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English 112B: Young Adult Literature

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“The American Dream”: Perspective and Practice

What is the “American Dream”? This seemingly simple term is a concept explored throughout high school classes, like history, government, and literature. Unfortunately, the “American Dream” is often talked about in terms of the past—merely an old saying stemming from the Declaration of Independence’s promise of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”. My unit of study would demonstrate how the American Dream is carried out in different manners, but essentially is living one’s life in the freedom of pursuing one’s goals.

My centerpiece work is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic *The Great Gatsby*. This novel is not only widely taught in high schools across America, but also embodies the theme of the American Dream. Gatsby goes through a rags-to-riches transformation—a change closely associated with the American Dream—but, in the end, he ends up with nothing, not even life. His inability to earn Daisy’s affection destroys him, leaving the reader to interpret what the American Dream really is. Is the dream to get rich? Become part of the upper class? Or, perhaps, to just be loved? This novel works well as medium for students to begin to think critically about what it really means to live the American Dream.

Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* could be considered historical fiction, as it embodies several of the qualities suggested for good historical fiction by *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*. The novel has “an authentic rendition of the time, place, and people being featured”, as well as leaving most readers with “the feeling that they know a time or place better”. Along these

same lines, I am pairing *The Great Gatsby* with several young adult literature historical novels, which students will read in literature circles. The supplementary young adult novels will focus on characters moving to the United States in pursuit of the American Dream. I hope to show students that not only is the American Dream a fluid ambition, but also a contemporary ideal that people have been coming in search of for centuries and still continue to search for today.

Launching the Unit

Assignment:

What does the “American Dream” mean to you? Do you believe you are pursuing this dream? Why or why not? Respond to this prompt in your journal in half a page.

I will launch the unit by asking students to complete this journal entry before starting the unit. I want to see what their perceptions of the term “American Dream” are prior to the unit, whether they see it as an out-of-date term, a contemporary idea, or have no idea what it means. When they finish their entry, we will proceed to discuss their ideas and I will give them a small lesson of the historical context of the “American Dream”. When we finish the discussion and lecture, I will play the song “The Last Resort” by The Eagles. I will hand out the lyrics to the students, so they can follow along with the song. After the song is over, I will break up the students into four groups and assign each group two consecutive stanzas to analyze. The students will look for imagery of the American Dream. What are the characters’ dreams? How are they achieving them? Are they being depicted in a positive or negative light? I would write these questions on the board for students to use, in case they need help getting their discussions started. When the students finish, I will ask them all to share their main discussion points with the class. Finally, the students will write the second part of their journal entry.

Assignment:

How does “Last Resort” depict the American Dream? Do you agree with this depiction? Why or why not? Respond to this prompt on the same page as your previous prompt.

Center Piece Work: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

I will give the students a small lesson on the author, F. Scott Fitzgerald and the historical context of *The Great Gatsby*. Before we begin the novel, I will have students research the “Jazz Age” era, the 1920s. I will provide them with a list of terms, including the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, to guide their research. They are free to use websites, books, and articles to supplement their research. We will discuss their findings in class, addressing the economy of the 1920s, the idea of “New Money” versus “Old Money”, and the Prohibition.

The students will read *The Great Gatsby* for homework, though we will be conducting a reader’s theatre for important scenes, like the dinner party, Gatsby and Daisy’s conversation before he goes to war, and the hotel scene. During the week, the students will read two chapters for homework. During the weekend, the students will read three chapters for homework. With this plan, we should finish the novel in about two weeks. Each class day, we will spend about half of the period discussing the assigned reading and connecting it to the idea of the American Dream. We will read certain passages aloud during class, and discuss what we think they mean through class discussions and journal entries. The students will complete an on-going assignment as we read the novel.

Assignment:

Track each character’s dream/ambitions and whether, thus far, they are accomplishing their dream.

Literature Circles: Stories of Immigrants

As we wrap up reading *The Great Gatsby*, I will introduce the students to their next assignment: literature circles. While Fitzgerald's novel is mainly about American characters pursuing the American Dream, the book selection for the literature circles will focus on characters who are immigrating to the United States in search of the American Dream. The students will have a choice of seven novels, which should roughly equal about four to six students per book. I will conduct a book pass for the literature circle novels, which will all be young adult historical fiction novels, and ask the students to keep in mind the ones they would prefer reading. I will then post sign-up sheets around the room with six spaces (or less if my class is under thirty-five students) and ask the students to sign up for a spot for one of the books they were interested in. Their reading choices will be:

Applegate, Katherine. *Home of the Brave*. Kek, a teen boy, immigrates to Minnesota from his homeland, Sudan. While he used to live with his family in Sudan, political turmoil and violence has led to death of his father and brother, while his mother remains missing. Kek must now cope with the loss of his family in a foreign cold land—as well as the impending fate of his mother.

