Multicultural Fiction and Non-fiction Books

A Girl Named Disaster ***
by Nancy Farmer
306 pages including appendices
Newberry Honor Book

Eleven year old Nhamo (Disaster) lives in an isolated jungle village in southeast Africa. Her father deserted her years ago, and her mother is dead, killed by a leopard. The girl's only ally is her grandmother. When many of the villagers die in a cholera epidemic, Nhamo is condemned as a witch. Her fate to become the 4th wife of a cruel man. At her grandmother's insistence the clever girl sets off alone through the wilds of Africa. This is the story of her adventures. Using her wits, courage, and determination, Nhamo survives wild animals attacks, starvation, illness, ghosts and witches, war, racial hatred, and her own family to find a hope-filled future.

Though a young adult book, the text is dense and filled with dozens of African worlds. Maps are provided, but still the journey was somewhat difficult to follow. This is an insightful look at the varied cultures that inhabit this part of Africa as seen through the eyes of a young girl. Nhamo is an excellent role model for young women.

Letters from a Slave Girl—The Story of Harriet Jacobs **
by Mary E. Lyons

This is a children's book appropriate for 4th-5th grade and up. It is a fast and easy to read despite the colloquialisms; a collection of fictionalized (?) letters written over her life-time to her deceased mother and father, lost love, absent brother and later son. The letters are organized in three groups: 1825-1833, 1835-1842, and 1842-1897. An amazing glimpse into the hardship and horror of a young girl/woman in slavery.

Shadow of the Dragon ***
by Herry Garland
pages 314

This is a heartbreaking story of two very different Vietnamese refugee cousins. Danny came to the U.S. as a young child and is now fluent in English and well acculturated. His biggest problems are his rebellious younger sister Kim, being in love with an Anglo girl, and trying to live in both his grandmother's world and his new life. Sang Le did not manage to escape as a child and after years in a Refugee Camp has come to America as an 18 year old. Everything from the language to the culture to finding a job seem impossible to Sang Le. They go from bad to worse when he becomes part of a Vietnamese gang. The story ends tragically as a result of racial hatred. Lots of interesting details about the everyday life and culture of Vietnamese refugees.
The Dreams of Mairhe Mehan (A Novel of the Civil War) **
by Jennifer Armstrong
119 pages

This is an unusual novelette told as an introspection and through interpretation of dreams by a young Irish immigrant, Mairhe, about her disintegrating life in Washington, DC from the year before the Civil War to just after her only brother's death at Gettysburg. A gritty look at the hardships and kinship of the Irish immigrants during the Civil War. One interesting element is Mairhe's friendship with Walt Whitman.

Reservation Blues ***
by Sherman Alexie
306 pages

This is a mystical glimpse into the shattered life of Native Americans. Through a mixture of metaphor, narrative, dreams, poetry, and music, the story examines the lives of the members of a would-be Indian rock band Coyote Springs. The reader gets a heartbreaking glimpse into the physical and emotional poverty of a people whose culture has been methodically destroyed over the last two hundred years. The author is a young Coueur d'Alene Indian who guides the reader into a spiritual world unknown to most. This was a disturbing yet powerful read.

The Long Season of Rain ***
by Helen Kim
275 pages
A Newberry Honor Book

Set in Seoul Korea in the late 1950's, this novel is a personal look at the lives of Korean women. The story is told in first person by Junehee Lee, the 11 year old second of four daughters. They share the upper middle-class household with their dictatorial grandmother, depressed mother, and womanizing, often-absent military father. The arrival of an boy who was orphaned in a mountain mud slides causes everyone in the story to reexamine their lives, particularly the place and value of women in Korean society. This is a positive read for young women because it shows the power of staying true to their personal dreams while existing in an often less than perfect world.

