

Mirrors and Memory; a brief list of readings

Literature of Migration

By Edie Shillue

With all the makings of a good story, literature about migration is a great escape for those of us unable to travel. Holding a mirror up to society by looking at the experiences of arrival, growth and accomplishment, migration stories engage readers in the travails of those among us who have sought out change and those who have had change thrust upon them. This field of literature unpacks social and personal reality and challenges received notions of history and society - it is the consummate "People's History". Below is a list of some resources chosen from this year's course offering.

Small Island is a must read for those who want to delve deeper into the Windrush experience. The unfolding story of two different women whose lives converge in 1950s England is elegantly written, with events that shock, amuse and enrage as Britain sets out on a project that we see culminating in the betrayals unfolding in the headlines around us today. Two central characters, Queenie and Hortense embody the hope and painful reality of post-war England as they awkwardly encounter each other in London. This novel has been effectively dramatized by the BBC, (though there are only trailers and clips currently available on iplayer) : <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p005f7g5>

My Antonia, by Willa Cather is a standard of American Literature, with a detailed portrait of the eponymous Antonia, a Bohemian girl who arrives in Nebraska farm country at the end of the 19th century; her struggle, growth and change are seen through the eyes of her friend and neighbour, Jim. It is a portrait of immigrant communities in the American mid-west, a story of cultural constraints and tensions along with an eloquent exploration of the American landscape. Cather herself was from the Mid-west and went on to become a leading journalist and writer, winning the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *One of Ours*. *My Antonia* is available for lending via Libraries NI: https://lni.ent.sirsidynix.net.uk/client/en_GB/default/search/results?qu=Cather%2C+Willa&te=

The Irish diaspora and workforce are long the subject of literature about Irish outward migration. Classic works include that done by the activist writer Patrick MacGill. *The Rat Pit* is a searing portrait of migrant Donegal women who are forced through poverty into lives of labour in Scotland. It is an unflinching look at the conditions which drove workers to leave Ireland and the exploitation they endured in Scotland/Britain. MacGill's work is informed by a lifetime of activism, both of which are honoured each year in his hometown of Glenties, Donegal through the international forum, The MacGill Summer School. <http://www.macgillsummerschool.com/about/>

Though famed for outward migration Ireland does not lack for inward migration stories. Hugo Hamilton's memoir *The Speckled People*, is the story of his family - a mother who migrated here from Germany and his Irish father. Hamilton's story of a bi-lingual (German-Irish) household in a largely English speaking Ireland is a compelling exploration of the term 'identity'. Scenes of childhood

curiosity are grounded in the history of Germany during WWII and one man's attempt to maintain Irish as his son's mother tongue.

Jhumpa Lahiri, author of *The Namesake*, focuses reader's attention on migrant families through novels and short stories. *The Namesake* is a novel that explores a young Indian American man's growth in the USA and his rejection of the culture and values his parents brought with them from India. His embrace of the speed, wealth and vibrancy of the USA put him at odds with parents who seem out of touch with what goes on in his world. However, he is eventually forced to re-examine his youthful decision to drop his given name, Gogol, in favour of 'Nikhil'. The reverberations throughout his life are laid bare in eloquent detail as he lives two lives - one inside the family household and one outside. Lahiri's writing gives us this story from the perspective of the migrant parent and the American born children both, so that the missed opportunities take on a tragic hue. In 2000, Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*.

The Namesake was made into a feature film, directed by Mira Nair and available for purchase via Youtube: https://youtu.be/_sOaA-4Y8tI

The film focuses on the challenges of migration and identity between generations.

For those who are fans of the detective genre, a recommended reading is *The Golden Scales* (or any part of the Makana series) by Parker Bilal. He has created a sympathetic and compelling detective in Makana, a Sudanese man displaced from his homeland and living in Cairo. Makana becomes a Private Investigator because of his professional past and spends a lot of time moving through the maze that is Cairo in search of answers for those who hire him. In this novel he must track down a missing footballer. Makana's own back story is a compelling portrait of a nation at war and his own difficult and haunting family situation. *The Golden Scales* is the first in the series and it is recommended they be read in order - because, as William Faulkner once noted: "the Past is not dead; it is not even past".

<https://www.waterstones.com/book/the-golden-scales/parker-bilal/9781408830369>

Happy Reading!

Please note that the web sites recommended are the personal opinion of the tutor