Auch, Mary Jane. *Ashes of Roses*. Based on the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Triangle fire, this story focuses on sixteen-year old Margaret Rose Nolan. Margaret has just immigrated to the United States from Ireland, and gets a job at the factory to remain in the United States.

Budhos, Marina. *Ask Me No Questions*. Nadira and her family emigrated from Bangladesh to the United States, but have now stayed past their visas' expiration date. Though they long to become citizens of the United States, their chances diminish after the attacks of 9/11. Though the family tries to flee to Canada, Nadira's father is detained. The rest of the family must now cope with his impending case and their uncertain future.

Burg, Ann E. *All the Broken Pieces*. Matt Pin is brought to the United States by American soldiers from war-torn Vietnam. Though Matt has a supportive adoptive family, he cannot forget the images that haunt him from his homeland...including a dark secret that continues to haunt him.

Hobbs, Will. *Crossing the Wire*. Victor Flores must “cross the wire” from Mexico to the United States. His family depends on this crucial crossing to survive, as they are near starvation due to the falling crop prices. Fifteen-year old Victor must find a way to cross that border—one way or another.

Kwok, Jean, *Girl in Translation*. Kimberly Chang is a young woman emigrating from Hong Kong to Brooklyn. She is an exceptional student by day and a sweatshop worker by night. Kimberly must struggle between the two worlds she lives in to identify who she really is—and who she wants to be.

Na, An. *A Step from Heaven*. Young Ju emigrates to the United States from a small fishing village in Korea, when she is just four years old. She has been told she is going to a paradise but she soon finds out she is actually just in a new foreign land, struggling to learn a new language, new customs, and a new lifestyle. This novel tells Ju’s story from the point she arrives to America to the day she leaves for college.

Once the students are in their groups, I will pass out the roles for each group member. The students can decide who gets what role. Scholastic provides a guide that outlines each member’s role and responsibility (<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/training-students-literature-circles>). Since the novels are fairly easy to read, the students will have about a week and a half to finish reading their novels. When they finish, they will move on to the assignment portion of the literary circles.

Assignment:

Your group will present your novel to the class, convincing us to read this book as an example of how immigrants pursue the American Dream. Your group can choose to make a commercial, create a paper advertisement/pamphlet, or create a PowerPoint presentation. (Note: If you decide to create a paper advertisement or pamphlet, you must bring enough copies for the entire class.)

All presentations must include:

- The book's title and author
- Background information on the author
- The main plot of the story (without giving away the ending)
- Three quotes relating to the American Dream
- Explanations for why the quotes your group chose relate to the American Dream
- Citations for all the sources you used (MLA format)

Please divide the workload evenly, including the oral presentation portion. Remember, all students must speak during the presentation.

Concluding the Unit

After we wrap up the literature circle presentations, I will have students complete one their final assignment. They will have a few options, so they can choose to focus on either the center piece work or their chosen young adult novel. By the end of the unit, students should understand what the American Dream was and what it is now. They should be able to think critically about the term the "American Dream" and what it implicates for different people. They should also, ideally, apply these ideas to their own lives, to analyze how their dreams could also be their interpretations of the American Dream.

Assignment:

Option 1: Write a three-page essay on one of the following prompts. Remember to use textual evidence to assert your claims.

1. Choose one character from *The Great Gatsby*. What was his/her idea of the American Dream? Were they able to achieve this dream?
2. Choose one character from your literature circle novel. What was their experience like in America versus their homeland? How did this character see their idea of American Dream?
3. Compare and contrast one character from *The Great Gatsby* and one character from your literature circle novel. What was each character's version of the American Dream? Were they successful? Which character's ambitions do YOU think embody what the American Dream SHOULD be?
4. You are also free to come up with your own prompt, as long as it pertains to either *The Great Gatsby* or your literature circle novel. Just make sure to tell me your prompt before you start your essay.