Somewhere in the Darkness ** Young Adult
by Walter Dean Myers
168 pages

Jimmy is an almost-15 year old black boy living in a rough neighborhood in New York with Mama Jean (a friend of his deceased mother). He bright but losing interest in school but still trying to find a positive path for his life. One afternoon a stranger calling himself
Crab shows up at Jimmy's apartment claiming to be his father, just released after nine years in prison. Mama Jean has no legal right to keep Jimmy, so the boy is forced to pack his things and leave on a supposed trip to Chicago where Crab says he has a job waiting, a job he must start immediately to meet the requirements of his parole. Once on the road, the truths start to come out. Crab was not released from prison; he escaped from the prison hospital. Though they stop for a few days in Chicago, their real destination is Crab's hometown in Arkansas. And, most importantly, Crab is dying of kidney failure. 

Along the journey, as father and son try to establish some kind of relationship, Jimmy learns about his father's (and mother's) past. He also gains insight into how he himself is and what path in life he does and does not want to take. The reader also gets a glimpse into the lives of people who because of poverty, lack of education, and dearth of opportunity live on the "underbelly" of society. This story seems an odd read for young adults/juveniles.

**Grab Hands and Run**
by Frances Temple
165 pages
Juvenile Fiction

Felipe is twelve, the perfect age to be forcibly enlisted into the Salvadorian army or the ranks of the guerillas. As a political activist, his father Jacinto, is also in danger. When Jacinto is "disappeared", Felipe, his younger sister Romy, and their mother "grab hands and run." Their father has said to head for Canada...a long way for three refugees with little money.

This is a frank and disturbing account of the situation of the everyday people in war-torn El Salvador and of the family's journey through that country, Guatemala, Mexico, and their capture in the United States. This story, an easy and fast read, humanizes the "refugee problem."

**The Breadwinner** **½**
by Deborah Ellis
170 pages
Juvenile Fiction

*The Breadwinner* is the heartbreaking story of Parvana, an eleven year old girl in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Though her family are well-educated and had prospering careers before the new regime, her family—Parvana, her three sisters, toddler brother, mother, and ailing father—now lives in a one-room apartment in a bombed out building. Since no woman is allowed on the street unaccompanied by a male, Parvana is forced to disguise herself as a boy and become the breadwinner of the family when her father is arrested (because he has a university degree from a foreign country). This short, easy-read gives a glimpse into the hellish life the people of Afghanistan led under the control of the Muslim extremists.
**Kite Runner**  **1/2**  
by Khaled Hosseini  
371 pages

This is a rather predictable but interesting pseudo-autobiography of Amir, the son of an upper-class Afghani. The novel covers the years from the 1960's to the early 2000's. After his mother dies in childbirth, Amir is raised in Kabul by his wealthy and respected father Baba and his father's faithful servant Ali. Amir's constant companion is Ali's son Hassan. At 12, Amir is faced with a terrible decision; he chooses to run rather than fight. In attempting to hide his shame, he destroys not the few loving relationships in his life but his father's as well. Amir and his father manage to escape war-torn Afghanistan and make their way to San Francisco where Amir spends the next twenty years. In the end, Amir must go back to Afghanistan, now under the control of the Taliban, to face his fears before he can find redemption.

This novel personalizes the effects of war and allows the reader a glimpse into the horrors faced by those unable to escape (and even the price paid by those who do). The book also explains the complexity of the political/religious conditions that led to the evolution of warfare in Afghanistan. This is a complex, challenging reading because of frequent time shifts and use of foreign words; not suggested for pre-college level readers.

**The Songcatcher**  **1/2**  
by Sharyn McCrumb  
316 pages

From Gaelic speaking Ireland through the American Revolution and Civil War to modern Appalachia, this novel describes the entwining of cultures and how a song from an ancient time connects generations of one family. An interesting, fast read, *The Songcatcher* gives the reader a glimpse at both the people of Appalachia and the ancestors of these people. Without stereotyping, the novel catches the sense of rugged individualism of these Scotch-Irish pioneers.

