

The Best Books on Finding Home in American Storytelling

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Robert J. Conley, *Mountain Windsong: A Novel of the Trail of Tears*. University of Oklahoma Press, 240pp.

Mountain Windsong brings together Conley's deep knowledge of Cherokee history with his appreciation for the lived experiences of Cherokee people today. As one of my mentors at the National Museum of the American Indian, Dennis Zotigh, has emphasized, when we study Native culture and peoples today, it's important not to limit ourselves to stories depicting them as victims, erased from the American landscape and history. Instead, we need to honor the many ways that indigenous communities remain alive and well, overcoming whites' too-frequent attempts to denigrate or even to eliminate them. (I suspect that's one reason why Diane Glancy eventually followed up her *Pushing the Bear* volume one with a sequel, *Pushing the Bear: After the Trail of Tears*. Both of Glancy's Removal-related novels are well worth

reading, especially in sequence, since the latter extends into the time when survivors of the long march west begin to build new homes in Oklahoma.)

Conley's novel on the Trail of Tears adeptly weaves together three strands of narrative which, read together, take readers both into the past moment of the Removal and into a present time when the Cherokee are successfully maintaining and passing along their heritage to new generations. One of these plot strands is a love story set in the time of the Removal. Waguli (Whippoorwill), a brave Cherokee from a traditional tribal community in what is now the homeland of the Eastern Band, is swept up into enforced relocation out West after the perilous journey mandated by President Andrew Jackson in defiance of treaties that had been affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court. Separated from his betrothed Oconeechee, who is part of the group remaining hidden in the Appalachian hills, Waguli initially grows despondent and becomes trapped in alcohol abuse, even as Oconeechee determinedly seeks to find him. Alongside this personal story, Conley presents historical records that document the longstanding political battle between the Cherokee and those seeking to take away their tribal lands. The author frames both these historical strands—the romance and the archive—with a third narrative thread depicting a Cherokee grandfather teaching his grandson community-oriented traditions while also telling the story of Waguli and Oconeechee.

Paulette Jiles, *News of the World*. William Morrow, 209pp.

Paulette Jiles is a productive writer whose mastery of multiple genres (poetry, memoir, dystopian narrative), like Conley's, had already generated a similarly impressive list of publications before *News*

of the World appeared in 2016. A National Book Award finalist, *News* shines for its visually stunning language and its thoughtful consideration of cross-cultural encounters in a past time that resonates with our own. In addition, the unusual yet believable relationship between its two central characters presented intriguing possibilities for following up on the romance of Waguli and Oconeechee's with a very different kind of intergenerational romance more akin to the grandfather/grandson bond in *Mountain Windsong*.

Set in 1870 in a Texas era facing interlocking social conflicts, *News of the World* focuses on the evolving connections between Captain Jefferson Kidd and Johanna, a young girl whose time as a captive in a Kiowa community has left her in a cultural limbo. The "finding home" theme operates on multiple levels in this fast-moving yet poetic story. Kidd reluctantly accepts a commission to escort Johanna from northern to southern Texas, where her aunt and uncle (her only relatives, since the rest of her family was killed in the Indian raid leading to her capture) are said to be eagerly awaiting her return. The shared journey of a grandfatherly Kidd and young Johanna leads this unlikely twosome through diverse encounters that convey how unsettled political, economic, and cultural forces in post-Civil-War Texas made any travel challenging—even perilous. Forging a bond in part based on navigating this danger together, Kidd and Johanna also find connections based on their both being situated on the margins of the region's white society. Kidd's past experiences, including his separation from his own family, and his fascination with cultures far removed from his own background, help him recognize Johanna's Kiowa self-identification as understandable, even admirable.

Francisco Jiménez, *The Circuit: Stories From the Life of a Migrant Child*. University of New Mexico Press, 134pp.

First in a series that continues with *Breaking Through*, *Reaching Out*, and *Taking Hold*, *The Circuit* signals its autobiographical elements in some editions by including photographs of Jiménez himself on the cover. Along related lines, the dedication page for *The Circuit* salutes both Jiménez's parents and his "seven sisters and brothers," with a list of their names that pairs each with a parallel character from the narrative. Winner of multiple literary awards, this memoir-like novel forecasts its plot and setting in a descriptive subtitle, *Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*.