Option 2: Adapt two memorable scenes from *The Great Gatsby* into screenplays. Some scenes you might consider are the dinner party hosted by Tom and Myrtle, Gatsby showing Daisy his mansion for the first time, or the hotel blowout. For each scene, make sure you include the setting and the character's actions—this is not merely an adaptation of the dialogue. At the end of each scene, create a monologue for one of the characters in the scene. The monologues should reflect on how the scenes portrayed an aspect of the character's idea of the American Dream.

Extending the Unit

Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes edited by David Roessel and Arnold Ampersad

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan

Assignment: (for extra credit)

Read any of the following novels and relate it to the idea of the American Dream in one and a half to two pages.

Works Cited

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"The Last Resort"
The Eagles

She came from Providence,
the one in Rhode Island
Where the old world shadows hang
heavy in the air
She packed her hopes and dreams
like a refugee
Just as her father came across the sea

She heard about a place people were smilin'
They spoke about the red man's way,
and how they loved the land
And they came from everywhere
to the Great Divide
Seeking a place to stand
or a place to hide

Down in the crowded bars,
out for a good time,
Can't wait to tell you all,
what it's like up there
And they called it paradise
I don't know why
Somebody laid the mountains low
while the town got high

Then the chilly winds blew down
Across the desert
through the canyons of the coast, to
the Malibu
Where the pretty people play,
hungry for power
to light their neon way
and give them things to do

Some rich men came and raped the land,
Nobody caught 'em
Put up a bunch of ugly boxes, and Jesus,
people bought 'em
And they called it paradise
The place to be
They watched the hazy sun, sinking in the sea

You can leave it all behind

and sail to Lahaina
just like the missionaries did, so many years ago
They even brought a neon sign: "Jesus is coming"
Brought the white man's burden down
Brought the white man's reign

Who will provide the grand design?
What is yours and what is mine?
'Cause there is no more new frontier
We have got to make it here

We satisfy our endless needs and
justify our bloody deeds,
in the name of destiny and the name
of God

And you can see them there,
On Sunday morning
They stand up and sing about
what it's like up there
They call it paradise
I don't know why
You call someplace paradise,
kiss it goodbye



“The American Dream”: Perception and Practice

Onette Morales
English 112B

Launching the Unit



Journal: Part

~~What~~ What does the “American Dream” mean to you?

Do you believe you are pursuing this

dream? Why or why not?



“Last Resort” by The Eagles

She came from Providence,
the one in Rhode Island
Where the old world shadows hang
heavy in the air
She packed her hopes and dreams
like a refugee
Just as her father came across the sea

She heard about a place people were smilin'
They spoke about the red man's way,
and how they loved the land
And they came from everywhere
to the Great Divide
Seeking a place to stand
or a place to hide

Down in the crowded bars,
out for a good time,
Can't wait to tell you all,
what it's like up there
And they called it paradise
I don't know why
Somebody laid the mountains low
while the town got high



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They call it paradise
I don't know why
You call someplace paradise,
kiss it goodbye

