

**RECOMMENDED IMMIGRANT VOICES READING LIST:
Memoirs and Immigrant Fiction By Country**

CHINA

Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan.

Four mothers, four daughters, four families whose histories shift with the four winds depending on who's "saying" the stories. In 1949 four Chinese women, recent immigrants to San Francisco, begin meeting to eat dim sum, play mahjong, and talk. United in shared unspeakable loss and hope, they call themselves the Joy Luck Club. Rather than sink into tragedy, they choose to gather to raise their spirits and money. "To despair was to wish back for something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable." Forty years later the stories and history continue. With wit and sensitivity, Amy Tan examines the sometimes painful, often tender, and always deep connection between mothers and daughters. As each woman reveals her secrets, trying to unravel the truth about her life, the strings become more tangled, more entwined. Mothers boast or despair over daughters, and daughters roll their eyes even as they feel the inextricable tightening of their matriarchal ties. Tan is an astute storyteller, enticing readers to immerse themselves into these lives of complexity and mystery.

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts by Maxine Hong Kingston.

In her award-winning book *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston created an entirely new form—an exhilarating blend of autobiography and mythology, of world and self, of hot rage and cool analysis. First published in 1976, it has become a classic in its innovative portrayal of multiple and intersecting identities—immigrant, female, Chinese, American. As a girl, Kingston lives in two confounding worlds: the California to which her parents have immigrated and the China of her mother's "talk stories." The fierce and wily women warriors of her mother's tales clash jarringly with the harsh reality of female oppression out of which they come. Kingston's sense of self emerges in the mystifying gaps in these stories, which she learns to fill with stories of her own. A warrior of words, she forges fractured myths and memories into an incandescent whole, achieving a new understanding of her family's past and her own present.

Girl in Translation by Jean Kwok

When Kimberly Chang and her mother emigrate from Hong Kong to Brooklyn squalor, she quickly begins a secret double life: exceptional schoolgirl during the day, Chinatown sweatshop worker in the evenings. Disguising the more difficult truths of her life—like the staggering degree of her poverty, the weight of her family's future resting on her shoulders, or her secret love for a factory boy who shares none of her talent or ambition—Kimberly learns to constantly translate not just her language but herself back and forth between the worlds she straddles. Through Kimberly's story, author Jean Kwok, who also emigrated from Hong Kong as a young girl, brings to the page the lives of countless immigrants who are caught between the pressure to succeed in America, their duty to their family, and their own personal desires, exposing a world that we rarely hear about. Written in an indelible voice that dramatizes the tensions of an immigrant girl growing up between two cultures, surrounded by a language and world only half understood, *Girl in Translation* is an unforgettable and classic American immigrant novel—a moving tale of hardship and triumph, heartbreak and love, and all that gets lost in translation.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz.

Oscar is a sweet but disastrously overweight ghetto nerd who—from the New Jersey home he shares with his old world mother and rebellious sister—dreams of becoming the Dominican J.R.R. Tolkien and, most of all, finding love. But Oscar may never get what he wants. Blame the fukú—a curse that has haunted Oscar's family for generations, following them on their epic journey from Santo Domingo to the USA. Encapsulating Dominican-American history, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* opens our eyes to an astonishing vision of the contemporary American experience and explores the endless human capacity to persevere—and risk it all—in the name of love.

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents by Julia Alvarez.

The novel deals with many themes common to the immigrant experience—intergenerational conflict, bonds to home country and culture, and cross-cultural misunderstanding—as well as themes that are more particular to the experience of political refugees. Because this novel contains some mature material, it is recommended for high school students.

MEXICO

The Book of Unknown Americans by Cristina Henriquez.

Two immigrant families (one from Mexico and one from Panama) who have come to the U.S. for different reasons find their paths colliding as their teen daughter and son get to know each other. Henriquez does a brilliant job bringing to life the modern immigrant experience told from the two families point of views.

CUBA

Dreaming in Cuban by Cristina García

Cristina García's acclaimed book is the haunting, bittersweet story of a family experiencing a country's revolution and the revelations that follow. The lives of Celia del Pino and her husband, daughters, and grandchildren mirror the magical realism of Cuba itself, a landscape of beauty and poverty, idealism and corruption.

HAITI

Brother, I'm Dying by Edwidge Danticat.

From the age of four, award-winning writer Edwidge Danticat came to think of her uncle Joseph as her "second father," when she was placed in his care after her parents left Haiti for America. And so she was both elated and saddened when, at twelve, she joined her parents and youngest brothers in New York City. As Edwidge made a life in a new country, adjusting to being far away from so many who she loved, she and her family continued to fear for the safety of those still in Haiti as the political situation deteriorated.

INDIA

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri.

The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoke adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world. Named for a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of a catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name. Lahiri brings great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs. With penetrating insight, she reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves.

Family Life by Akhil Sharma

Family Life begins in 1978 Delhi. As Ajay and his family wait to join their father in America, Ajay regales his friends with stories of America. The family settles in New York, in a vibrant Indian community, and America seems like a land of opportunity. Ajay's older brother Birju has just been accepted into the prestigious Bronx High School of Science when tragedy strikes. The family turns to healers in the immigrant community while simultaneously navigating the American health care system. Spare and engaging, this novel provides a fascinating look at the effect both religion and alcohol have on a family. Sharma, a native of Delhi, spent twelve and a half years writing this semi-autobiographical novel.

