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Ten Thousand Things

A Dominican-American girl who wants to become “Miss América.” An African-American man who is disturbed when white people walk faster after he appears on the sidewalk. A Chinese-German-American woman who is both amused and horrified when her father takes a mail order bride.

In Many Voices, you will hear the familiar sound of English, but in tones and accents that have a distinctive ethnic flavor. The writers who make up the conversation are primarily African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American, groups that together represent nearly 40 percent of all students in the United States. But writers from other ancestries contribute as well, including those of Greek, Italian, Jewish, and Arabic heritage.

An ethnic identity can make life more difficult for people, but it may also contribute much meaning and joy. The Chicano poet, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, wrote recently, “I cling to my culture because it is my skin, because it is my heart, because it is my voice, because it breathes my mother’s mother’s mother into me. . . . I am blind without the lenses of my culture.”

Many of us don’t come into contact with people from other ethnic groups in meaningful ways. We may go to work and school with them, but never strike up true relationships. Literature gives us the opportunity to learn what we otherwise might never know. Against the backdrop of ethnicity, the characters in these stories, essays, and poems raise questions common to us all: Who am I? How important is my family? How do I conduct my relationships with others? How does the outside world influence me? Quality literature may provoke more questions than answers, but they are the questions that everyone should ask.

You read multicultural literature for the same reasons you read other kinds of literature: out of curiosity and because you want to see your own life reflected back at you in the stories of others. Most of all you read because you want to be transported to another world and entertained. Reading ethnic literature is unlikely to make you unlearn all of your prejudices. But it may help you to figure out which differences among ethnic cultures actually matter. The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks said, “I believe that we should all know each other, we human carriers of so many pleasurable differences. To not know is to doubt, to shrink from, sidestep or destroy.”

Finally, you should remember that ethnic or not, writers are individuals practicing a very personal art. You can’t assume that what they write is characteristic of others who share their racial or ethnic identity. As the noted poet Elizabeth Alexander wrote in one of her poems: “I didn’t want to write a poem that said ‘blackness / is,’ because we know better than anyone / that we are not one or ten or ten thousand things.”

Just like you know better than anyone else that you are not one or ten or even ten thousand things.
You will find the following terms and definitions useful as you read and discuss the selections in this book. Each word is defined and then used in a sentence.

**assimilation** the process of fitting in to a new culture or becoming like others in that culture
Learning a language and social customs is important to *assimilation*.

**bigotry** prejudice; intolerance
Assuming that people from a certain race have little to offer is *bigotry*.

**bilingual** speaking two languages fluently
It was clear to the other students that Miguel was *bilingual* after he delivered his speech perfectly in both English and Spanish.

**civil rights** the freedoms and rights a person may have as a member of a community, state, or nation. Civil Rights, when capitalized, refers specifically to African Americans’ struggle for freedom and fair treatment in the 1960s.
“It’s my *civil right*!” Bill protested, insisting that he be allowed to make a phone call from the precinct.

**culture** a characteristic set of beliefs and practices of a racial, regional, religious or other social group
In the Vietnamese *culture*, members of an extended family often live together under one roof.

**desegregation** the act of breaking down the barriers that separate ethnic groups
In order to achieve *desegregation*, some school districts transport students by bus from the schools in their own neighborhoods to more distant schools.

**diaspora** the migration and dispersion of people from their homeland
In the 1930s, there was a massive *diaspora* of southern black Americans to the North as they sought to escape racism and find jobs in northern factories.

**discrimination** a biased attitude or act of prejudice against a group
Barring members of a certain race or religion from a club or organization is an act of *discrimination*.

**diversity** variety; differences. In the study of human culture, diversity refers to the differences among individuals and groups of people in society as a whole.
The racial *diversity* of the yearbook staff mirrored that of the school population.
Theme Three

Defining Moments
I could wake up in the morning
without a warning

and my world could change:

blink your eyes.

