The American Dream - Annotated Bibliography
What is the “American Dream” and how has it changed?

Compiled and annotated by Sara Lachman

The term "the American Dream" has come to represent the dream of financial success, but its original meaning was broader. William Truslow Adams was an American historian and writer. He was an investment banker, a captain in the Military Intelligence division and a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference to draft a resolution to end WWI. In 1931 he published the book The Epic of America in which he wrote, The American Dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." The following bibliography includes well-acclaimed books from the late 20th and early 21st century exploring the idea of the American Dream from the perspective of non-Caucasians.

Choose one of the books below and consider the following questions as you read: What does the American Dream mean to the protagonists of the story? What does the American Dream mean to your family and you?

Citation: Alvarez, J. (1991) How the Garcia girls lost their accents. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. 290 pages. 950L
Race or ethnicity: Latino-American
Genre: Realistic Fiction, Historical Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: “This sensitive story of four sisters who must adjust to life in America after having to flee from the Dominican Republic is told through a series of episodes beginning in adulthood, when their lives have been shaped by U. S. mores, and moving backwards to their wealthy childhood on the island. Adapting to American life is difficult and causes embarrassment when friends meet their parents, anger as they are bullied and called "spics," and identity confusion following summer trips to the family compound in the Dominican Republic.” This book addresses what it means to be successful in America after coming from wealthy origins in another country.
Source of annotation: amazon.com (School Library Journal Review), Self

Sources in which the book is recommended: National Book Award Winner, 2008 American Indian Youth Literature Award, 2008 ALA Best Books for Young Adults
Race or ethnicity: American Indian
Genre: Realistic Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: Junior is just entering high school as a Spokane Indian living on the reservation. When a teacher tells him he needs to escape reservation life, he makes the controversial decision to go to a nonreservation high school. Junior struggles with the fact that this decision alienates him in the eyes of his community, even though he knows that his decision will help him achieve his goals of success.
Source of annotation: Self

Citation: Davis, T.S. (2009). Mare’s war. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. 341 pages. 830L
Sources in which the book is recommended: 2010 Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book, 2010 ALA Best for Young Adults.
Genre: Realistic Fiction, Historical Fiction
Format: Novel

Annotation: “On a parent-mandated cross-country road trip with Mere, their unpredictable grandmother, 15-year-old Octavia and 17-year-old Tali make the transformation from complaining, self-absorbed teens to observant, supportive family members. Mere's account of her war years is full of historical detail and lively personal anecdotes about the training, treatment, duties, and social life in her African-American regiment of the Women's Army Corps both on assignment in the U.S. and in the European Theater during 1944 and 1945.” This book addresses what it means to be a successful African-American woman.

Source of annotation: amazon.com (School Library Journal Review), Self


Sources in which the book is recommended: 2009 Ten Best Books for Young Adults, A Junior Library Guild Selection: Positive reviews in School Library Journal and Booklist.

Race or ethnicity: Mexican American, African American, Biracial

Genre: Realistic Fiction

Annotation: The summer after his sophomore year of high school, half white, half Mexican Danny Lopez decides to spend the summer in National City with his dad's side of his family. After befriending a local kid named Uno, Danny struggles with his love of baseball and his desire to successfully fit in with his dad's Mexican relatives.

Source of annotation: Self


Sources in which the book is recommended: 2002 Coretta Scott King Author Award Honor Book: Positive review in School Library Journal, starred review in Booklist.

Race or ethnicity: African American, Korean American, Bi-racial

Genre: Realistic Fiction

Annotation: Raspberry Hill is 13-years-old and obsessed with making money. Her friends find her miserly ways frustrating, and Raspberry ends up having to make the ultimate decision between whether it is more important to be monetarily successful, or to be a good friend.

Source of annotation: Self


Race or ethnicity: Indian-American

Genre: Realistic Fiction

Annotation: “Dimple Lala has spent her entire life trying to fit in. In India, she is too American, while in America she feels unable to conform, largely because of her parents’ efforts to educate and involve her in Indian culture. By her 17th birthday, she feels incapable of making anyone happy and is hopelessly confused as to where she belongs. Teens will be rooting for Dimple and her quest to find her own place in her family and country.” This book addresses what it means to successfully fit in within two very different cultures.