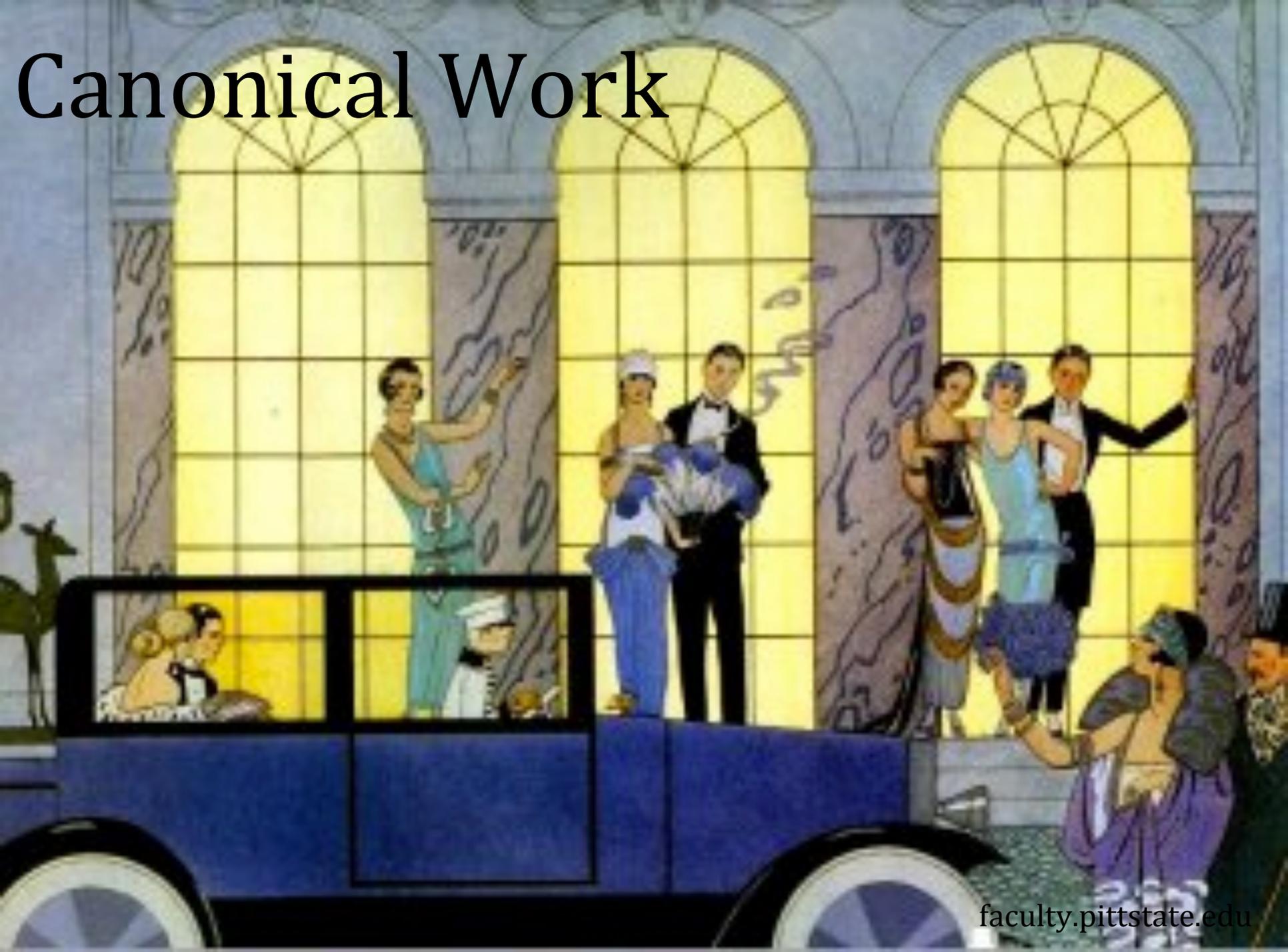
Journal: Part Two

How does “Last Resort” depict the American Dream?

Do you agree with this depiction?



