Table of Contents

THEME ONE  Families: Comfort and Conflict

Looking for Work
Gary Soto  memoir ..................................................... 14

The Warriors
Anna Lee Walters  short story ........................................ 21

Nikki-Rosa
Nikki Giovanni  poem .................................................. 36

from Roots
Alex Haley  autobiography ........................................... 38

Immigrant Picnic
Gregory Djanikian  poem ............................................. 46

Housepainting
Lan Samantha Chang  short story ................................. 48

The Horned Toad
Gerald Haslam  short story ........................................... 60

THEME TWO  Traditions and Customs

The Real Thing
Marilou Awiakta  poem ............................................... 76

Gentleman of Río en Medio
Juan Sedillo  short story ............................................. 78

Sunday
Angela Shannon  poem ................................................ 82
Fortune Teller
Nguyen Duc Minh short story .................................................. 84

Little Things Are Big
Jesús Colón essay ................................................................. 105

The Cutting of My Long Hair
Zitkala-Ša memoir ............................................................... 109

The Lion Sleeps Tonight
Egyirba High memoir .......................................................... 113

Magic
Liz Rosenberg short story ...................................................... 118

Becoming Me

David Talamántez on the Last Day of Second Grade
Rosemary Catacalos poem ....................................................... 130

A Whole Nation and a People
Harry Mark Petrakis short story ............................................. 133

from Black Boy
Richard Wright autobiography ............................................. 140

Indian Education
Sherman Alexie short story .................................................. 146

Chitterling
Henry Van Dyke short story ................................................ 151

Not Knowing, in Aztlán
Tino Villanueva poem ........................................................ 165

Fox Hunt
Lensey Namioka short story ................................................ 166

this morning
Lucille Clifton poem .......................................................... 176

Tiffany
as told to Rebecca Carroll personal essay ............................... 177
THEME FOUR  Between Two Worlds

Monkeyman
Walter Dean Myers  short story  .............................................. 186

Thank You in Arabic
Naomi Shihab Nye  memoir .................................................. 197

Reading Poems in Public
Maurice Kenny  poem .......................................................... 212

American Hero
Essex Hemphill  poem ......................................................... 214

A Shot at It
Esmeralda Santiago  memoir .................................................. 215

Achieving the American Dream
Mario Cuomo  essay .......................................................... 228

The Winter Hibiscus
Minfong Ho  short story .......................................................... 231

THEME FIVE  Defining Moments

American History
Judith Ortiz Cofer  short story .................................................. 252

hate
Tato Laviera  poem ............................................................ 262

Letter to a Young Refugee from Another
Andrew Lam  letter ............................................................ 263

Not Poor, Just Broke
Dick Gregory  autobiography .................................................. 268

A New Story
Simon J. Ortiz  poem ............................................................ 273
Theme Six  Outside Influences

Cross Over
Rita Williams-Garcia drama ............................................. 298

Field Work
Rose del Castillo Guilbault short story .............................. 306

Tattoo
Gregg Shapiro poem ...................................................... 312

from I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Maya Angelou autobiography ........................................... 314

Have You Heard About America?
D. L. Birchfield poem ...................................................... 319

A Haircut
I. S. Nakata short story .................................................. 320

The Phone Booth at the Corner
Juan Delgado poem ....................................................... 325

Americans All
Michael Dorris essay ...................................................... 327

Author Biographies ......................................................... 334
Glossary of Literary Terms ............................................... 343
Index of Titles and Authors .............................................. 347
Ten Thousand Things

A Chinese American college girl who struggles with her parent’s expectations. A Greek American boy who learns a lesson from a cranky shopkeeper. Two African American friends who get caught in the crossfire of gang warfare.

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.
Concept Vocabulary

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.

**biracial** having a dual racial heritage
Because she was *biracial*, Stacey celebrated both Japanese and American holidays.

**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.

**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 ONE

Families: Comfort and Conflict
Daddy...hesitated as if to clear his throat, then answered,

“When you’re family, you take care of your own.”

“The Horned Toad”
–Gerald Haslam
The Horned Toad

Gerald Haslam
"Esxpectoran su sangre!" exclaimed Great-grandma when I showed her the small horned toad I had removed from my breast pocket. I turned toward my mother, who translated: "They spit blood."