PUERTO RICO

When I was Puerto Rican by Esmeralda Santiago.

Esmeralda Santiago's story begins in rural Puerto Rico, where her childhood was full of both tenderness and domestic strife, tropical sounds and sights as well as poverty. Growing up, she learned the proper way to eat a guava, the sound of tree frogs in the mango groves at night, the taste of the delectable sausage called *morcilla*, and the formula for ushering a dead baby's soul to heaven. As she enters school we see the clash, both hilarious and fierce, of Puerto Rican and Yankee culture. When her mother, Mami, a force of nature, takes off to New York with her seven, soon to be eleven children, Esmeralda, the oldest, must learn new rules, a new language, and eventually take on a new identity. In this first volume of her much-praised, bestselling trilogy, Santiago brilliantly recreates the idyllic landscape and tumultuous family life of her earliest years and her tremendous journey from the *barrio* to Brooklyn, from translating for her mother at the welfare office to high honors at Harvard.

Almost a Woman by Esmeralda Santiago

Following the enchanting story recounted in *When I Was Puerto Rican* of the author's emergence from the barrios of Brooklyn to the prestigious Performing Arts High School in Manhattan, Esmeralda Santiago delivers the tale of her young adulthood, where she continually strives to find a balance between becoming American and staying Puerto Rican. While translating for her mother Mami at the welfare office in the morning, starring as Cleopatra at New York's prestigious Performing Arts High School in the afternoons, and dancing salsa all night, she begins to defy her mother's protective rules, only to find that independence brings new dangers and dilemmas.

ETHIOPIA

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears by Dinaw Mengestu.

Seventeen years ago, Sepha Stephanos fled the Ethiopian Revolution for a new start in the United States. Now he finds himself running a failing grocery store in a poor African-American section of Washington, D.C., his only companions two fellow African immigrants who share his bitter nostalgia and longing for his home continent. Years ago and worlds away Sepha could never have imagined a life of such isolation. As his environment begins to change, hope comes in the form of a friendship with new neighbors Judith and Naomi, a white woman and her biracial daughter. But when a series of racial incidents disturbs the community, Sepha may lose everything all over again.

IRAN

Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America by Firoozeh Dumas.

In 1972, when she was seven, Firoozeh Dumas and her family moved from Iran to Southern California, arriving with no firsthand knowledge of this country beyond her father's glowing memories of his graduate school years here. More family soon followed, and the clan has been here ever since. *Funny in Farsi* chronicles the American journey of Dumas's wonderfully engaging family: her engineer father, a sweetly quixotic dreamer who first sought riches on *Bowling for Dollars* and in Las Vegas, and later lost his job during the Iranian revolution; her elegant mother, who never fully mastered English (nor cared to); her uncle, who combated the effects of American fast food with an army of miraculous American weight-loss gadgets; and Firoozeh herself, who as a girl changed her name to Julie, and who encountered a second wave of culture shock when she met and married a Frenchman, becoming part of a one-couple melting pot. Above all, this is an unforgettable story of identity, discovery, and the power of family love. It is a book that will leave us all laughing—without an accent.

Laughing Without an Accent: Adventures of an Iranian American, at Home and Abroad by Firoozeh Dumas.

In this charming and heartfelt memoir, Iranian author Firoozeh Dumas captures the spirit of her immigration experience moving from Iran to Southern California. Now she again mines her rich Persian heritage in *Laughing Without an Accent*, sharing stories both tender and humorous on being a citizen of the world, on her well-meaning family, and on amusing cultural conundrums, all told with insights into the universality of the human condition.

AFGHANISTAN

West of Kabul, East of New York: An Afghan American Story

West of Kabul, East of New York is an autobiographical memoir about a man entrenched in two cultures, seemingly stuck between his Afghan roots and his experience as an American immigrant. Tamim's story is fascinating, at times frightening, and always informative.

NIGERIA

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The bestselling novel—a love story of race and identity—from the award-winning author of *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele*. Ifemelu and Obinze are young and in love when they depart military-ruled Nigeria for the West. Beautiful, self-assured Ifemelu heads for America, where despite her academic success, she is forced to grapple with what it means to be black for the first time. Quiet, thoughtful Obinze had hoped to join her, but with post-9/11 America closed to him, he instead plunges into a dangerous, undocumented life in London. Fifteen years later, they reunite in a newly democratic Nigeria, and reignite their passion—for each other and for their homeland.

(*This book is significantly longer than the other selections, but I've included it here because it is simply AMAZING. For those that are willing to take on the extra pages, it will be well worth your while).

Open City: A Novel by Teju Cole

A haunting novel about identity, dislocation, and history, Teju Cole's *Open City* is a profound work by an important new author who has much to say about our country and our world. Along the streets of Manhattan, a young Nigerian doctor named Julius wanders, reflecting on his relationships, his recent breakup with his girlfriend, his present, his past. He encounters people from different cultures and classes who will provide insight on his journey—which takes him to Brussels, to the Nigeria of his youth, and into the most unrecognizable facets of his own soul.

Happiness, Like Water by Chinelo Okparanta

This collection of ten first-person short stories focuses on the lives of Nigerian women. Told in spare and lyrical writing, the stories vividly depict life in Nigeria as well as Nigerian immigrant life in America. The stories span the ranges of genre and emotion -- some are romantic and earnest; others suspenseful and chilling. Chinelo Okparanta was born in Nigeria and moved to America at age ten. This book is dedicated simply: "For home."