Canonical Work

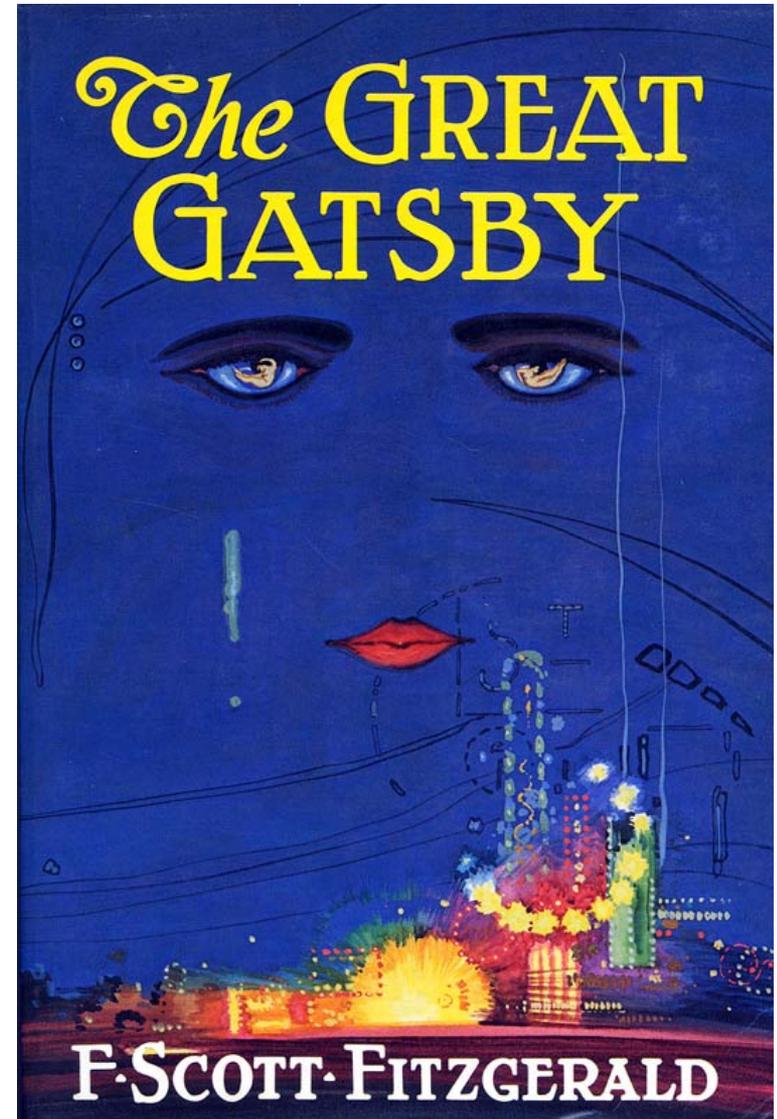


Perception:

How do the characters perceive the American Dream?

Practice:

How do the characters actively pursue that dream?



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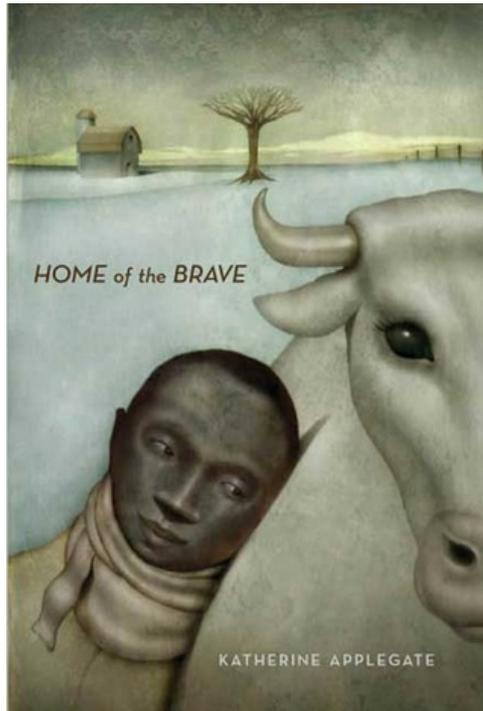
The “American Dream”: Immigrant’s Perspectives



Literary Circles: YA Historical Fiction

Characters coming to the United States...

From Sudan



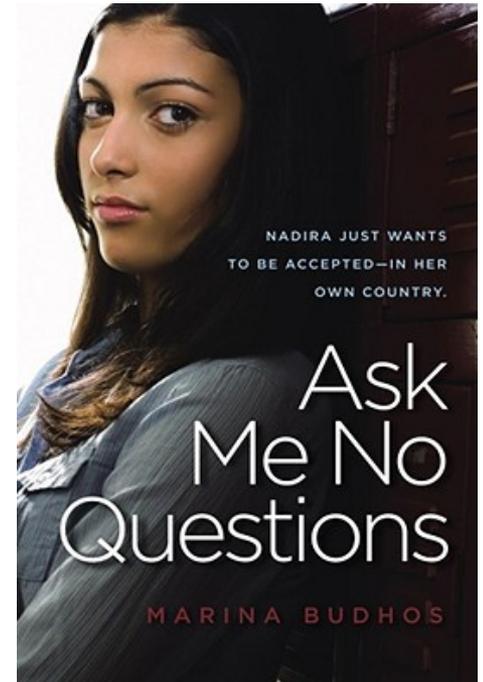
Home of the Brave
by Katherine Applegate