“Blink Your Eyes”
– Sekou Sundiata
**Blink Your Eyes**

(Remembering Sterling A. Brown)\(^1\)

**Sekou Sundiata**

I was on my way to see my woman but the Law said I was on my way thru a red light red light red light and if you saw my woman you could understand. I was just being a man. It wasn’t about no light it was about my ride and if you saw my ride you could dig that too, you dig? Sunroof stereo radio black leather bucket seats sit low you know, the body’s cool, but the tires are worn. Ride when the hard times come, ride when they’re gone, in other words the light was green.

I could wake up in the morning without a warning and my world could change: blink your eyes. All depends, all depends on the skin, all depends on the skin you’re living in

Up to the window comes the Law with his hand on his gun what’s up? what’s happening?

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\(^1\) **Sterling A. Brown**: an African American who wrote *Southern Road* in 1932, a book protesting social conditions for black Americans

**LITERARY LENS**

Consider the author’s purpose in writing this poem.
First Love

Judith Ortiz Cofer
At fourteen and for a few years after, my concerns were focused mainly on the alarms going off in my body warning me of pain or pleasure ahead.

I fell in love, or my hormones awakened from their long slumber in my body, and suddenly the goal of my days was focused on one thing: to catch a glimpse of my secret love. And it had to remain secret, because I had, of course, in the great tradition of tragic romance, chosen to love a boy who was totally out of my reach. He was not Puerto Rican; he was Italian and rich. He was also an older man. He was a senior at the high school when I came in as a freshman. I first saw him in the hall, leaning casually on a wall that was the border line between girls' side and boys' side for underclassmen. He looked extraordinarily like a young Marlon Brando—down to the ironic little smile. The total of what I knew about the boy who starred in every one of my awkward fantasies was this: He was the nephew of the man who owned the supermarket on my block; he often had parties at his parents' beautiful home in the suburbs which I would hear about; this family had money (which came to our school in many ways)—and this last fact made my knees weak: He worked at the store near my apartment building on weekends and in the summer.

My mother could not understand why I became so eager to be the one sent out on her endless errands. I pounced on every opportunity from Friday to late Saturday afternoon to go after eggs, cigarettes, milk (I tried to drink as much of it as possible, although I hated the stuff)—the staple items that she would order from the “American” store.

Week after week I wandered up and down the aisles, taking furtive glances at the stock room in the back, breathlessly hoping to

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1 Marlon Brando: a virile movie actor of the 20th century
Responding to Theme Three

Defining Moments

DISCUSSING

1. The narrator in "Here's Herbie" and Mitch in "The Lemon Tree Billiards House" both have distinctive characters. Pick a passage—of dialogue, description, or thought—from each selection that makes each character come alive. Explain what you like about these passages.

2. Why do you think superstition is comforting to the narrator "from Black Boy"?

3. In "from Black Boy," "Blink Your Eyes," and "The Baddest Dog in Harlem," the main characters are forced to respond to oppression and poverty. In a chart like the one below, record the problem the character confronts and his response.

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<td>&quot;Blink Your Eyes&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;The Baddest Dog in Harlem&quot;</td>
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After evaluating how these characters deal with their situations, decide whose response is most effective.

4. Would you agree with Albert Camus and the author of "First Love" that "If love were easy, life would be too simple"? Why or why not?

5. Some readers find "Here's Herbie," "Beets," and "The Lemon Tree Billiards House" humorous. Rank them first to last, based on your own opinion of how funny they are. Explain your ranking.
6. Walter Dean Myers, the author of “The Baddest Dog in Harlem,” has said that you can write about anything you can fully imagine. Were you able to envision the events, people, and setting of his story? Why or why not?

7. Another Way to Respond  Write a song based on the prose poem “Innocent Traveler.” Feel free to take words and phrases for your song from the poem itself.

**IT’S DEBATABLE**

Divide into two teams, affirmative and negative, and debate the following resolution. Try arguing the position for which you feel most strongly, then switch sides and argue the opposition.