"De los ojos," Grandma added. "From their eyes," mother explained, herself uncomfortable in the presence of the small beast.

I grinned, "Awwwww.


Mother moved back an involuntary step, her hands suddenly busy at her breast. "Put that thing down," she ordered.

"His name's John," I said.

"Put John down and not in your pocket, either," my mother nearly shouted. "Those things are very poisonous. Didn't you understand what Grandma said?"

I shook my head.

"Well . . ." mother looked from one of us to the other—spanning four generations of California, standing three feet apart—and said, "of course you didn’t. Please take him back where you got him, and be careful. We’ll all feel better when you do." The tone of her voice told me that the discussion had ended, so I released the little reptile where I’d captured him.

During those years in Oildale, the mid-1940s, I needed only to walk across the street to find a patch of virgin desert. Neighborhood kids called it simply "the vacant lot," less than an acre without houses or sidewalks. Not that we were desperate for desert then, since we could walk into its scorched skin a mere half-mile west, north, and east. To the south, incongruously, flowed the icy Kern River, fresh from the Sierras and surrounded by riparian forest.

1 Son muy toxicos: Spanish for “They are very poisonous.”
2 Sierras: the Sierra Nevadas, a mountain range in the western United States
3 riparian forest: a forest that runs along the banks of a river
I heard her whisper to him, “Thank you, Charlie,” as she kissed his cheek.

Daddy squeezed her, hesitated as if to clear his throat, then answered, “When you’re family, you take care of your own.”

---

**Literary Lens**

*Why does the great-grandson feel strongly about the place where his great-grandmother should be buried?*
Responding to Theme One

Families: Comfort and Conflict

DISCUSSING

1. The sisters in “The Warriors” learn about Pawnee values from Uncle Ralph. What values have you learned from your family that you would like to pass on to the next generation?

2. A symbol is something that stands for, or represents, something else. A rose, for example, sometimes symbolizes love. In the last selection in this theme, what do you think the horned toad symbolizes?

3. Pick two selections from this theme. Identify sources of comfort and conflict in each.

4. In your opinion, which family in this theme exerts the most influence on its members? Why did you choose this family?

5. If you could spend one week with one of the families in this theme, which one would you choose? Why?

6. To deepen your understanding of the concept of family, use a chart like the one below to define, or describe, each of the families in this theme. Use one descriptive word for each selection. Try not to repeat the defining words you use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Descriptive Word</th>
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<td>Looking for Work</td>
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<td>The Warriors</td>
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<td>Immigrant Picnic</td>
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<td>Housepainting</td>
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<td>The Horned Toad</td>
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Using what you have learned, write an informal, one sentence definition of family.
7. **Another Way to Respond**  Read “Nikki-Rosa” aloud in class, each person speaking a different line. What did you learn from hearing it this way? Did you prefer to hear it or read it silently?

**IT’S DEBATABLE**

Divide into two teams, affirmative and negative, and debate the following resolution. You don’t have to join the team that will argue for the position with which you really agree; you may learn more if you argue for the opposite side.

**Resolved:** Your family has more influence on you than anything else in your life.

**WRITING**

**Literary Analysis: Memorable Characters**

Uncle Ralph in “The Warriors” and the great-grandmother in “The Horned Toad” are both strong characters. Pick one and **analyze** the ways the author makes this character come to life in the story. You will want to include background, economic class, lifestyle, speech, personality weaknesses and strengths, and what others learn from the character in your analysis.

**Creative Craft: Family Matters**

Using “Immigrant Picnic” as a model, write a poem in which family members talk with one another. You might consider writing about conversations at a family gathering, a conflict between two siblings, or a comforting moment between a grandmother and a grandchild.

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**Telling Your Own Story**

This book isn’t complete until you tell your own story. Begin by writing about you and your family members. You might consider writing about a memorable family gathering, a relationship you have with another family member, or relatives who immigrated to the United States. Keep your work in a special place as you will be adding to it at the end of each theme.
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<th>Glossary of Literary Terms</th>
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