**Shabanu, Daughter of the Wind**  **3**  
by Suzanne Fisher Staples  
240 pages  
Newberry Honor Book

Rich in detail of the culture of the nomadic people of the Cholistan Desert in present-day Pakistan, this novel tells the story of young Shabanu. Shabanu's father has only two daughters but has arranged for good marriages for both. Though Shabanu is independent and headstrong, she has begun to accept that in a few years, once her older sister Phulan is married, she too will become a wife and leave her family. Unfortunately, after Shabanu thwarts an attempt by the wealthy landlord of Phulan's husband-to-be attempts to rape the two sisters, Shabanu's family is forced to flee and Phulan's future husband is killed.
Finally after much negotiation between the landlord, his rich brother-in-law and Shabanu's father, settlement and reparation are agreed upon. As the book ends, Phulan is to be wed to Shabanu's intended husband, the landlord has paid Shabanu's family handsomely for killing the young groom-to-be, and twelve-year old Shabanu is promised as the fourth wife to the 55 year old brother-in-law. In the last line of the book, Shabanu decides to follow the advice of her aunt: she will marry, but she will "never unlock the secrets of my heart."

**Under the Persimmon Tree** *½
Suzanne Fisher Staples
270 pages

A disappointing story that follows the lives of Nusrat (Muslim name), an American woman who has married an Afghanistani, and a Najmah, a young shepherdess from the hill country. While waiting in Peshawar for the return of her husband who has opened a medical clinic in northern Afghanistan, Nusrat teaches refugee children in her courtyard, under the persimmon tree. Najmah is left alone in a country at war when her father and older brother are taken by the Taliban and her mother and baby brother killed in a bombing by the Americans. Taking the disguise of a boy, she survives the constant danger as she makes her way to the refugee camps in Peshawar, Pakistan in search of her father and brother. Finally the two meet and together face their personal tragedies and decide the direction of their futures. This had potential but the writing seems stilted and lifeless.

**Things Fall Apart** **
by Chinua Achebe
209 pages
Niger

A stark parable of an egotistical African man Okonkwo set in Niger in the years just prior to and up to the advent of the white missionaries. The story gives a look at both the brutal, patriarchal African society where women and children are basically treated as property and at the missionaries and how their intervention disrupted the centuries old African way of life.

**Malinche** **
by Laura Ewquivel
186 pages
Pre-Mexico

This unusual and lyrically told novel by the author of *Like Water for Chocolate* gives a fictional glimpse into four very different cultures—Malinalli's goddess worshiping people, the patriarchal, blood-demanding Aztecs (Montezuma), the gold-lusting invading
Spanish (Cortes), and the Mexico that the blending of these three were to become. Sold into slavery at age 5, Malinalli who was educated in ways of nature by her grandmother despises the Aztecs. Later because of her natural ability to learn languages, Malinalli becomes "The Tongue" or official translator between the Aztecs and Cortes; she also becomes Cortes' lover. In the beginning, she believes the Spaniard is the God Quetzalcoatl, but over times realizes that the conqueror is all too human.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the novel is the opportunity to watch how an individual weaves various belief systems to create a new one to suit a new reality.

Daughter of Fortune ****
Isabel Allende
399 pages
Chile/China/Gold Rush Era California

This is truly a multicultural novel. Eliza Sommers is a half Anglo-half Chilean supposed orphan left on the doorstep of a well-to-do British family in Valparaiso, Chile. She is raised by the supposedly prim-and-proper spinster Miss Rose and Mama Friesa, the Indian cook, who teaches the girl the secrets of nature, healing, and cooking. In Part I—1843 to 1848, the reader sees the unusual mixing of cultures—Spanish, British, and Indians, in this developing seacoast city. Infatuated by love for Joaquin Andieta, Eliza leaves the safety of her home follows her lover to California at the beginning of the Gold Rush.

In Part II—1848-1849, the reader sees a very different culture as the story line shifts to Tao Chi'en, four-son of a very poor family in a desperately poor China. A chain of circumstances leads him to become the apprentice of a renown healer in Canton. The reader has a shocking looking into the China in transition. Misfortune eventually also leads Tao Chi’en on a path toward San Francisco.