From Ireland



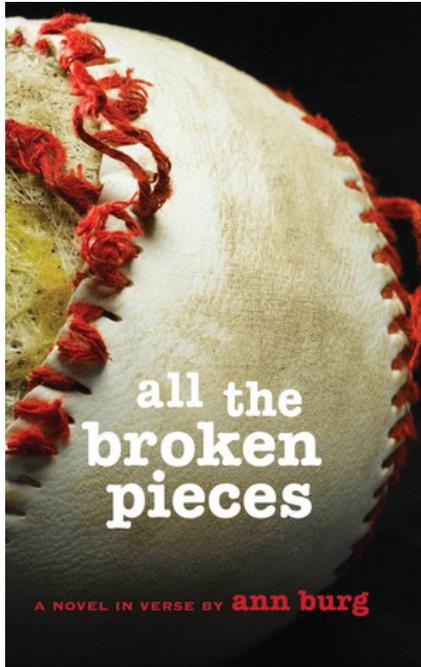
Ashes of Roses
by Mary Jane Auch

From Bangladesh



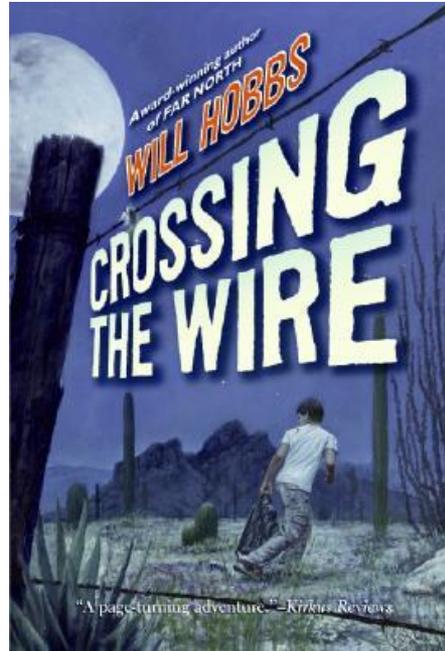
Ask Me No Questions
by Marina Budhos

From Vietnam



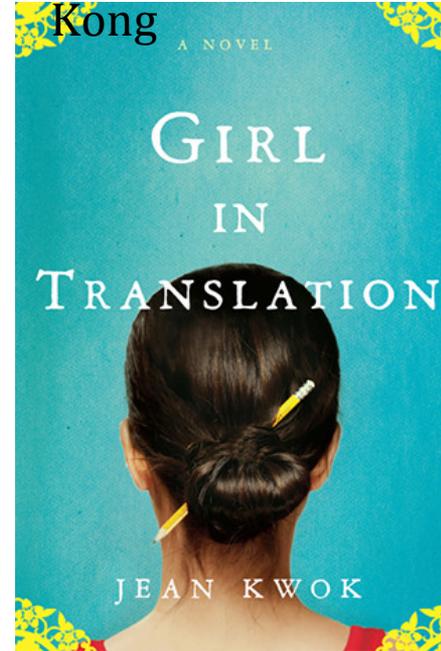
All the Broken Pieces
by Ann Burg

From Mexico



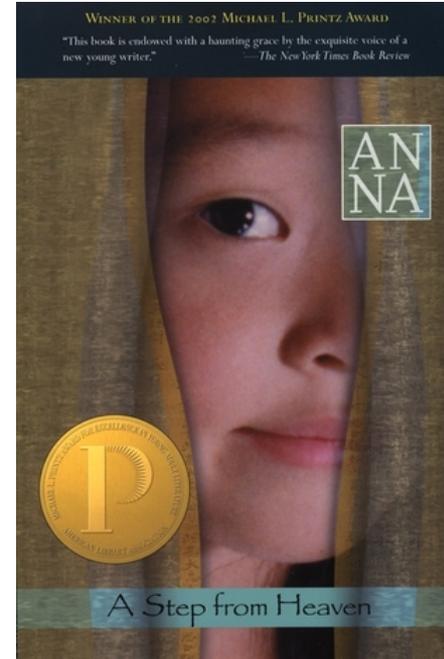
Crossing the Wire
by Will Hobbs

From Hong Kong



Girl in Translation
by Jean Kwok

From Korea



A Step from Heaven
by An Na

Project for Lit.

Circles

Present your book to the class, emphasizing how it portrays the American Dream. Create a video commercial, paper advertisement/pamphlet, or PowerPoint presentation



Concluding the Unit



Final Project

Option 1: Three-page essay.

Option 2: Adapt two memorable scenes from *The Great Gatsby* into screenplays. At the end of each scene, create a monologue for one of the characters in the scene. The monologues should reflect on how the scenes portrayed an aspect of the character's idea of



Extending the Unit



For Extra Credit:

(Or to replace *The Great Gatsby*)