Source of annotation: amazon.com (School Library Journal Review)
**Citation:** Jiménez, F. (2008). *Reaching out*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company. 194 pages. *910L*


**Race or ethnicity:** Mexican American

**Genre:** Autobiography

**Format:** Novel

**Annotation:** A follow-up to his books *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through*, this book is an autobiographical account of the author’s life as a college student at Santa Clara University. Francisco struggles with balancing his academic successes with his guilt over abandoning his family, while trying to decide what he really wants to do with his life.

**Source of annotation:** Self

---


**Sources in which the book is recommended:** 2007 Coretta Scott King Award, 2007 Notable Social Studies Trade Books: Positive reviews in School Library Journal, Booklist, Kirkus.

**Race or ethnicity:** African-American

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Format:** Novel

**Annotation:** “In the tradition of Janet McDonald, this moving first novel tells a hopeful story of Patrice, a shy, studious teen who beats the odds in her grim inner-city neighborhood. Patrice, who lives with her aunt, never knew her dad and barely met her mom, who is in jail. When she gets a chance to win a scholarship to a prestigious African American boarding school, pressures in her aunt's home and on the streets threaten to pull her down—until Monty, a gang leader, protects her and loves her. Handled without obscenity, the lively street talk will draw readers to the gripping story of a contemporary kid who works to make her dreams come true.” This book deals with the struggle between academic and social success.

**Source of annotation:** amazon.com (Booklist Review), Self

---

**Citation:** Lee, M.G. (1996). *Necessary roughness*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy. 228 pages. *750L*

**Sources in which the book is recommended:** 1998 ALA Best Books for Young Adults: Positive reviews in School Library Journal, Kirkus.

**Race or ethnicity:** Korean American

**Genre:** Realistic fiction

**Format:** Novel

**Annotation:** “Chan and his sister Young move from Los Angeles to a small town in Minnesota with their parents who immigrated to the U.S. from Korea when the twins were small. Entering their junior year of high school, the siblings face numerous obstacles. They are the only Asians in town, and the fact that their mother and father practice many of the old-world Korean customs that clash with Chan and Young's more Americanized desires is paramount.” This book is about becoming a successful Korean athlete in a predominantly white area of America.

**Source of annotation:** amazon.com (School Library Journal Review)

---

**Citation:** Martinez, V. (1996). *Parrot in the oven: Mi vida*. New York, NY: HarperCollins. 216 pages. *1000L*

**Sources in which the book is recommended:** 1996 Americas Book Award for Children’s & Young Adult Literature, 1996 National Book Award for Young Peoples Literature, 1998 Pura Belpré Award: Positive reviews in Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal.
Race or ethnicity: Mexican American
Genre: Realistic Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: “This contemporary novel, lyrically related in a series of vignettes, tells the story of a Mexican-American family's struggle to maintain its integrity in the face of poverty, discrimination, and cultural alienation. Throughout, the powerful thread of this story is Manny's search for acceptance, laced with the adolescent angst that always accompanies such a quest.” Martinez's novel deals with what it means to be a success in the eyes of himself and his peers.
Source of annotation: amazon.com (School Library Journal Review)

Citation: Namioka, L. (2002). *An ocean apart, a world away*. New York: NY: Delacorte Press. 197 pages. 780L
Sources in which the book is recommended: Positive reviews in Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal, and Booklist.
Race or ethnicity: Chinese American
Genre: Historical Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: “Unlike her conservative mother, 16-year-old Yanyan refuses to have her feet bound. Although she dreams of being a doctor, she nearly gives it up to follow the young man she loves in a daring political adventure. Instead, however, she convinces her rich dad to send her to college in America.” Yanyan's story grapples with how America can help her achieve her dreams to be a successful doctor.
Source of annotation: amazon.com (Booklist Review), Self