Part III—1850-1853, after helping Eliza escape from her family and saving her life during the two-month long journey, Tao Chi’en and Eliza develop a supportive relationship. Tao is mourning is dead wife; Eliza is determined to find Joaquin, so their paths separate. Eliza transforms herself into a boy and spends the next three years surviving the wilds of a Northern California gripped with gold fever. The reader gets a realistic portrait of the hardships of life and the dangers caused by the friction of so many different cultures competing for gold, land, and a new way of life.

Besides vivid descriptions of numerous different culture, the author gives a horrifying look at the treatment of women and their limited options in all the cultures involved. It also shows the ways some women survived the degradation emotionally. This is a fabulous story in a well-researched, description vehicle.
**The Mango Season** *** ½
by Amulya Malladi
229 pages
India/US

This was an enjoyable read about a young Indian woman Priya Rao, who while in the U.S. for the last seven years has become engaged to an American man. She has returned to her homeland during summer, Mango Season, to tell her family the news she knows will devastate them. As a dutiful daughter (granddaughter, cousin, sibling) she is expected to marry not only an Indian but a "boy" from the correct line of the Brahmin line; to do otherwise would disgrace her family.

Once she returns to Indian, Priya is torn between her love for her fiance and her love of family. She also is struggling trying to balance the importance of tradition and her new life. This story must reflect the confusion felt anyone caught between cultures. Priya personal courage and her family's devotion help mitigate the clashing of two very different worlds. There is a great surprise ending.

**Invisible Lives**
by Anjali Banerjee
278 pages
US/India

Very similar to *The Mango Season* in setting and theme, this novel was a refreshingly pleasant read. Lakshmi Sen is an Americanized India woman who still values her cultures traditions. She is partners with her widowed mother in a sari shop in present-day Seattle. Lakshmi has a special gift—she "knows" other people's feelings, which makes her a very successful saleswoman. Just when Lakshmi's mother finds her the perfect husband-to-be, the young women finds herself attracted to the chauffeur of a wealthy movie-star who has discovered the sari shop. As in *The Mango Season*, this young Indian woman must choose between tradition and personal happiness.

**Sweetgrass** **
by Jan Hudson
157 pages
Juvenile novel—Canadian Library Association Book of the Year for Children

Like many multicultural novels, *Sweetgrass* examines the life (and role) of a woman in her native culture. At 15, Sweetgrass is one of the oldest unmarried girls in her Blackfoot tribe. Despite her best friend's marriage as a "slave-wife" (5th wife condemned to labor all day for other wives and husband), Sweetgrass is still hopeful that her father will arrange for her to marry her love Eagle-Sun. Despite the hard work and growing responsibilities as she approaches adulthood, the fifteen year old enjoys the summer and the gathering of tribes for Sun Dance. It is not until winter (in northern Wyoming) that
Sweetgrass must test her courage and determination. Hungry wolves, starvation, a devastating smallpox epidemic—Sweetwater must face all of these. This is an interesting, informational read.

**Tulku ***
by Peter Dickinson
286 pages

An usual story of three unlikely traveling companions—Theodore, son of an American missionary in south west China, Mrs. Jones, a spirited middle-aged English amateur botanist, and Lung, the young Chinese interpreter who has fallen in love with "the English princess." After Theodore's entire village, including his father, is massacred by the Boxers, Chinese militants, the 13 year old joins Mrs. Jones entourage. Traitorous guides and pursuing bandits, force the trio into the wilds of Tibet and eventually to a monastery high in the Himalayas. Here they wait for the birth of Mrs. Jones unborn child, the long-awaited Tulku—reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. The story not only gives insight into the clash of many different cultures but allows the reader the opportunity to explore Theodore's own confusion over how to interpret to very different religious belief systems—Christianity and Buddhism.

**Digging to America **
Anne Tyler
277 pages

A glimpse into what it feels like to feel forever like "a stranger in a strange land." Maryam Yazdam has been in the United States for 37 years, and yet she still feels like an outsider. She misses her home in Iran while knowing that even if she returned the home she longs for no longer exists. Jin-ho and Sooki (Susan) are young Korean adoptees being assimilated into American culture.