**Resolved:** A single moment can change someone’s entire life.

**WRITING**

**Literary Analysis: Talking the Talk**

**Dialogue** is especially important in “The Baddest Dog in Harlem,” “Beets,” and “The Lemon Tree Billiards House.” Dialogue can be used to provide authenticity, show relationships, move the plot forward, create laughter, and break hearts. From the stories mentioned, find two examples that do one or more of these things and explain why you think they are effective.

**Creative Craft: Just the Facts**

Imagine that you are a police officer or journalist who is at the scene in “The Baddest Dog in Harlem.” From that person’s **perspective**, write a police report or news account. Notice what information can be provided in a short story that would be missing from the “factual” account of a law officer or reporter.

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**Telling Your Own Story**

This book isn’t complete until you tell your own story. Now that you’ve read about the **defining moments** and **turning points** of others, think back on such moments in your own life. It doesn’t have to be an earth-shattering event. Perhaps it is simply a time that you came to a realization about yourself, your friends, your family, or your place in the world. Maybe it was triggered by a trip, an adventure, or an experience such as an audition that was scary and/or challenging for you. Maybe it was something you observed or something someone said. Whatever it was, describe the experience, how it felt, and what you learned from it.
Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952–) Born in Puerto Rico, Cofer grew up in New Jersey loving the literary works of those she calls “dead white people”—Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, and Yeats. Cofer writes her poems, essays, and stories as a woman from two backgrounds. She said that “. . . being both [Puerto Rican and American] makes me feel rich in cultures and languages.” Cofer lives in Georgia with her husband and daughter and is a professor at the University of Georgia in Athens, where she teaches literature and creative writing.

Victor Hernández Cruz (1949–) Although he grew up in Spanish Harlem after age five, Cruz was born in Puerto Rico. His youth was influenced by music and theater, which has helped make his poetry into lyrical mini-dramatic dialogues. *Life* magazine calls him a major American poet. Cruz has been the editor of *Umbra* magazine and is a poet in residence in San Francisco.

Edwidge Danticat (1969–) Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and grew up there while her parents emigrated to New York. She moved to Brooklyn when she was 12 to join her parents, but didn’t speak much in her teen years because her peers made fun of her accent.

“Papi” is from *Krik? Krak!*, a collection of short stories. “Krik” is what someone in Haiti says after dinner to ask if anyone has a story to tell. “Krak” is the response of someone who wants to tell a story. Danticat is the one who yells, “Krak!”

Martín Espada (1957–) Espada’s first of three volumes of poetry, *The Immigrant Iceboy’s Bolero*, contains photos taken by his father. A Puerto Rican American born in Brooklyn and a full-time lawyer, he writes a “poetry of advocacy,” he told Steven Ratiner in an interview for *Modern American Poetry*. He has said that “one of a poet’s duties is to challenge the official history” by celebrating new heroes.

Mike Feder (1945–) Feder is a lifetime New Yorker who has worked as a probation officer, social worker, and owner of used bookstores. Previously, he ran WBAI radio station in New York and told stories on the air. Feder says that in high school he read books but never did homework. Feder’s work is autobiographical, the quest to find one’s own identity when super-attached to a single parent. Feder has published *New York Son* and *The Talking Cure*. He lives with his wife and two children in New York.

E. R. Frank (1968–) “Sonia” is from *Life is Funny*, Frank’s first novel. It was written as an outgrowth of her training as a social worker and her experience as a psychotherapist. Her work has involved all types of people and all ages, from age five to “as old as people get,” she says. She currently lives in Montclair, New Jersey.

Nicholas Gage (1939–) Nikos Gatzoyiannis was born in Epiros, Greece. At age nine, he and three of his four sisters escaped their guerrilla-occupied village with the help of their mother, who stayed behind and was killed by Communist guerrillas. The remaining family eventually landed in Worcester, Massachusetts. He Americanized his name to Nicholas Gage and went to Boston University. Sent to Greece by *The New York Times*, he began to research the death of his mother. This research gave birth to *Eleni*, the first of his five books. He now lives in Massachusetts.