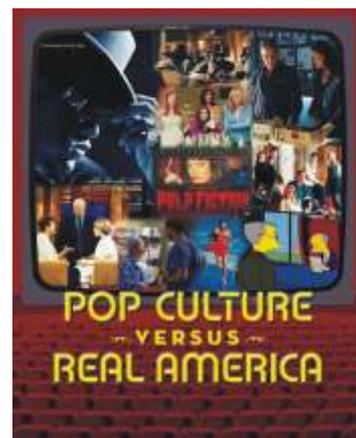
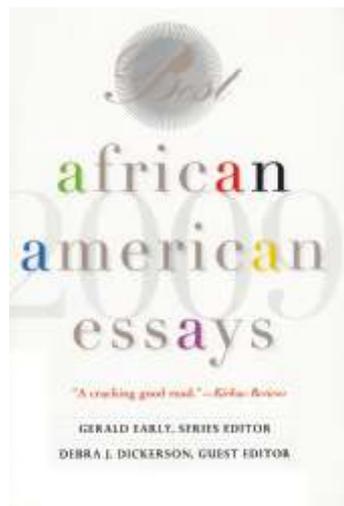
This on-line book is an effort to correct some of the misconceptions of Americans created by U.S. television and cinema. *Pop Culture Versus Real America* contrasts those pop culture images with profiles of real Americans in every walk of life.

To download this book, please follow the link below:
http://www.america.gov/media/pdf/books/pop_culture.pdf#popup

Online Databases

Literary Reference Center

Literary Reference Center (LRC) is a comprehensive database that combines information from over 1000 books and monographs, major literary encyclopedias and reference works, hundreds of literary journals, and unique sources not available anywhere else. LRC contains detailed information on the most studied authors and their works, and is an essential resource for public, academic, and high school libraries.



Pop Culture Universe

Pop Culture Universe (PCU) is an authoritative digital library of information on American and world popular culture – past and present. The database can be searched either by subject index or Decades Pages. The PCU Decades Pages are one-stop guides to the icons, idols, and ideas of each decade from the 1920s to the present. They provide helpful overviews to each decade, as well as quick reference lists of the major films, movie stars, TV shows, songs, books, Broadway shows, awards, fads, new products, discoveries and inventions, new words and phrases, fashion trends, sports champions and awards, and obituaries for each year and within each decade.



Note: Please contact the Information Desk to access the databases mentioned above.

Ask a Librarian: Please write to the American Library at libref@state.gov for research queries related to information on U.S. international relations, education, law and legislation, English language, and literature.

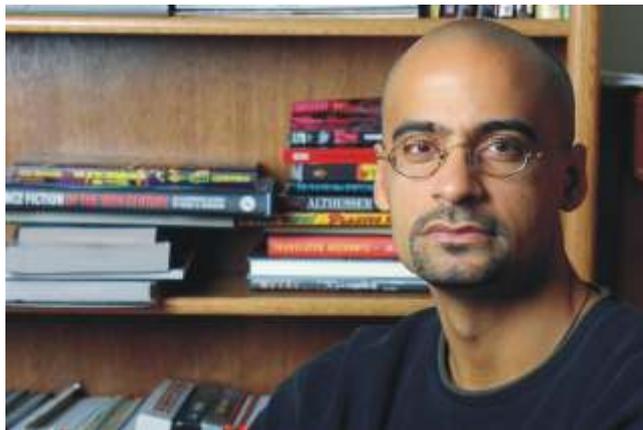
Outstanding Oklahomans!
Discussion led by Michael Tapley

Monday, August 16
American Center Auditorium

6:00 p.m.

When Rodgers and Hammerstein produced *Oklahoma*, they knew that there was much more than waving wheat and wind coming down the plains. At the center of the United States, Oklahoma has been at the crossroads of American history, producing some amazing and notable characters. From movie stars to athletes we'll take a look at the interesting people that make Oklahoma great!

Michael Tapley is originally from Tulsa, Oklahoma – where the wind comes sweeping down the plains! Michael attended Oklahoma State University to earn a B.S. in International Business, a B.A. in French, and an M.B.A. While at university, he took a year off to study abroad and live in Strasbourg, France. Previously, he worked in the field of student affairs as Director of Marketing and Fundraising. Before joining the Foreign Service, he was a Senior Financial Analyst for the regional operations of American Airlines. His interests include exploring new restaurants and cooking for friends, as well as exploring new locations.



Award-winning writer Junot Díaz, who emigrated from the Dominican Republic as a child, teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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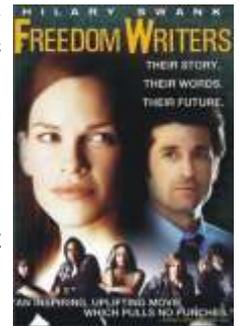
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American Center Auditorium
3:30 and 6:30 p.m.

Friday, August 13

Freedom Writers
(2007, 122 mins)

Hilary Swank stars in this compelling true-life drama about Erin Gruwell, an idealistic young teacher who takes a job at Long Beach, California's tough Woodrow Wilson High School. Initially terrified of the gang violence and racial unrest that grips the school, Gruwell presses on, encouraging her troubled students to keep journals that become sources of inspiration for them. Patrick Dempsey, Scott Glenn and Imelda Staunton costar.



Friday, August 27

The Visitors
(1993, 107 mins)

A record-breaking hit in its native France, Jean-Marie Poire's fantasy/comedy stars Jean Reno and Christian Clavier (who co-scripted with Poire) as a 12th-century knight and his squire who, thanks to a wizard, are transported to modern-day France and must battle autos, appliances and such strange notions as democracy and bathing. With Valerie Lemercier. In French with English subtitles.



California writer Helen Zia, shown in this undated publicity photo, interweaves stories of Asian-Americans' continuing struggle in *Asian-American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (AP Photo/Paul Kuroda)

Admission to American Center programs, restricted to persons over 14, unless otherwise specified, is on a first-come, first-served basis. The auditorium doors will open 30 minutes before the start of the program.