The story follows to very different families living in present-day Baltimore: the very American Donaldsons and Maryam's son Sami and daughter-in-law. The story begins at the airport where both families are picking up their adopted Korean baby girls. Despite a difference in ages and cultures, the two families (including grandparents) develop a growing friendship. Maryam tries and often fails to understand her place both in this relationship and in the American culture as a whole.

The novel raises some interesting points about what the individual from another culture sacrifices to become a part of a different culture.
**Mutant Message Down Under**  **½**
Marlo Morgan
187 pages

This short novel/parable (supposedly based on real events) follows the physical/emotional/spiritual journey of an American physician who is "tricked" into a walk-about across the Outback of Australia with a band of "Real People" (aborigines). As the months pass and she successfully overcomes or accepts the many challenges she must face, the "mutant" begins to understand the ways, beliefs, and values of this ancient people but her own beliefs as well. The ending is a blatant wake-up call to all "mutants" who have forgotten how to live as one with Mother Earth.

**Broken Verses**  **2½**
by Kamila Shamsie
338 pages

Set in present day Pakistan, this first-person narrative shows the devastating personal effect political violence has on the individual. Samina Akram's political activist mother disappeared sixteen years earlier only a few years after her lover, a controversial poet is found brutally beaten to death. Samina cannot accept that either is dead. Most people believe Samina's mother, suffering from clinical depression after the brutal murder, simply walked into the sea one day. Samina, having spent her childhood being repeatedly abandoned by her mother, believes the woman has once again deserted her. When a letter arrives written in a code that supposedly only Samina, her mother, and her lover knew, Samina becomes obsessed with the fact that Omi, her mother's lover and her surrogate father, is still alive. Despite the dangers from political "minions" she believe staged his death, she begins a search to find him because she believes her mother will return if Omi is still alive.

The novel's narrative is very poetic and written in a sophisticated style that allows the reader a glimpse into the confused mind of someone suffering from horrendous loss. It also reveals the edginess of life lived in a state desiring democracy but still suffering with the constant fear of death squads and religious zealots.

**Crescent**  *****½**
by Diana Abu-Jabber
349 pages

This is a thought-provoking story of two "multicultural" lovers struggling to deal with their heritage and their true "place" in the world. The story focuses on Sirine, a half American-half Arabic chef at a Lebanese restaurant in Los Angeles. Han is a college professor at the local university is a Iraqi who fled his country years before. His guilt and emotional need for "home" are a barrier to his love for Sirine. Adding to the conflict is Ami, Han's supposed friend, who is infatuated with Sirine, and Nathan, a graduate...
The characters in this book are very true-to-life, the writing poetic in places, and the Arabic folktale woven throughout a delight. This novel gives a heart-wrenching look into the sense of loss suffered by immigrants and the confusion felt by people trying to straddle two cultures.

by Azar Nafisi
343 pages

An incredibly rich mixture of history, culture, and literature woven through the memoirs of a female Iranian teacher living in Tehran through the revolution, the 8 year-long Iraqi war, and later into the times of terror under the ruling mullahs. Much of the book focuses on seven of her most committed students with whom she secretly meets every Thursday. Having been expelled from the University and chafing under the ever tightening rules of the Islamic Republic, Azar Nafisi, English Literature professor, risks all to continue teaching. Not only is this a fascinating glimpse into modern Iran and the lives of women in that country, but also a treasure trove of information about American and English novelists and the importance of fiction in our everyday life.

**The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures **1/2
by Anne Fadiman
288 pages

The subtitle says it all. This well-researched book truly makes the reader feel how it must be to be "a stranger in a strange land." The Hmong are an ancient, proud, and culturally rich people who after assisting the United States in the war in Southeast Asia were forced to flee their homelands in Laos. Many eventually immigrated to the United States. This heartbreaking story is about one Hmong family whose young daughter suffers from severe epilepsy ("the spirit catches you and you fall down" in Hmong). Language barriers are not the only cause of conflict over the health and "soul" of Lia Lee. Opposing medical traditions, misunderstandings about family roles and responsibilities, even a diametrically opposite beliefs in what is most important: body or soul—all these lead to a clash of wills with one small child caught in the middle.

