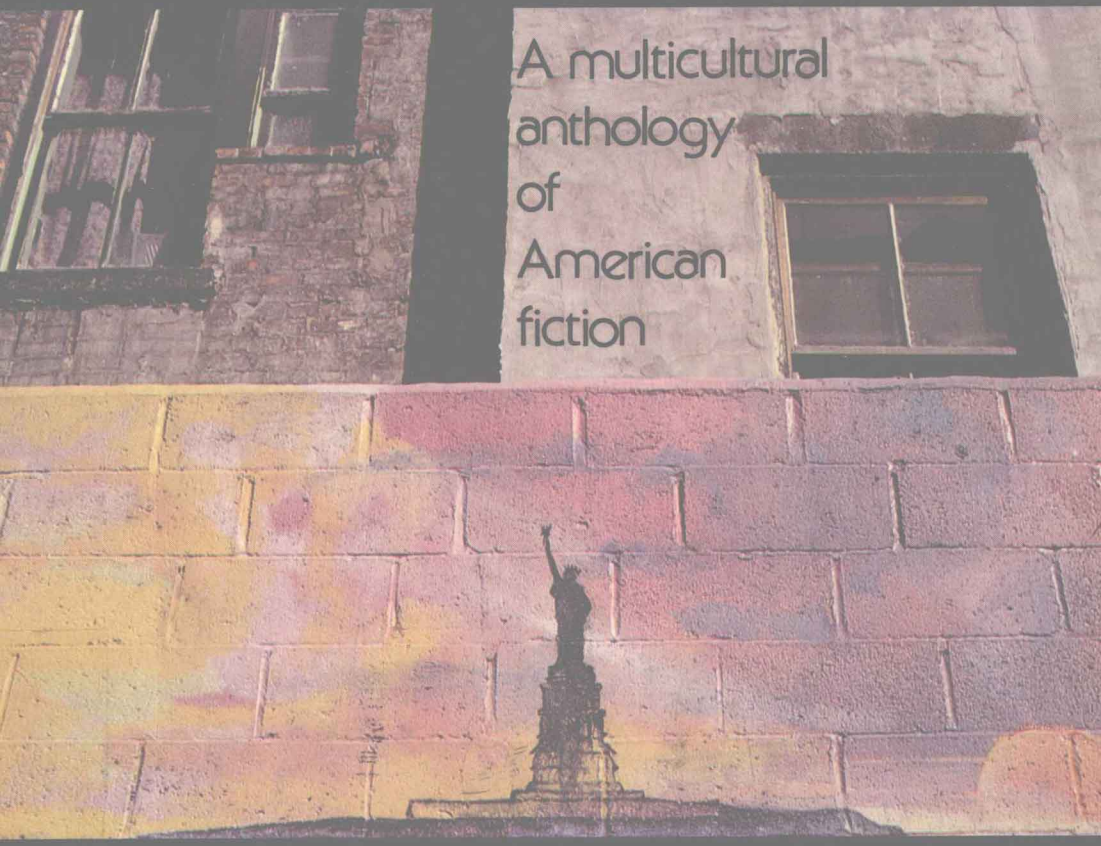
IMAGINING AMERICA

STORIES FROM THE PROMISED LAND

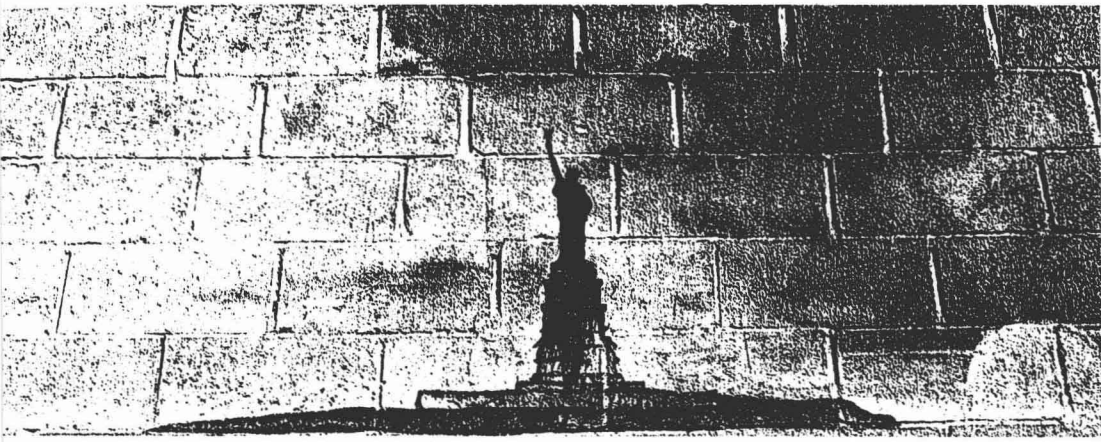


A multicultural anthology of American fiction

Edited by Wesley Brown & Amy Ling

IMAGINING AMERICA

STORIES FROM THE PROMISED LAND



Edited by Wesley Brown & Amy Ling

A Karen and Michael Braziller Book
PERSEA BOOKS/NEW YORK

For information, write to the publisher:

Persea Books, Inc.
171 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10016

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Imagining America : stories from the promised land / edited by Wesley Brown and Amy Ling.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-89255-161-5 : $24.95. — ISBN 0-89255-167-4 (pbk.) : $11.95
1. Short stories, American—Minority authors. 2. National characteristics, American—Fiction. 3. Emigration and immigration —Fiction. 4. Minorities—United States—Fiction. 5. American fiction—20th century. I. Brown, Wesley, 1945- . II. Ling, Amy.
PS647.E85145 1991
813m82;tf,98Tm84'.010892069—dc20 91-26828
CIP

Designed by REM Studio, Inc.

Set in Century Old Style by ComCom, Allentown, Pennsylvania.
Printed and bound by The Haddon Craftsmen, Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania.

Seventh Printing

IMAGINING AMERICA

OTHER PERSEA ANTHOLOGIES

Visions of America:
Personal Narratives from the Promised Land
Edited by Wesley Brown & Amy Ling

America Street:
A Multicultural Anthology of Stories
Edited by Anne Mazer

Going Where I'm Coming From:
Memoirs of American Youth
Edited by Anne Mazer

Working Days: Short Stories About Teenagers at Work
Edited by Anne Mazer

A Walk in My World:
International Short Stories About Youth
Edited by Anne Mazer

Paper Dance: 55 Latino Poets
Edited by Victor Hernández Cruz, Leroy V. Quintana, and Virgil Suarez

First Sightings:
Contemporary Stories of American Youth
Edited by John Loughery

Into the Widening World:
International Coming-of-Age Stories
Edited by John Loughery

Show Me a Hero:
Great Contemporary Stories About Sports
Edited by Jeanne Schinto

Virtually Now:
Stories of Science, Technology, and the Future
Edited by Jeanne Schinto

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people aided us in the completion of this book. For their encouragement and helpful suggestions we thank Magda Bogin, Mitchell Horowitz, Irving Howe, Betsy McTiernan, Julian Moynahan, Molly Moynahan, Ted Solotaroff, Chuck Wachtel, and Cheryl Wall.

INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM FAULKNER ONCE OBSERVED THAT IT IS IN THE NATURE OF the Southern character both to engage in a relentless indictment of contemporary society and to escape into the realm of the imagination where anything is possible. In Faulkner's view, expressions of despair and hope are inseparable in the Southern psyche. While these two emotional currents may reverberate profoundly in the South, they also characterize the journey of every defined group of people who have ever grappled with the dilemma of being an American.