Citation: *Na, A. (2001). *A step from heaven*. Asheville, NC: Front Street. 156 pages. 670L
Race or ethnicity: Korean American
Genre: Realistic Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: “Young Ju's parents don't want her to become too American, and Young Ju is ashamed of them. It's the classic immigrant child conflict, told here in the present tense with the immediacy of the girl's voice, from the time she's a toddler in a small Korean village wondering why the adults talk about America as ‘heaven.’ Young Ju's mother is a strong figure in the background until the girl suddenly sees her as a person, who tells her, 'In America, women have choices.’” Na's novel addresses what it means to see America as a place where a woman can choose her own dreams and successes.
Source of annotation: amazon.com (Booklist Review)

Race or ethnicity: Korean American, Mexican American
Genre: Realistic Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: To her mother, Mina is the ideal daughter: Harvard-bound, president of the honor society, and constantly working in her family’s dry cleaning business. What her mother doesn’t know, however, is that Mina has been stealing from her family’s business, and lying about her grades. This book perfectly
depicts Mina’s struggle between being seen as successful in her mother’s eyes, and following her own dreams.

Source of annotation: Self

Race or ethnicity: African-American, Biracial
Genre: Historical Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: “Drawing directly on her family history, especially what she knows about her great-grandfather, she goes back to the time of Reconstruction to tell a searing story of cruelty, racism, and betrayal. His dream is to own his own land. It becomes his obsession. The second part of the book is about his work, backbreaking work for months and years to get that land.” In this prequel to Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Taylor discusses the historical American dream of being a successful land owner.
Source of annotation: amazon.com (Booklist Review), Self

Race or ethnicity: Korean American
Genre: Realistic Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: “In this charming tale of family, community and the struggle for understanding, young Korean immigrant David Kim learns to acculturate to a new American life.” “Cleverly concatenated…recounts with both humor and pathos growing up and gradual Americanization.” Throughout the story, David learns what it means to be successful in the new American world to which he has immigrated.
Source of annotation: amazon.com (Publishers Weekly and Kirkus Reviews), Self

Race or ethnicity: Chinese-American
Genre: Historical Fiction
Format: Novel
Annotation: “The story begins as eight-year-old Moon Shadow Lee journeys across the Pacific to join his proud and clever father at the family-owned laundry in San Francisco. The boy recounts their problems with prejudice, as well as the kindness of uncles and cousins. Father and son must leave the protection of the family to move out of Chinatown, but they find refuge with a generous and friendly landlady. Once they have successfully established a repair business, they turn their attention to making a flying machine.” Moon Shadow’s father’s American Dream is to create his very own successful flying machine.
Source of annotation: amazon.com (Publishers Weekly and Kirkus Reviews), Self
Because, dear reader, How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents is written backwards. Nah, not like the above. That would be a tad sadistic. Also, if the entirety of this book were written in Alphabet soup-style mayhem, Julia Alvarez’s debut novel wouldn’t have been the smash-hit it was when it was published in 1991. If you could only read How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents in a mirror, the New York Public Libraries wouldn’t have included it in their list of 21 New Classics For The 21st Century. And if all of Alvarez’s luminous prose was written backwards-sdrawkcab, we ‘the novel How the Garcia Lost Their Accents. It illustrates a family life adapting to a new culture. Carlos is the overprotective father. One of the main sources of tension in How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents, written by Julia Alvarez, are the sisters search for a personal identity among contrasting cultures. Many of the characters felt pressure from two sources, the patriarchal culture that promotes traditional gender roles and society of nineteen-sixties and seventies America. How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents is a 1991 novel written by Dominican-American poet, novelist, and essayist Julia Alvarez. Told in reverse chronological order and narrated from shifting perspectives, the text possesses distinct qualities of a bildungsroman novel. Spanning more than thirty years in the lives of four sisters, the story begins with their adult lives in the United States and ends with their childhood in the Dominican Republic, from which their family was forced to flee due to the