The author does an excellent job of giving the facts without placing judgment. The book is filled with a depth of information about Hmong history, cultural, religious beliefs and much more. When the reader is finished, he or she will have an eye-opening understanding of the difficulty of trying to survive in an alien culture.
The Middle Heart ***½
by Bette Bao Lord
408 pages

This incredible novel follows the interwoven lives of three unlikely friends from their youth to their deaths and beyond. Covering the years from 1919 to 1989, the unfolding story allows the reader to witness ever horrifying step in the evolution of China through the eyes of these Steel Hope—the strong-willed, educated aristocrat, Mountain Pine, his crippled scholarly servant, and Firecracker (aka Summer Wish) who like China remakes herself from destitute gravekeeper's daughter to renown stage actress and singer. As children the three swear a blood oath, vowing to defend their country to the end. Together they are one—"The Middle Heart."

Together and on their own, each struggles to survive the crumbling of the ancient aristocracy, the Chinese civil war, the bloody Chinese Revolution, even eventually the uprising in Tiananmen Square. Their dedication to each other remains through war, imprisonment, betrayal, years of separation, and death. This novel is powerful because it allows the reader to experience the price the individual pays for survival in times of political unrest. This would be an excellent introduction to anyone interested in the history of China in the 20th century (as told by a few of those who managed to survive the turmoil and bloodshed.)

In the Time of the Butterflies ***
by Julia Alvarez
325 pages

This is a semi-fictionalized story of the Mariposa sisters whose courage helped to end the dictatorship of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. Told through a mixture of first person narratives, diary entries, and reminiscences by the only surviving "butterfly," this story reveals how four very ordinary, yet different, women became involved in the grassroot effort to overthrow a ruthless tyrant. Patria is the eldest, the sensible one, the religious one, who first considered becoming a nun before discovering her passion for Predrito and children. Minerva is the headstrong sister, outspoken, obstinate, drawn early to the cause of freedom. Dede, her father's favorite, who has cursed to survive to tell her sisters' story. Last, young Maria Teresa, an asthmatic who always seems to doubt her own courage.

Surprisingly, the story does not dwell on the negative—"disappearances," death squads, imprisonment, torture, and betrayals. Though all of these are aspects of the sisters' lives, the story keeps the reader focused on everyday, simple events. The personal narratives give the reader an opportunity to see how a variety of people, particularly the sisters survive the trials and tribulations of life from the simplest problem to the horrific. Even after the brutal murder of three of the "butterflies" and their driver, the story leaves the reader with a feeling that these women (and other people like them) made a positive and long-term effect on their world.
Personally, I found the novel an eye-opening chapter in Dominican (and U.S.) history. The Yanquis are supporters of the dictatorship and for that reason hated. Intervention by the Organization of American States along with the worldwide press about the murder of the Mariposa sisters helped finally bring an end to this reign of terror.

The Whale Rider **½
by Witi Ihimaera
152 pages

This short, easy-to-read novel is set in present-day New Zealand. Blending first person narrative with mystical sequences of whale life, the author tells the story of Kahu, a young Maori girl destined for greatness. As the 20th century becomes the 21st the Maori people are struggling to save their cultural heritage, a heritage deeply connected to the whale. According to their legends, the whale rider was the first of their people to arrive on the islands. Legends also tell that another whale rider will come to save their people. Koro Apirana, one of the leader of the tribe, is desperately searching for someone to replace him. So convinced that only a male can lead his people, he ignores his granddaughter who desperately adores him. In the end, young Kahu's love of her people give her to courage to save both the whales and her culture...and win the love of her grandfather. Surprisingly, this is one instance where the movie had more depth than the novel.