This anthology is a reimagining, through short stories, of emigration to and migration within the United States during the twentieth century. Encompassing the experiences of the nation's first inhabitants, its oldest immigrants, and its more recent arrivals, these stories explore the manner in which a diverse group of writers has imagined an America mythologized for its promise and indicted for its practice. Reconciling our high-minded rhetoric as a nation with our actual behavior as citizens continues to be the pivotal issue in the two-hundred-year-old

argument over our national identity and the meaning of democracy. When taken together, the stories anthologized here show not only the different cultural voicings that shape American life, but also the remarkable variety and richness of twentieth-century American fiction.

We have chosen to arrange the stories under four different headings: Arriving, Belonging, Crossings, and Remembering. It was not our purpose to burden the selections with arbitrary categories. On the contrary, in our reading of these stories, a thematic pattern emerges naturally that is replicated again and again in fictional portrayals of characters experiencing disorientation upon their arrival in an alien country or city, struggling to gain acceptance in an indifferent environment, trying to negotiate the often antagonistic borders of language and race, and using the compass of memory to bring about some reconciliation of the life left behind with the discovery of a new life. So the counterpointing of stories in this way clarifies the cross-cultural differences and commonalities among experiences portrayed earlier in the century and more recently. By the end of the book, we have had a comprehensive look at a century of our history as well as our fiction.

It is not surprising then that the fates of characters in several stories emerge out of larger historical circumstances. In Bernard Malamud's "The German Refugee" and Jeanne Schinto's "The Disappearance," the protagonists are stalked by the past, in the former by the Nazis and in the latter by the disappearance of his father during the celebrated 1931 textile mills strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. And in Howard Gordon's "The Playground of Hostility" and Oscar Hijuelos's "Visitors, 1965," two boys, one black and the other Cuban, are profoundly affected by a world of bogeymen created for them by adults during the 1950s and in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis. This playing out of history, particularly through the mythologizing eyes of children, is masterfully rendered in Richard Bausch's "Old West"—a fictional sequel to the classic Western movie, "Shane," that picks up the story years later with the return of the gunfighter to the town where he was immortalized in the memory of a boy who is now a grown man and the narrator of the story. His disturbing realizations become the occasion for a shattering reappraisal of the uses of myth.

The America imagined by writers in the early part of the century is expressed, for the most part, through the lens of a single group experience and in a tone that is austere and forbidding. Sui Sin Far's "In the Land of the Free" is a turn-of-the-century story whose title is tragically at odds with the callous treatment by an immigration bureaucracy of a Chinese family arriving in San Francisco. Anzia Yezierska's "Soap and Water," published in 1920, is the story of a Russian Jewish woman who, having escaped the pogroms in her native land and achieved her dream of becoming a teacher in America, remains an alien and a despised presence in the eyes of those more privileged than herself. And Marita

Bonner's "The Whipping," set in Chicago during the 1930s, depicts the harsh consequences of the black migration from the rural deep South to the urban North. Its graphic realism and terse, cinematic style put Bonner in the front ranks of American writers of her generation.

The stories of more contemporary writers are often characterized by bitter humor and mockery as well as engaging the promised land through the collision of language and different ethnic sensibilities. In Nicholasa Mohr's "The English Lesson," Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice," Lynne Sharon Schwartz's "The Opiate of the People," and Bharati Mukherjee's "A Wife's Story," language mediates with ironic consequences between the ghosts of the past and the cosmic absurdity of a new world. Criticism of our boundless optimism as a nation is effectively understated in Toshio Mori's "Japanese Hamlet," in which a young man has unrealistic aspirations to become a Shakespearean actor. His experience becomes a symbol for generations of immigrants who for better and worse idealized an America existing only in their imaginations. And in Leslie Marmon Silko's "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" there is a sardonic look at a conflict of rituals and the futility of good intentions which are often not enough to close the emotional and historical distance separating people.