The text's opening chapter, "Under the Wire," and its first full sentence situate the narrative as a Mexican family's border-crossing search for a new home in the US: "*La frontera* is a word I often heard when I was a child living in El Rancho Blanco, a small village nestled on barren, dry hills several miles north of Guadalajara, Mexico." Jiménez carries readers along as his narrator struggles to acclimate to various new schools. His family's situation is clearly shaped by the tenuousness of most members' status within the U.S. (the father having legal work papers, but the mother and several children, born in Mexico, constantly at risk of being deported). But Jiménez also depicts Panchito's family life in ways that invite strong empathy based on shared values and experiences, such as wanting to become more like an older sibling, chafing at the responsibility of caring for younger ones, and sometimes resisting parental priorities. Overall, with consummate skill, Jiménez cultivates a balance between celebrating specific features of his own ethnic identity (such as its vivid language patterns, sometimes

rendered directly in Spanish, and its special foodways) and building intercultural connections.

The strategic choice of writing in a child's voice brings important benefits to the narrative's engagement with complex politics. Minor characters who've been brought to the California farm fields as *braceros* cue adult readers to think critically about how U.S. agriculture capitalized on the vulnerabilities of workers desperate for any kind of labor opportunity, however constrained. But Jiménez's youthful narrator presents no critique of his own. Similarly, Jiménez shows us how Panchito struggles to master a second language via immersion in English-only classrooms. The novel vividly describes his concerted efforts to rise above such constraints on his schooling as the family's constant moves on the harvest "circuit." But his youthful viewpoint shields readers from having to confront overt analysis of how structural inequities impact educational policy as encountered by individual migrant children.

Like Paulette Jiles, Jiménez can call up poetic imagery to engage his readers. Everyday objects like Panchito's treasured note pad become unpretentiously imbued with symbolic resonance. Panchito's unfulfilled longing for a pet—even something as modest as a neighbor's little goldfish—or his wishing for a warmer jacket—convey the precarious status of family finances concisely. Simple, repeated descriptions carry affective weight. Coming back to one of their temporary homes after a day helping their father in field labor, Panchito and his older brother Roberto confront the familiar signs that another dislocation is at hand, just as they were beginning to find a few friends and settle in on the strawberry farm where the harvest is almost completed. "When I opened the front door to the shack," Jiménez says in

Panchito's voice, "I stopped. Everything we owned was neatly packed in cardboard boxes...The thought of having to move... brought tears to my eyes. That night I could not sleep. I lay in bed thinking about how much I hated this move."

**Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*.
Riverhead, 231pp.**

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has generated noteworthy scholarly analyses positioned within ongoing conversations about cosmopolitanism, comparative cultural studies, and post-colonial literatures. Whether Hamid's more recent *Exit West* will garner similar multi-faceted (and sustained) success remains to be seen, but it's already grabbed the attention of literary prize-givers.

Certainly, *Exit West* is a book of and for our current moment. If Hamid's portrait of refugee trauma is mitigated somewhat by his love story (reminiscent in some ways of *Mountain Windsong*), the diasporic terrain's being far more vaguely depicted, for the most part, separates it from specific migratory histories like Conley's. When Hamid's young protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, first meet, they are caught in a beleaguered but not-yet-uninhabitable space evoking today's Syria. And in various points in the characters' odyssey, they find temporary refuge on Greece's Mykonos, in London, and in the San Francisco Bay Area. Perhaps because each of these episodes seems more focused on their psychological responses and the broader sociological unravelings exemplified at each stop, and despite Hamid's naming of these various locales in their migrations, this progression of settings seems more a series of geographic pin drops than a vividly rendered sequence of realistic places-in-time, as in *News of the World*. Yet, for me, in spite of the

sophisticated psychologies at play, their successive dislocations are not as emotionally debilitating as a reader, as young Panchito's in *The Circuit*. Maybe that's because Nadia and Saeed, as adults, however young, are choosing their moments of departure in each case, rather than having others direct their migratory paths.

I suspect Hamid sought to encourage just such a distancing between his characters' moves in search of home and his readers' responses. More allegory than history, more parable than adventure, more philosophical dystopia than personal story, *Exit West* seems to me, especially as I re-read in the intertextual nexus of my current syllabus's other narratives, to be mandating a more

distanced reflection—a careful consideration of where the world is headed, if we fail to see how all of us could soon be refugees. If nationalist xenophobia reigns supreme, *Exit West* shows, there may be no nations to safeguard, in the end, no exit for anyone, anywhere.

Hamid refuses to issue a direct call to political action or even to clarify if individual love can prevail. Maybe his is a wiser rhetorical stance than clarion pleas for intervention like the repeatedly circulated photograph of a toddler washed up on a Turkish beach after a failed Mediterranean crossing. Perhaps a realism only somewhat tinged with fantasy will have a more telling impact. ▸