The stories from some of the nation's oldest inhabitants suggest that America's mythic promise does not resonate in the same way for them as it does for more recent arrivals. Stories as varied as Mary Gordon's "Eileen," Amiri Baraka's "The Death of Horatio Alger," Louise Erdrich's "American Horse," Alice Walker's "Elethia," and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" all portray specific aspects of our intoxication with our own innocence and how it enforces a willful ignorance of the past and a resistance to change. And there is probably no more poignant embodiment of how indispensable the past is to any imagined promise or future than in Paule Marshall's "To Da-duh, in Memoriam," in which a young girl grows to see the power of her grandmother's life in Barbados over her own life in New York City.

Finally, there is a compelling image at the end of Kim Yong Ik's wonderfully evocative story, "They Won't Crack It Open," where the narrator mails a coconut from Florida to the children of his Korean village and imagines them hugging this strange fruit but refusing to crack it open to see what is inside. All the stories in this anthology, each in its own fashion, confront our impulse, individually and collectively, to embrace the mythology we've created for ourselves or that has been created for us. But unlike the children in Kim's story, the writers assembled here are compelled to crack open America, realizing that we can only hope to know the whole through its quarrelsome parts.

WESLEY BROWN

AMY LING

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

III. CROSSINGS

IV. REMEMBERING

CONTENTS

I. ARRIVING

IN THE LAND OF THE FREE

Sui Sin Far

1

"SEE, LITTLE ONE—THE HILLS IN THE MORNING SUN. THERE IS THY home for years to come. It is very beautiful and thou wilt be very happy there."

The Little One looked up into his mother's face in perfect faith. He was engaged in the pleasant occupation of sucking a sweetmeat; but that did not prevent him from gurgling responsively.

"Yes, my olive bud; there is where thy father is making a fortune for thee. Thy father! Oh, wilt thou not be glad to behold his dear face. 'Twas for thee I left him."

The Little One ducked his chin sympathetically against his mother's knee. She lifted him on to her lap. He was two years old, a round, dimple-cheeked boy with bright brown eyes and a sturdy little frame.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!" puffed he, mocking a tugboat steaming by.

San Francisco's waterfront was lined with ships and steamers, while other craft, large and small, including a couple of white transports from the Philippines, lay at anchor here and there off shore. It was some time before the *Eastern Queen* could get docked, and even after that was accomplished, a lone Chinaman who had been waiting on the wharf for an hour was detained that much longer by men with the initials U.S.C. on their caps, before he could board the steamer and welcome his wife and child.

"This is thy son," announced the happy Lae Choo.

Hom Hing lifted the child, felt of his little body and limbs, gazed into his face with proud and joyous eyes; then turned inquiringly to a customs officer at his elbow.

"That's a fine boy you have there," said the man. "Where was he born?"

"In China," answered Hom Hing, swinging the Little One on his right shoulder, preparatory to leading his wife off the steamer.

"Ever been to America before?"

"No, not he," answered the father with a happy laugh.

The customs officer beckoned to another.

"This little fellow," said he, "is visiting America for the first time."

The other customs officer stroked his chin reflectively.

"Good day," said Hom Hing.

"Wait!" commanded one of the officers. "You cannot go just yet."

"What more now?" asked Hom Hing.

"I'm afraid," said the customs officer, "that we cannot allow the boy to go ashore. There is nothing in the papers that you have shown us—your wife's papers and your own—having any bearing upon the child."

"There was no child when the papers were made out," returned Hom Hing. He spoke calmly; but there was apprehension in his eyes and in his tightening grip on his son.

"What is it? What is it?" quavered Lae Choo, who understood a little English.

The second customs officer regarded her pityingly.

"I don't like this part of the business," he muttered.

The first officer turned to Hom Hing and in an official tone of voice, said:

"Seeing that the boy has no certificate entitling him to admission to this country you will have to leave him with us."

"Leave my boy!" exclaimed Hom Hing.

"Yes; he will be well taken care of, and just as soon as we can hear from Washington he will be handed over to you."

"But," protested Hom Hing, "he is my son."

"We have no proof," answered the man with a shrug of his shoulders; "and